

Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned Study Guide

Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned by Walter Mosley

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Plot Summary

The stories contained in *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* are set in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California during 1995-1996 and chronicle several months in the life of Socrates Fortlow, who is the main character (protagonist) in each of the short stories. Socrates is a 58-year-old ex-convict who served 27 years in a prison in Indiana for a double murder, and who has been living in a two-room apartment in Watts for the eight years since his release. Socrates is a large African American man with huge, strong hands and a violent nature he continually – and for the most part successfully – struggles to keep in check. Socrates took a bus to Los Angeles immediately after his release from prison to start his life over in a completely new place where no one knew him. In the first few stories, Socrates is supporting himself by collecting cans and bottles for the deposit money, although later he gets a job as grocery bagger/delivery person in a supermarket.

The 14 short stories in this collection are all interconnected, and yet are written so they can be read independently of one another; each story has a beginning, middle, and an end, and its own plotline. Each of the stories deals with Socrates' life and the struggles he faces both on the streets of his neighborhood, and within himself. Burdened with guilt over his past actions, anger at himself and the world around him, and a sense of loss related to the things his years in prison took from him or kept him from having in the first place, Socrates is a complicated and multidimensional character. The stories explore themes including guilt, responsibility, love, redemption, forgiveness, justice, poverty, racism, and friendship as they relate to both Socrates' present and his past. They provide the reader with the portrait of a man making his way as best he can in a world where he feels he is always an underdog and can never be certain of everything.

In each of the stories, Socrates confronts a situation or dilemma in which his own unique moral compass or sense of justice is his only guide. Whether confronting a criminal threatening his community or one of his friends, dealing with one of his own inner demons, or standing up for his rights, Socrates lives by a very strict set of rules and his own code of morality. This is perhaps best illustrated in the several stories which deal directly with the crime and violence prevalent in Watts. Because he has a deep distrust of the police – and all authority – Socrates is compelled to take action on his own in these instances rather than simply ignore the problems he is confronted with. Although in each of these stories Socrates does a considerable amount of good for his friends or his community, it is often at great personal cost to himself. Although Socrates continually refers to and thinks of himself as a “bad man” his actions, though not always strictly within the law, reveal a good, compassionate heart and a highly developed sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Though Socrates is portrayed as pretty much of a loner and as a man who mostly has acquaintances rather than friends, he does form close relationships with a few other characters, and these relationships play a pivotal role in a number of these stories. Perhaps the most important of these relationships is with Darryl, a 12-year-old boy who has killed another boy – possibly accidentally – and who Socrates befriends and



mentors in several of these stories. In Darryl, Socrates sees a boy who, while not precisely a younger version of himself, is on a path leading him to a future that mirrors Socrates' past – crime, prison, and a lifetime of isolation and loneliness. By helping Darryl find his way in the world, Socrates not only discovers things about himself he didn't know before, but also connects with a human being on a level he has not done since before going to prison.

Each of the stories in this collection also gives the reader a glimpse into some part of Socrates' past, either through flashback scenes or dream sequences. Along with providing an insight into the events, relationships, and circumstances that have contributed to making Socrates the man he is, these scenes from the past also illustrate Socrates' personal evolution from a wild, cold-blooded killer in his 20s to a thoughtful, moral man in his 50s. The reader is left with the feeling Socrates will continue to evolve and grow as a person.



Crimson Shadow

Summary

Socrates Fortlow comes out into the alley behind his small two-room apartment in the Watts section of Los Angeles at 6:00 am to check on Billy, the old rooster kept by a neighbor woman, but finds a young boy of about 12 has killed the bird with a serrated kitchen knife. Socrates catches the boy, whose name is Darryl, and makes him bring the dead rooster into his kitchen and pluck the bird clean, after which Socrates cooks the bird and he and Darryl eat it together. All during this time Socrates talks to the young boy, and tells Darryl he has spent much of his life in prison for murder, after which Darryl tells him his father was in prison, but died there.

At one point during their conversation, when he asks Darryl why he killed his “friend” (meaning Billy the rooster), Socrates realizes from the boy’s panicked, evasive answer Darryl has actually killed a human being. Darryl finally confesses to Socrates he and a couple of his friends were playing out in the abandoned oil fields when a retarded boy came up to them and wanted to be friends. At first they just shoved the boy around, but then the boy got mad and attacked them, and Darryl ended up cutting him – possibly accidentally – with his knife and killing him. The boys all swore never to tell what happened, and the body had not been found.

After a long silence, Socrates finally asks Darryl what he is going to do to make things right. When Darryl says he won’t turn himself in or go to jail, Socrates tells him that isn’t what he means and he isn’t his judge or jailer, but he has to understand he has done wrong, and he has to learn from it. Darryl is confused and doesn’t completely understand what Socrates is saying, but is relieved when Socrates tells him he can leave. As Darryl is leaving, Socrates tells him he is welcome to come back anytime to talk, or if he finds himself in trouble he can’t handle.

Analysis

This first story in the book serves to introduce the reader Socrates Fortlow – the character all of the subsequent stories in the book focus on – and provides a small amount of insight into his circumstances, his surroundings, and his character. Socrates is a large, imposing man with huge hands who is no stranger to violence, and who has paid the price for his violent nature by serving many years in prison for murder. The reader at this point is uncertain of the circumstances under which this murder was committed, but does understand Socrates was guilty.

When Socrates catches Darryl after the boy has killed Billy the rooster, his first emotion is anger at the boy for killing a part of his small world. Though not expressly stated, the reader understands Socrates is very poor – as is Darryl – and as the two spend time first preparing and then eating the rooster, Socrates begins to believe Darryl is actually



a younger, far less experienced and world-wise version of himself. It is the fact the two of them are alike that allows Socrates to first suspect Darryl has actually killed another human being, and it is the guilt Darryl has harbored since committing the act that causes him to confess to Socrates.

While Darryl remains afraid of Socrates throughout this story, the fact he actually confesses his crime to him indicates the burden of guilt and fear that the young boy has been carrying around with him – a burden he has no idea how to handle. Although Darryl is unsure what Socrates expects him to do to “make things right” – and, indeed, the reader is left with the feeling Socrates is uncertain of what the boy should do himself – the invitation is given at the end of the story for Darryl to come back and talk any time he wants. While Darryl does not accept, he also does not refuse, leaving the door open for the two to work things out together.

After the boy leaves, Socrates thinks about a woman he knew many years before, and about his own crime. Finally, he thinks about the rooster, which had been a small but important part of his world, and how he would now be waking up alone for the first time in eight years, without its hoarse crowing to keep him company.

Vocabulary

serrated, discarded, murky, supervision, succession, giblets, retarded, forlorn, maroon, linoleum, corpse, gizzard, sautéed, basil, tufts, shuttered, slobbery, syncopation, orgy, monotone, drowsy



Midnight Meeting

Summary

This second story starts, as the name implies, with a late night meeting in Socrates' tiny apartment. There are five men at the meeting; Socrates, Right Burke, Markham Peale, Stony Wile, and Howard Shakur – all men who live in Socrates' neighborhood and who he has formed acquaintances and friendships with during his eight years there. The subject of the meeting is a young junky named Petis, who Howard Shakur's daughter saw stab and kill a young local man named LeRoy while robbing him. There has been a series of stabbings in the neighborhood recently and, although this is the first one that has been witnessed, it has been widely assumed Petis is responsible for them. The meeting is about what, if anything, the men should do.

Although the other men make suggestions, such as going to the police or telling the rest of the neighborhood what Shakur's daughter has seen, Socrates knows what the men really want is for him to kill Petis. Socrates thinks back to a man he killed while in prison who had been brutalizing other men on his cellblock, and thinks how easy it would be to take care of Petis the same way. However, rather than kill Petis or go to the police, Socrates says they need to talk to him, and so the next afternoon the five of them go to Petis' apartment. When Petis opens the apartment door, the first thing Socrates sees is a six inch knife in the younger man's hand, and immediately delivers a terrible uppercut to the man's gut; Petis falls to his knees, moaning and vomiting. Socrates tells him he and the other men know what he has done, and have held a trial. Socrates gives the young man until six that evening to get out of Watts forever. He tells him if he or any of the other men see him in Watts again, he will kill him immediately.

Socrates checks Petis' apartment later that day, and for a couple of weeks afterwards, but the young man appears to have cleared out. A month later, Socrates hears Petis has been killed downtown. Petis had been living on the streets dealing drugs and robbing people, and had finally been killed by one of his victims.

Analysis

Crime is a part of the world that Socrates and the other people in his Watts neighborhood live with on a daily basis, and yet in Socrates' mind, the police are not the answer. At one point in this story he tells the other men in the meeting that going to the police about Petis isn't the answer, because when a black man – no matter how bad he is or what he has done – is brutalized by the police, it hurts all black men; this shows his distrust for the police, and all authority. However, he also realizes he can't just sit back and do nothing, because the blood of any of Petis' future victims in the neighborhood will be on his hands as well. It is obvious to the reader Socrates remains unsure of how he will handle Petis until he sees the young junkie standing there with a knife in his hand.



The flashback scene in this story where Socrates remembers killing the inmate who had been brutalizing other men on the cellblock serves to not only give the reader an insight into Socrates' past, but also shows how he has grown as a person. The reader is left with the knowledge that while killing Petis would have been natural to the younger Socrates, the man he is now – while still capable of violence – only uses it when he has to.

Vocabulary

atrophied, perched, swiveled, squinted, helicopter, rotors, hovered, pistol, retirement, grumbled, grudge, poverty, province, twitch, brutalized, mechanism, vertebrae, veteran, minister, steeled



The Thief & Double Standard

Summary

The Thief

Socrates is eating dinner in a makeshift diner run by a neighborhood woman named Lula, as he does once a week when he has money after selling the empty cans and bottles he has collected on his “route”. While enjoying her homemade meatloaf and flirting with Lula, a young black man named Wilfred comes into the restaurant wearing a bright blue exercise suit and proceeds to order everything on the menu for both himself and for Socrates. When asked how he is going to pay for it all, Wilfred shows the two of them a fan of twenty-dollar bills. Socrates knows that there is no way anyone in that neighborhood could get that much cash legitimately, and while talking to the younger man learns that Wilfred is a thief. He dresses in a three piece suit over which he puts on the exercise suit that he wore into the diner – or khakis like Socrates is wearing – borrows his girlfriend’s car and drives up to the malls in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, or Santa Monica where he attacks women in the parking lots, putting a knife against their throats and robbing them. He then runs back to his car, strips off his “ghetto clothes”, and drives away, sometimes right past where the woman he has just robbed is giving her statement to the police – since no one is looking for a black man in a three-piece suit.

Wilfred is proud of how clever and successful he has been, but Socrates is disgusted, telling the younger man just because he isn’t robbing his own people doesn’t mean he isn’t hurting all African Americans. Even though he can’t afford it, Socrates decides not only to pay for his own dinner but also for Wilfred’s dinner, with the money he has earned honestly.

Double Standard

Socrates is standing in the shelter of a bus stop in a heavy rainstorm waiting for a bus and watching two lovers in the doorway of an abandoned bakery across the street – a large man, and a small woman. When a bus comes, the two run to the bus stop where the woman boards the bus, and the large man stays behind with Socrates. Up close, Socrates sees that he knows this man; his name is Ralphie McPhee, and he lives just two blocks down the street from Socrates, with his wife and young son. Socrates says something to the man just to make conversation, but Ralphie says he doesn’t want to talk to him. It is obvious even though Ralphie lives just down the street from Socrates, he doesn’t recognize him – almost as if he can’t see him. This angers Socrates, and the two men exchange harsh words and almost fight, but Socrates’ anger soon passes.

Socrates sees Ralphie is dressed in newer, clean clothes while he is dressed in his old, stained and worn khakis, and understands Ralphie thinks he is worthless, just another street person. He apologizes for his harsh words, and then asks Ralphie why he is



disrespecting his wife and son by fooling around with a young woman out on the street, just a couple of blocks from where he lives, in an area where people who know him pass by all the time. He tells Ralphie if he needs to fool around he can understand, but risking hurting his wife and kid is just wrong no matter what. At this point Ralphie really looks at Socrates, and realizes he knows him from the neighborhood. The bus both Ralphie and Socrates are waiting for comes, and as he is boarding it Ralphie offers Socrates a few dollars, which he refuses. Socrates decides he would rather walk home even though it is still raining.

Analysis

In both of these stories, Socrates is confronted by young men both of whom he sees as being much the same as he was back before the 27 years he spent in prison made him the man he is now, and who consider themselves to be better than he. In the first story, Wilfred the thief felt his money – even though it was stolen – and the fact he is a “successful” thief made him superior to Socrates, while in the second story Ralphie saw only the clothes Socrates was wearing, and not the man in them who lived just down the street from his family.

While Socrates feels he can't really judge either man because what he has done in his past is so much worse than what they are doing, he still understands what they are doing is wrong and simply can't let it pass. In both stories Socrates sacrifices something – money he cannot afford in the first, a dry ride home on the bus in the second – to prove to the two young men, but mostly to himself, they are not better than he is.

Vocabulary

abandoned, adobe, cascading, reveled, khakis, recognition, preservation, slaughtered, levered, gelatin, disheveled, chariot, stilts, mastiff, makeshift, lockjaw, benefactor, demolished, symptom



Equal Opportunity

Summary

Socrates is standing in the Bounty Supermarket on Venice Boulevard, almost 14 miles from his apartment in Watts. He has come to apply for a job. There are stores closer to his home, but he knows none of those will hire him because they all know him as a man who collects old bottles and cans to sell for the recycling deposit. He has come this far because he is sure no one will recognize him. Anton Crier, the assistant manager of the market, tells Socrates there are no openings, but Socrates demands an application anyway, telling the younger man he has a right to a job. Finally, after it becomes clear Socrates isn't going to leave, the young man leaves to speak to his boss, and returns with an application. Though he tells Socrates he can fill it out at home and mail it in, Socrates prefers to fill it out there. When he finishes the application he waits for over half an hour before Halley Grimes, the white manager of the market, tells him because he has no telephone they can't consider him for a job. Socrates demands she send his application in to the front office and the woman finally agrees, but tells him it will make no difference. Socrates tells her he will be back tomorrow for an answer.

Socrates shows up at the market every morning at 9:30 for the next five days, asking if they have heard from the front office. First he is told there has been no answer, then he is told there is no job because he has no phone, and finally he is told by Halley Grimes that the front office has sent a fax saying he is not qualified. When Socrates demands to see the fax, she tells him she threw it away. He calls Bounty's head office and is told there is no application from him on record. On the fifth day he goes back and confronts both Crier and Grimes, who threatens to call the police. It is Friday and Socrates tells them he will be back on Monday for answers.

On Monday he arrives at the market at 9:30 a.m. to find two men from the front office – a white man named Parker and a black man named Weems – waiting for him. Parker tells him Halley Grimes has finally called the head office about him – because she is afraid he is going to attack someone. Parker makes it clear that Socrates will never get a job at this market, but there is another Bounty where the manager believes in giving people a chance, and he can have a job there. Later that night Socrates, Right Burke, and Stony Wile celebrate his new job as a general food packager and delivery person at the Bounty on Santa Monica at Lula's diner, and laugh about the fact Socrates left the question about criminal convictions blank on the application form.

Analysis

It has been 37 years – the 27 years he served in prison, the two years he was unemployed before that, and the eight years since his release – since Socrates has held a real job, and the fact he is trying to get one now is an indication he is finally ready to rejoin society rather than just exist along its fringes. Though still riddled with guilt



about the murders he committed in his past and haunted by the terrible anger threatening to envelop him at almost any moment, Socrates understands he cannot remain where he is; he either needs to move forward or he will die.

Though they know nothing about him, it is obvious from the first neither Anton Crier nor Halley Grimes want Socrates working in their store, because they are both scared of him. While Socrates understands this – and at one point even tells Stony Wile if he was smart he'd look into finding work at another store – he also knows he has done nothing to them, and he deserves a chance to work. Throughout his interactions with Crier and Grimes, Socrates struggles to keep his temper and avoid the violence that lies just beneath the surface, and while he is successful at this, it is a near thing. When he is finally offered a job at a different market he realizes it isn't a total victory, but also understands it is a half-victory, and half is better than nothing.

Vocabulary

asphalt, lulled, lofty, abundance, discriminate, infirmity, nonchalant, gallery, qualified, process, fluorescent, finality, shipbuilder, graphite, restocking, placid, irony, felony, paycheck, hostage



Marvane Street & Lessons

Summary

Marvane Street

One Saturday a few weeks after Socrates starts his job at the Bounty market, Darryl – the young boy who killed Billy the rooster – stops by Socrates' apartment. He tells Socrates his mother has a new boyfriend who is around their house all the time, and he can't sleep because when he does he has terrible nightmares about the boy he killed coming back and killing him. Socrates feeds the boy, and tells him because he has done something bad, he now has to do something good to make it right. Socrates then tells Darryl to sleep on his sofa and he will make certain nothing comes to get him. Darryl sleeps for five hours without nightmares, and then comes back the next day and sleeps on the sofa again. As Socrates will have to be back to work on Monday, he gives Darryl keys to his apartment, and comes home every day for the next week to find the boy sleeping on his sofa.

The next Saturday, Socrates takes Darryl to Marvane Street – a street about an hour from their own neighborhood – where he shows the boy four houses. The first house is a crack house, filled with dope dealers and prostitutes. The second house is the headquarters of the Young Africans, a social action group trying to educate the members of the community. The third house is a boarding house where Socrates' friend Right Burke lives; the house is run by a woman named Luvia who is heavily involved with her church, and who takes in older, disabled men and women, giving them a safe house to live in. The fourth house is a three story building with 11 windows, all but one of which has the shades drawn even though it is a pleasant, sunny day. The house faces the headquarters of the Young Africans, and Socrates and Right explain to the boy the house is full of police watching the Young Africans' house – not the crack house – because to the police the group trying to do good is more dangerous than the drug dealers.

As they walk home, Socrates tells Darryl while the Young Africans are trying to do good it is Luvia who is actually doing the most good, by opening her home and her pocketbook, and caring for her brothers and sisters. He tells Darryl the only way to do good is to love your brother, and if you love him, you have to make him safe.

Lessons

It is a few months later, and Darryl is living with Socrates most of the time now. Socrates and Darryl are sitting on a bench in a local park, waiting for a boy named Philip who is two years older than Darryl and has been threatening and bullying the younger boy. Darryl wants to leave before Philip arrives, but Socrates has told him he has to confront the older boy. When Philip arrives he is with two other boys, and Socrates walks away from Darryl, joining a few other older men who are playing checkers at a nearby picnic



table. Darryl first tries to reason with the older boy, but Philip takes a swing at him that misses. Darryl then hits the older boy with a solid punch – as Socrates has taught him – but Philip doesn't even flinch. Philip starts to beat Darryl and the two other boys move forward to join in, but Socrates springs up from where he is sitting, and quickly knocks the other two boys out with his huge hands. Philip is now on top of Darryl and has pulled a .45 automatic pistol, which he is pointing at the younger boy's head. Socrates quickly slaps the gun from Philip's hand and lifts him off of Darryl, slapping him several times. A moment later, Socrates sees Darryl has picked up the gun and is pointing it at Philip. Socrates steps away, leaving the decision as to what happens next up to Darryl, and after a moment Darryl lets Philip and the other boys run away, without firing.

When it is over, Socrates tells Darryl even though he lost the fight he should be proud, because he stood up for himself and that is all any Black man can do. Darryl understands this lesson, but is still scared because he knows Philip is a gangbanger and will come back with more of his gang to kill him. Socrates knows this as well and the next day he and Darryl head back to Marvane Street, where Socrates explains the situation to Luvia Prine, the woman who runs the boarding house where Socrates' friend Right Burke lives. While Luvia's house is only for older, disabled people, she knows a couple in her church – the MacDaniels – who lost their son to street violence, and might be willing to raise the boy as their own. Socrates offers to help with expenses from his earnings at the supermarket, and he has also gotten Darryl a part-time job at the Bounty where he works so the boy can contribute himself, and a week later Darryl goes to live with the MacDaniels. He doesn't want to go – and Socrates doesn't want him to – but they both know the only way the boy will survive is to get out of the neighborhood.

Analysis

In both of these stories, Socrates is trying to teach life lessons to the young Darryl that he, himself, had to learn on his own – and, indeed, is still learning – because there was no one around to teach him when he was a boy. In the first story, Socrates shows Darryl good and evil can take many different forms, and can often exist side by side – as is the case with the Young Africans' house and Luvia's house standing on the same block as a crack house and the house the police are using. In the second story, Socrates makes Darryl stand up to Philip and his gang even though he knows the boy could be injured or killed, because he knows Darryl will not survive unless he is able to stand up for himself, even when the odds are against him.

In both stories the reader is given insights into Socrates' past via his memories and dreams – a past that is both very different from and eerily similar to Darryl's present. What becomes obvious to Socrates is, while he can protect Darryl physically, he simply doesn't have the tools to teach the boy properly, as he thinks the MacDaniels will be able to do. Though it is hard for him to let the boy go, he knows he has done right, and sleeps better than he has in years.



Vocabulary

seeped, cascading, gumbo ,butane, sassafras, thyme, gluttony, stifle, mincemeat, biceps, balance, solitary, glee, commando, withered, surveillance, loll, sapling, redemption, sensual, squall



Man Gone & The Wanderer

Summary

Man Gone

One evening Corina – the wife of Socrates' friend Howard Shakur – comes by Socrates' apartment looking for her husband. Socrates invites her into his kitchen for a cup of coffee and after a moment's hesitation, she accepts. She tells Socrates she and Howard fought the night before and he stormed out and hasn't been back since. Howard has been out of work for nine months, and when she suggested he try to get a job at MacDonald's, he'd gotten angry. Socrates tells her she shouldn't put up with it; she is working overtime at her job and raising Howard's two children, and if she were his woman he would work as many jobs as it took to put food on the table, and he wouldn't ever leave her alone at night in that neighborhood. Corina is flattered by what he says, and leaves a few minutes later after Socrates promises he will find Howard and tell him exactly what he told her. As soon as she leaves, Socrates opens the door to the other room and tells Howard to come in the kitchen.

Howard is angry Socrates talked to his wife like he did, which sounded to him like the older man was trying to take her away from him. Socrates tells him that is exactly what he was trying to do, and what every other man in the neighborhood would be trying to do if Howard kept disrespecting her and walking out when he got mad. The two men share a bottle of whiskey, and Socrates tells Howard how he has it much better than he does with a beautiful woman like Corina waiting for him at home. Even if Howard keeps messing up and loses Corina and the kids, he will still be better off than Socrates, because he will at least have had it all once.

A few days later, after not having heard from either Howard or Corina, Socrates stops by the Shakur's house to visit. Howard is still a little angry at him, but Corina invites him in and tells him that Howard has gotten a job as an assistant manager at a pizza place. She then invites him to dinner the following Sunday. On the way home from Sunday dinner, Socrates sees a kitchen table that has been left for the trash collectors and takes it home with him. He works on the table for three weeks until it looks almost like new, and then carries it on his back over to Howard and Corina's house. He gives it to Howard, and tells him that every time he sits down with his wife and family at it to have a meal, Socrates wants Howard to think of him.

The Wanderer

Though it has been over eight years since Socrates moved to Los Angeles after being released from the penitentiary in Indiana, one day he realizes he has never seen the ocean. On his next day off he takes a bus to Santa Monica and walks for miles on the beach, keeping to himself, reliving events in his past, and trying to make sense of them. Finally, as the sun sets and he thinks it is time to start heading back, he comes on a



man and a woman named Gordo and Delia, who ask him to share their meal and a bottle of wine on the beach. Gordo is a large, well dressed black man about ten years younger than Socrates, and Delia is a woman who is either white or black (Socrates is unsure) in her early 20s. After a moment's hesitation, Socrates agrees.

As they drink, Gordo tells Socrates it is his birthday, and every year on his birthday he finds a girl and goes someplace special he has never been before to celebrate the life of one of the 26 men he killed in the Vietnam war. This is the 26th year he has done this, and he tells Socrates how he killed this last man; he remembers every detail. Soon, Gordo is exhausted by the pain of his memory, and wanders off to stare at the sea, leaving Socrates and Delia alone. Delia asks Socrates if he would like to make love, but he refuses; this encounter, and the whole day, has exhausted him.

Socrates starts back up the beach towards Santa Monica, but soon finds the wine and his own memories have taken their toll. He finds two large cardboard boxes and makes himself a makeshift shelter and sleeps. In the morning he considers going back to see if he can find Gordo and Delia, but in the end walks the rest of the way back to the bus, which takes him back home.

Analysis

In both of these stories, Socrates deals with men – one a friend, and the other a complete stranger – who are dealing with anger and pain he does not understand. In the first story, Howard Shakur is angry with his wife for suggesting he get a job he feels is 'beneath' him and walks out on a beautiful woman and two healthy children Socrates can only dream of having, and for whom he would work any kind of job or make any kind of sacrifice. In the second story, though the 26 men he killed died 'legally' in a war, Gordo is as consumed with guilt over their deaths as Socrates is over the two people he was sent to prison for murdering. In both cases, Socrates is confronted with men who have lives he can only dream of, but who don't seem to appreciate them.

In the first story, Howard goes back to Corina and seems to have worked out his problems after Socrates shows him how good his life actually is. In the second story, though there is no firm resolution, the reader is left wondering if perhaps Gordo's guilt is too all consuming to be dealt with and whether now that he has 'celebrated' the life of the 26th and final man he killed on his birthday, it will also be Gordo's final birthday celebration. In both stories, Socrates is confronted with memories of his own past, and of the things he has missed out on, and struggles to understand what the other two men are going through.

Vocabulary

punk, rambling, drafty, anonymity, fugitive, homeless, solitary, hissed, sermon, passion, sparse, driftwood, ritualistic, priest, reverie, prickles, cudgels, heroin, Vietnam, thorny, chamois, funnel



Letter to Theresa & History

Summary

Letter to Theresa

Socrates has been in bed with a high fever for three days. On the third day he has a hallucination and sees Theresa – his last girlfriend and the only woman he ever truly loved – standing next to the bed. She looks exactly as she did when he last saw her 35 years ago, just before he went to prison. She holds him, and tells him she can't keep worrying about him and nursing him back to health, and she needs to move on. He begs her not to go, but the hallucination passes and he sees Darryl standing where Theresa has been. He recovers from his illness quickly, but the memory of the hallucination stays with him.

On his next day off, Socrates writes a letter to Theresa. He tells her about the hallucination and what she said to him, and tells her she can stop worrying, he has stopped being crazy. He tells her he would like to talk to her and tell her about his life – even though it has been 35 years. When he finishes the letter he is not satisfied, but mails it to her mother's address back in Indiana, which is the only address he knows for her. He puts the store across the street as the return address, and checks in at the store every day for a few weeks for a reply, but none comes. He starts working double shifts at the market to try and keep from thinking about Theresa, but it is no use. He can't sleep, and he can't eat. Finally he calls a "live girls" phone line and talks to a girl he calls Theresa, telling the woman everything that he wanted to say to the real Theresa, pretending she is the real one. When he has done this he is able to sleep, and tells his friend Right Burke later it felt like he'd awakened from a long dream.

A month later, a letter from Theresa's mother arrives at the store across the street. The old woman writes Theresa married, moved to Los Angeles, and had eight children with her husband. After seeing the last one through college the previous November, Theresa died and was buried next to her husband. Socrates rides a bus for three hours to visit her grave. He finds it and stands there silently for over an hour, imagining the life he and Theresa might have had together.

History

LA is engulfed in riots and, though they haven't hit his neighborhood, Socrates watches them every night on the small television he's bought with earnings from his job. One evening he sees a billboard he recognizes erupt in flames; it is a billboard that stood near the Capricorn Bookstore, a place he used to frequent when he first came to Los Angeles eight years earlier, because it was air conditioned and charged nothing to sit inside. The store was owned by Oscar and Winifred Minette – an elderly couple who had run the store for almost 50 years – and attracted an eclectic group of individuals. The Minettes encouraged lively discussions, always soothing tempers when they flared.



Socrates would stop by the bookstore several times a week, until he began to feel accepted and safe there for the first time since he'd been sent to prison.

Over several months, as he adjusted to life as a free man, Socrates began to participate more and more in the discussions among the regulars, and argue regularly with one of the most vocal of the men who frequented the Capricorn – Roland Winters. He also got to know the Minettes, and one evening had dinner at their apartment. During the dinner Socrates and Oscar Minette had a long conversation, during which he tells Oscar his history and refuses to accept the older man's judgment that he shouldn't have been sent to prison, and he has now changed. Socrates tells Oscar he is still a bad man, still learning, still adjusting – but Oscar is no longer listening to him, because he cannot – or doesn't want to – understand what Socrates is saying. Socrates leaves feeling he has disappointed Oscar.

After that conversation, Socrates felt the atmosphere change in the Capricorn; he stopped by less frequently at first, and then stopped visiting the store altogether. After seeing the burning billboard fall on television, he heads out to the Capricorn for the first time in years, only to find it has been burned out in the riots and the books are scattered all over the parking lot. He finds Roland Winters wandering around inside the burned out store and learns that Winifred has been dead for three years, and Oscar had died right after he heard the store had burned. The other regulars Socrates had known are also all dead and Roland has just completed an unsuccessful course of chemotherapy for cancer. For the next few weeks, Socrates brings Roland groceries and reads to him from the Bible, but doesn't make it through Genesis before Roland dies.

Analysis

Both of these stories deal with loss and the fragile nature of relationships. In the first story, Socrates becomes consumed with the memory of Theresa after his hallucination and, even though he has had no contact with her in 35 years, he is desperate to get in touch with her because she was one of the very few completely good and positive things he ever had in his life. In the second story, though he drifted away from it over time, the Capricorn Bookstore was the first place after he was released from prison where he actually felt safe and accepted for himself, and seeing the billboard that had stood over the shop burn down caused him to want to reestablish his relationship with the people there. In both cases it was Socrates who had been the cause of the end of the relationships – (1) by going to prison and leaving Theresa and, (2) by walking away from the Capricorn – and when he finally realizes he wants to get those relationships back, it is too late. There is nothing, and no one, left for him to go back to. The world has moved on.



Vocabulary

dehydrated, echoing, tendrils, saliva, surplus, savoring, brisket, despair, subdued, paralyzed, mole, resigned, rayon, elder, spiritual, somber, incarcerated, leathery, giggle, dodge, rancor



Firebug & Black Dog

Summary

Firebug

One day Socrates asks a friend who has spent 42 years working as a dispatcher for the LAPD if he knows a good cop he can talk to. Though shocked at the request, as Socrates has always expressed his distrust for the police and never talked to them, the friend suggests Socrates talk to Kenneth Shreve, a black police officer who the friend assures Socrates is better than most. Socrates goes to Denther's Bar and Grill, a cop café in another section of LA, to find the man. Socrates spends several uncomfortable minutes talking with Shreve, asking him if he believes that a man is innocent until proven guilty, before he finally tells the officer he might know who is behind a string of arson fires have been set in recent weeks in Watts. When Shreve asks if he is there because of the reward, Socrates first asks what reward, and then leaves the bar without saying a word. Shreve follows him for almost three blocks before Socrates finally makes the officer swear he will make sure the arsonist is treated fairly, and then tells him that the firebug is a young man named Ponzelle Richmond.

A few days before, on the night of the last fire, Socrates had been out walking when he heard the fire engines and saw Ponzelle walking toward him with a look on his face exactly like the look a firebug he had known in prison got on his face after he started a fire in a cell. Socrates followed the man to his home, and then waited until Ponzelle left before breaking in and finding a collection of gas cans, and bottles and rags for making Molotov cocktails. Socrates also found a diary, which he did not tell Shreve about. Later, when the police arrested Ponzelle, they found maps, and other paraphernalia convincing them Ponzelle was their man. However, Socrates kept the diary and buried it in his tiny yard, along with 147 one hundred dollar bills – most of the reward he was given for turning Ponzelle over to the police.

Black Dog

For the first time since his release from prison, Socrates finds himself in trouble with the law. He has been arrested for assaulting a white man after the man ran over a large black dog with his car outside the market where Socrates works, and then walked back towards the dog with a piece of metal in his hand, presumably to kill it. Socrates swatted the man away with one of his big hands, and then carried the 60 pound dog over a mile to a veterinary clinic he had passed by on his way to work, run by a white woman named Dolly Straight. The police come to the clinic and arrest Socrates, and the next day his bond is set at \$25,000. To Socrates' surprise, Dolly puts up her clinic as a guarantee for his bond, and tells him she did it because anyone who would do that for a dog that wasn't his can't be bad and deserves help. Dolly tells Socrates the dog – which she has named Bruno – might live, but will never use his back legs again. Socrates says if he can stay out of jail, he will take the dog as a pet.



A few weeks later, although several people have testified on his behalf, Socrates is found guilty, but remains free pending his sentencing. He visits Bruno every day and Dolly – who has made the dog a harness with wheels on it so it can get around using only its front paws – tells Socrates if he wants to run, it is okay with her, but he has to take Bruno with him. Just before sentencing, Socrates' court appointed lawyer tells him the only chance he has of staying out of prison is to apologize to the man he swatted, apologize to the court and the community, and ask for mercy. At first Socrates absolutely refuses, and yet finally agrees. He is given a suspended sentence and community service. Later, after celebrating the verdict at Lula's diner, he tells Right Burke the reason he did it was because of the dog and the boy Darryl, because he couldn't take care of them – or be of any use at all – if he was in jail.

Analysis

In both of these stories, Socrates finds himself dealing with a system he distrusts, and which he believes is weighted heavily against him – and all black men. Yet, in both stories, he has no choice. Though it would be easy enough for him to simply not put what he sees together in his mind and forget about Ponzelle Richmond, he knows two people have already died in his community because of the fires, and more will die if he does nothing; the only option short of killing the man himself is going to the police. Though he could have simply let the dog – a stray, owned and loved by no one – be killed by the man who ran him over, Socrates protects the animal and incurs the wrath of the system that had incarcerated him before without even thinking about it. In both stories, Socrates' life would have been easier if he had simply minded his own business – and the reader understands in the past that is exactly what he would have done – but the man Socrates is now had to act. In the end he had to break his own set of rules, by first talking to the police and then asking for mercy, for the good of others.

Vocabulary

intoned, stocky, campaign, rickety, invasion, conspiracy, slumlord, surly, defied, neon, dangled, felony, unison, stalking, bail, yelping, glee, pudgy, alfalfa, lice, blazed, scent



Last Rites

Summary

Right Burke, Socrates' best friend, is dying of prostate cancer. A World War II veteran, well into his 70s and half paralyzed by a stroke he suffered several years before, he tells Socrates he wants to die in his own time, and asks Socrates to get him a gun. Socrates digs up some of the money he got as a reward and has Luvia take Right to a doctor uptown, and then goes to a local "reputable" drug dealer and buys 100 strong doses of morphine. The doctor Luvia takes him to says Right's cancer is inoperable and he only has a little time left, but the pills Socrates has brought him ease his pain enough so he can go out for one last night. Right tells Socrates he wants to drink some good whiskey, see some pretty girls, and escape from the pain just for a while. Before meeting Right, Socrates gets the .45 automatic he took off of the gangbanger Philip in the park and brings it with him, but doesn't tell Right.

The two men go to a bar that Right knows employs a pretty waitress, and he flirts with the waitress harmlessly as she keeps the drinks coming. Right tells Socrates he loves him, and he was always a little bit jealous of the younger man because he never had anything to say Socrates didn't already know, but that he does now. He says he knows about death, and he isn't scared of it. When Right begins to get ill from the combination of the cancer, the whiskey, and the morphine, they leave the bar and go to a bus stop to wait for a bus home. When the bus is approaching, Right asks Socrates to count out ten of the morphine pills and give them to him, and then leave him there. After protesting just a little, Socrates gets on the bus and leaves the old man behind, with the gun still in his pocket. Though he thinks about getting off the bus and running back to his friend, he doesn't. He realizes Right is dying as he wanted to – in his own time and feeling better than he ever will again.

Analysis

In this final story in the book, Socrates finds himself facing something he can't change, and which is completely beyond his power to make right. Right Burke is his closest friend – perhaps the closest friend he has ever had – and yet he is unable to save him. All he can do is help him live with his pain and, in the end, let him go. Though tempted to stop his friend's suicide, he realizes it isn't his decision to make, and does as Right asks of him. Though Socrates has lost a huge part of his world, the reader also knows there is much remaining for him to do.

Vocabulary

writhing, prostate, winced, gnarled, shoo, skeletal, congregate, forcibly, morphine, abdomen, posh, din, deformed, retched, milky, droning, emphasize, staggered, headlong



Characters

Socrates Fortlow

Socrates Fortlow is a 58-year-old African-American man who served 27 years in prison in Indiana for committing a double homicide. Socrates has been free for eight years when the book starts, and moved to the Watts section of Los Angeles right after his release from prison. Socrates lives in a small, two-room apartment and supports himself by collecting cans for the deposit money, but later gets a job bagging and delivering groceries. He has a small circle of friends he is extremely loyal to, and a deep distrust of authority – particularly the police.

Throughout these stories, Socrates is haunted by people and events from his past, and is plagued by guilt, hatred, and anger. He sees himself as a “bad man”, yet his actions tell a different story as he constantly tries to help both the people he knows and his community in general. Though capable of terrible violence – both in the past and in the present – he is also surprisingly compassionate and constantly seeks to do the right thing, though he is often uncertain of what the right thing is. Throughout the 14 stories, Socrates tries to improve his own life and the lives of those around him, with varying results.

Darryl

Darryl is a skinny neighborhood boy of about 12 who Socrates catches after the boy kills a neighbor’s rooster. Darryl confesses he has killed a young retarded boy, and is consumed by guilt, and fear that the ghost of the dead boy will come back and get him. Socrates takes the boy under his wing, helping him come to grips with what he has done, and helps get him into a foster home away from the gangbangers that bully him. Darryl grows both physically and emotionally during the course of the stories, and learns many important life lessons from Socrates.

Right Burke

Right Burke is a World War II veteran in his 70s, and is Socrates’ best friend. Right has been partially paralyzed for several years as the result of a stroke, and lives in a house for older disabled people on Marvane Street run by Luvia Prine. Right is one of the very few people who Socrates trusts and will open up to, and tends to have a very practical and no-nonsense view of the world Socrates respects. Right is diagnosed with inoperable prostate cancer and shares one last night with Socrates before killing himself with morphine pills.



Luvia Prine

Luvia is a black woman in her 60s who takes disabled men and women into her house and gives them a place to live. Though she does not like or trust Socrates, she is one of the very few people Socrates truly respects. She is active in her church, and instrumental in helping Socrates get Darryl away from gangbangers in his neighborhood by arranging for him to live with a couple from her church who lost a son. Socrates tells Darryl Luvia is a “good woman”.

Iula

Iula is a black woman in her 40s who owns a makeshift “diner” that Socrates frequents at least once a week, and where the two celebrations recounted in the stories (when Socrates gets a job, and when he receives a suspended sentence) are held. Iula is a handsome woman and Socrates flirts with her at every opportunity. There is a mutual attraction between her and Socrates, although it would appear nothing has come of it yet.

Howard Shakur

Howard Shakur is a pudgy young man in his late 20s/early 30s who is married to Corina, a beautiful woman in her early 20s, and the mother of his two children. Howard leaves Corina after a fight, ending up at Socrates apartment, where Socrates tells him how lucky he is to have what he has and gets him to go home. Though Howard is a friend, Socrates thinks he is a fool.

Dolly Straight

Dolly is a young veterinarian who cares for Bruno – the black dog Socrates saves – and puts up her house to pay Socrates’ bond. She is one of the only sympathetic white characters in the book, and helps Socrates because he helped Bruno. Though she only knows him briefly, she sees a goodness in Socrates he does not see in himself.

Theresa

Theresa is a woman from Socrates’ past that he hallucinates about when he is ill. The only woman he ever really loved, he becomes consumed with getting in touch with her only to find out that she died just a few months before, and just a few miles away from him. Though only seen as a hallucination, Theresa serves to show how powerful Socrates’ memories are, and how much a part of his present they can become.



Petis/ Ponzelle/ Philip

These three young men all live in Socrates' neighborhood, and are all harming the community; Petis by robbing and stabbing people, Philip by being a gang leader, and Ponzelle by lighting fires. Though Socrates believes his crimes were worse than theirs, he still knows to keep his community safe he will need to deal with these criminals, and he does so.

“Ghosts”

In virtually every story, significant interactions with people from Socrates' past are described – either in dreams, via flashback sequences, or by Socrates relating a story to someone. Some of these episodes are violent and some are tender, but all of them directly relate to what is happening in the story in the present, and serve to show how Socrates has grown as a person.



Objects/Places

Knives

Many of the characters in these stories, including Socrates, carry knives either for protection or as a weapon with which to commit a crime.

Cans/Bottles

Socrates collects cans and bottles in the early stories, before he gets a job at the Bounty market.

Food

Several of the most important scenes take place during meals.

Buses/ Bus Stops

Aside from walking, the bus is the only transportation Socrates uses. Bus stops provide shelter in several stories.

Whiskey

Some of the most important scenes take place while Socrates is drinking whiskey with others.

Hotplate

Socrates cooks on a hotplate in his two-room apartment, as he has no stove.

Prison

Though seen only in flashbacks, the 27 years Socrates spent in prison has formed much of who he is.

Marvane Street

This is an inner city street about an hour by bus from Watts where Socrates takes Darryl to show him the different things that can exist on the same block. It is also where Luvia's house is.



Iula's diner

The only restaurant or bar Socrates frequents regularly; the place where the only celebrations in the book are held.

Watts

The inner city neighborhood in Los Angeles where Socrates lives. Watts is a minority neighborhood, plagued by crime, poverty, and violence.

Santa Monica

Santa Monica is the easiest area to reach by bus which offers access to the beach and the Pacific Ocean.

Indiana

Indiana is the state where Socrates spent 27 years in prison.



Themes

Guilt

Guilt is a recurring theme throughout the 14 stories that make up this book, and is central to what makes Socrates who he is. While the terrible murders that he went to prison for continue to weigh heavily on his conscience even 35 years later, Socrates' feelings of guilt are not confined to that single episode in his life. Through a series of flashback scenes, dreams, and memories, the reader understands that the guilt Socrates feels goes back to events that occurred long before he committed the murders, encompass events that happened throughout his 27 years in prison and even extend to things that have happened during the eight years he has lived in Watts. His need to reconcile his deeds in the past with who he is now is central to how he deals with other characters and situations in the book.

Socrates is not the only character in the book who struggles to deal with guilt. The young boy Darryl is consumed with guilt over his killing of the retarded boy, while Gordo – the man Socrates meets on the beach – is unable to deal with the guilt he feels about killing 26 men in the Vietnam War. Though Socrates has at least found a way to survive in spite of the guilt he feels, and helps Darryl to learn to do so, their guilt is always with them, and the reader presumes that it always will be.

Responsibility

Throughout the book, Socrates is confronted with situations that require him to act either for the good of his friends, or for the good of his community. Because of his basic distrust of the police and most forms of authority, Socrates is compelled to dispense street justice himself on a number of occasions, almost always because he can see no other choice available to him and feels he has a responsibility to do something to protect those weaker than himself.

The stories contain a number of flashback scenes – many from Socrates' time in prison – where he is forced to deal with prisoners who are brutalizing his friends or weaker inmates, and that same sense of responsibility extends to the present. In the case of Petis – the young junkie who is robbing and stabbing people in the neighborhood – Socrates feels he must drive the young man out in order to protect the community, and resorts to violence to get his point across. With Darryl, Socrates takes a gentler and more compassionate approach, but ensures the young man faces up to what he has done and understands it was wrong. When Howard Shakur leaves his wife Corina, Socrates talks him into going home, even though other alternatives appeal to him more. Even in the case of Bruno the dog, Socrates risks going back to prison rather than let the man who hit him kill the dog. The theme running through these stories is, at least in Socrates' world, responsibility takes many different forms, can never be escaped, and in most cases requires direct action.

Friendship

Socrates has far more acquaintances than he does friends, but he is fiercely loyal to and protective of those few friends that he does have, and will do whatever he needs to do to take care of them even if it is hard for him. In the case of Darryl, while Socrates would have preferred the boy continued to live with him, he instead arranges to have him live in a neighborhood an hour away rather than have him subjected to the risks posed by the gangbangers who have been bullying him. In the case of Right Burke, he leaves his best friend to die of an overdose of morphine because Right has asked him to let him die in his own time. In both of these cases, Socrates needs to give something up and do something he would prefer not to, and does so because the welfare of his friend is more important to him than his own needs.

Style

Point of View

All of the 14 short stories in this book are written in the third person narrative, from Socrates' point of view. Published in 1998, the book is set in 1995-1996, and presents the main action of each story as occurring in those years. Each of the stories is centered either around Socrates' present or his past, and Socrates is in every scene in the book. All perceptions, feelings, and emotions in the stories are Socrates', and all action is seen through his eyes. While the stories are written by a third person narrator, the author does occasionally insert first person thoughts and observations by Socrates outside of normal dialogue, usually set off by italics.

The fact all of the observations, feelings, and emotions in these stories are what Socrates' sees and feels causes the reader to care about this character and also generally feel the same way as he does about other characters and circumstances in the book, although in many cases the reader would not necessarily feel this way in the real world. The use of this point of view allows the author to use words economically, which is crucial to writing short stories successfully.

Setting

Most of the stories in this book are set primarily in the Watts section of Los Angeles and take place over an indeterminate number of months in 1995-1996. A secondary setting for a number of these stories – used exclusively in dream sequences and flashback scenes – is the prison in Indiana where Socrates served 27 years for murder. The Watts neighborhood and the crime, poverty, and injustice commonplace there, provides a gritty urban setting to these stories where violence is commonplace, and a separate set of rules are followed.

The inner city setting of these stories serves to immediately immerse the reader in the danger and misery that surrounds Socrates on a daily basis, while at the same time causing those few victories and moments of tenderness to stand out even more. In a very real sense the streets of Socrates' neighborhood, and the larger city that surrounds it, is one of the major characters in these stories.

Language and Meaning

The language of these stories is the language of the streets, and of the poor and largely un- or under-educated African Americans who inhabit them. This is particularly true of the dialogue used in the book, which is heavily laced with contractions (for example, "mo" for "more", "wit" for "with", "offa" for "off of", etc.). There is also a very large amount of profanity, as well as racist and sexist language, used throughout the dialogue – and



many of the flashback scenes – in virtually all of these stories. The use of this language, and the frequency with which it is used, may offend some more sensitive readers.

The language used in these stories is appropriate to the setting in which the stories take place, as well as the characters, and serves to give the reader an insight into the world that Socrates inhabits. It would be impossible for the author to tell the stories in this collection as powerfully or meaningfully as they are presented using more “proper”, less offensive language.

Structure

This book contains 14 short stories, all revolving around Socrates Fortlow. While the stories are all connected to each other by the central character – and some of the later stories build on events that have occurred in previous stories – all of the stories can stand alone and have their own beginning, middle, and end. Each of the stories is between 12 and 16 pages long, and contains both third person narrative and dialogue. .

Each of the stories contains its own unique plot, and several contain a subplot; these subplots are often developed using flashback or dream sequences which outline people or events from Socrates’ past, which the author then relates to events in the present.



Quotes

We all got to be our own judge, l'il brother. 'Cause if you don't know when you wrong, yo' life ain't worf a damn. (Chapter 1)

I'm sayin' that bein' right won't wash the blood from your hands. (Chapter 2)

He'd learned when he was a boy that the next meal was never a promise; only a fool didn't eat when he could. (Chapter 3)

You looked right through me, brother.' Socrates felt tears in his eyes. 'You across the street ...right in front of me like I was some kinda animal, like I didn't even matter at all. And then you couldn't even nod to me... (Chapter 4)

He didn't care about a job just then. He was happy to talk, happy to say what he felt. Because he knew that he was telling the truth, and that those men believed him. (Chapter 5)

You don't teach people, you love 'em. You don't get a house and a printin' press, and put up a fence. You do like Luvia. You open up your arms and your pocketbook. (Chapter 6)

You stood up for yourself, Darryl,' Socrates said. 'That's all a black man could do. You always outnumbered, you always outgunned. (Chapter 7)

You know I sit here an' look at you, and I can see all the things in my life that I missed. (Chapter 8)

I either committed a crime or had a crime done to me every day I was in jail. (Chapter 9)

I think a whole lot of our people put more into a year than some others might do. Sometimes it just takes an hour, and you done had a lifetime. (Chapter 10)

Socrates imagined all of the sweet knowledge buried in her hello. It made him happy. (Chapter 11)

All right then,' Socrates replied. 'But tell me, do you know a cop I could talk to? A black man knows he's black'?"? (Chapter 12)

The old woman was a few inches under five feet and slight. She looked like an excited child up there on the stand. There was an ancient glee at the memory of the punch. Socrates tried to keep from smiling. (Chapter 13)

I must be somebody,' Socrates said. 'Cause here you is. (Chapter 14)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who and what is Socrates Fortlow? Is Socrates a bad man who does good or a good man who has done bad things? Has Socrates paid for the murders he has committed, or should he have been kept in prison? Does Socrates get in the difficult and sometimes violent situations in which he finds himself throughout the book as a result of his own actions, or are these chance occurrences? Given the circumstances and environment, does Socrates handle these situations well?

Topic 2

Discuss the relationship between Socrates and Darryl. Why does Socrates take Darryl under his wing and mentor him? Should Socrates have turned Darryl into the police after he admitted killing another boy? Why is Darryl able to sleep on Socrates' sofa, but not at his own home? What does Socrates try to teach Darryl by taking him to Marvane Street? Why does he make Darryl confront Philip, even though the older gang member might hurt or kill him? Discuss what, if any, positive effect Socrates has on Darryl's life.

Topic 3

How does Socrates view the criminals he encounters in these stories? Why does he choose to force Petis from the neighborhood, rather than turn him over to the police? Why does he feel that the thief Wilfred is harming his own people even though he commits his crimes in white neighborhoods? Does Socrates break his own code by turning Ponzelle – the firebug – in to the police? If so, discuss why he does it.

Topic 4

Discuss Socrates' relationship with women in the stories. Why does he refuse the job that Lula offers him at her diner? Why does he turn down the young woman Delia's offer to make love on the beach? Why does he become obsessed with contacting Theresa, who he has not seen or heard from in 35 years? Does he mean what he says to Corina Shakur in his kitchen? Why does he have such a deep respect for Luvia Prine, even though she neither likes nor trusts him?

Topic 5

Discuss Socrates' relationship with Right Burke. Why are they friends? How does what Right feels should be done about Petis differ from what Socrates feels, and who is right? Why does Socrates take Darryl to see Right during the trip to Marvane Street?



How does Right's view of the world differ from Socrates', and why? Why does Right choose to spend his last few hours on Earth with Socrates? Should Socrates have gone against Right's wishes and gotten him some help after he overdosed on morphine?

Topic 6

Why does Socrates distrust the police so much? Is this distrust justified? Why does Socrates tell Darryl that the police watching the Young Africans' headquarters on Marvane Street are part of the problem on that street? Why does Socrates bury the reward money he gets after he turns Ponzelle in to the police? Why does Socrates distrust authority in general? Is it simply a result of the 27 years he spent in prison, or is there more to it? Why does Socrates resist the idea of apologizing to the court even though it is the only way he will stay out of prison? Why does he finally agree to do it?