

Ask the Dust Study Guide

Ask the Dust by John Fante

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Plot Summary

Los Angeles in 1939 is a booming land of promise for Arturo Bandini, whose fondest dream is to become a real, published author. Having moved from a small town in Colorado, Bandini rides a roller coaster of emotions as he tries to make a life for himself in the big city. Arturo forms a stormy relationship with a Mexican waitress named Camilla Lopez, who becomes an obsession for him nearly as powerful as his career. Their mutual love and hatred for one another, and for themselves, provides an intensely dark comedy that exposes their inner conflicts, their racial bigotry and their low self-esteem as they struggle to survive in a contrived culture to which neither will ever really belong. Arturo loves Camilla; Camilla loves Sammy; Sammy loves nobody; and eventually Camilla disappears—but her presence in his life makes Arturo a wiser, stronger person.

John Fante's description of Los Angeles during the depression—of gaunt faces and lost humanity—is haunting and riveting, told from the perspective of a young man who is not altogether stable. The smog, traffic, dust, grime and shallow lifestyles of southern California were already present in 1939, making this story relevant still today. The earthquake scene in the story is just as realistic as it might be today, complete with military intervention and the emergence of human kindness in the face of disaster.

Camilla, Arturo, Sammy, Vera and Hellfrick are all non-entities in the bustle of L.A. culture, but all are profoundly human in their suffering, confusion and vices. Each is battling a poor sense of self-worth while struggling to survive in an indifferent world. Arturo Bandini takes us through this story in intimate first-person, exposing us to his mood swings, his astute observations and his growth as an author and a man.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

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In the Alta Loma Hotel in the Bunker Hill district of Los Angeles, writer Arturo Bandini's hotel room window opens onto the ground level, a smog and sand-choked base of a palm tree as his view. Arturo's train of thought rambles as he ponders his existence as a lonely, insecure writer relocated from Colorado and out of sync with women, life and his own writing ability.

Arturo, down to his last nickel, begins his story trying to decide whether to pay his rent or leave, but decides instead to have coffee and walk around the city. As he walks, Arturo indulges in his memories of people and his past that float around in his mind as he walks the streets past cars, streetcars and hotels. He imagines dates with attractive women, his own Mexican girl and princesses. He thinks about his mother, mass, the mouse in his room, his publisher, Hackmuth, and the fact that he is a good, poetic writer and his work has affected people. However, he clearly has a severe case of writer's block that keeps stalling him like this and keeps him thinking.

The Little Dog Laughed is the title of Arturo's published work, upon which he relies for his self-esteem and confidence. Much of Arturo's time is spent reassuring himself through scenes set up in his mind, such as beautiful women wanting his autograph, fan



letters based on one he actually received, and his agent's recognition of him as a great writer.

He is unable to pay his rent to Mrs. Hargraves, which is five weeks behind. He is broke, hungry, and writes the same lines over and over, in a severe slump of self-worth. Arturo tries to draw inspiration from the palm tree outside, but the palm tree wins.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Arturo is down on his luck in the real world. In his fantasy world, there is rich detail and he incorporates all of the scenes and people he sees into his daydreams. Although he imagines positive events unfolding, the reality is that he is desperate and perhaps almost irrational from hunger. Obviously very young and immature, Bandini is seeking a sense of the world outside of the one he has known, primarily to help him in his writing and secondarily because he needs to grow up. His confidence is eroded by hunger, late rent, his fear of not finding the success he is seeking, and his own personal insecure baggage that he has brought along with him from childhood.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Arturo remembers when he was twenty years old thinking he had lots of time to write a book, so he should get out and experience life. However, he has never been with a woman and therefore, his writing is not as inspired as he wants it to be. He remembers trying to be with a prostitute but being blocked by thoughts of the Blessed Virgin and adultery. He imagines being with a woman who will not frighten him.

As he walks along Bunker Hill, he commiserates with himself about being poor, being no good at writing, having dubious talent, and being a coward, traitor and liar. He admits he is claustrophobic, afraid of heights, blood, earthquakes, heart trouble, death and fear itself, but is otherwise quite fearless. Pretending to be wealthy, Arturo goes to a burlesque show but is disgusted. Seeing himself as an atheist, he stops in a church and prays for his writing career and for his mother's happiness.

Arturo imagines becoming famous from writing about an experience with a prostitute after he dismisses the advances of one outside the church. Changing his mind about her, he turns back and sees her with a Mexican man. His hatred toward "stinking greaser" Mexicans surfaces. Waiting outside the building until the prostitute reappears, Arturo agrees to go to her room, but instead of taking her up on her offer for sexual favors, he tells her he is a writer and simply wants to talk to her. He hates her and considers her filthy yet cleaner than him, since she only sells her flesh and he sells his mind. He ends up paying her eight of the ten dollars his mother sent him and leaves, punishing himself severely, saying, "Oh Jesus, kill me dead and ship my body home, kill me dead and make me die like a pagan fool with no priest to absolve me, no extreme unction, eight dollars, eight dollars..."

Chapter 2 Analysis

If it were not so pitiful this chapter would be hilarious. Arturo is tormented by his confusion, his fears and his determination all working against one another. His insecurity makes him pretend he is smooth and worldly, but his guilt and angst are so strong that he cannot even temporarily let down his defenses. Catholicism has obviously played a large role in his life and is one main source of his guilt. His desperate escape from the prostitute feels to him like breaking out of hell to the sweet, foggy, clean air and wonderful world. His fear of this woman and of his own failures make him unable to have sex with her but, ultimately, his worst anguish is over spending the eight dollars, which he could ill afford. Arturo is not different from many young men who want and need a woman but fear it at the same time; however, he is twenty years old and lacks social skills. Arturo is bright enough to write of his own self-doubt and anxieties, but not strong or mature enough yet to overcome them.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Arturo feasts on fruit, buying fifteen or twenty oranges from a Japanese fruit vendor for a nickel. At one point he actually thinks he is getting fat from them. His writer's block is so severe that he prays to St. Teresa for an idea; he feels deserted and unloved, even by the resident mouse. Arturo thinks he is the most miserable, grief stricken creature on earth on one hand, and on the other, is arrogant enough to call himself a courageous, starved genius. He vacillates between his feelings for himself, all of them extreme.

Mr. Hellfrick, Arturo's neighbor, is an atheist, an alcoholic and an army veteran. Hellfrick, who has not paid the fifteen cents he has owed Arturo for a long time, comes with a plan. He tells Arturo how he can steal some milk from the back of a friend's milk truck while Hellfrick keeps the milkman occupied with gin. Although he initially rejects the idea, Arturo cannot resist the offer because he is hungry. Arturo laments that he is about to become a thief and tries to create a story in his head about how stealing the milk was just an exercise for a story he is writing.

Arturo rolls tobacco in toilet paper and smokes it. He writes through the night, waiting for the milkman to arrive. Trying to bolster his confidence and assuage his guilt, Arturo tells himself in the mirror what courage he has to choose the life of a writer, and enjoys another reading of *The Little Dog Laughed*. After composing a thirty-page letter to his agent, Hackmuth, four o'clock arrives. Arturo successfully steals two bottles from the back of the milkman's truck. After saying grace for a half hour, he pours it and drinks it, realizing it is buttermilk, which he detests.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Arturo's hunger alone would be reason enough for his depression. We can feel his almost panicky fear about not being able to write anything of value after one published article. He values honesty and is forced to compromise his values to steal the milk, which also turns out bad for him. Still hoping that prayer will help, Arturo's faith vacillates like his moods. His mind is as much an enemy as a friend, giving him mixed messages about himself, his life, his talents and his future. However, Fante may realize that most people's minds work in this way, with thousands of conflicting thoughts as we try daily to maintain our confidence and sanity, with the trick being to find a sense of balance. At some level he recognizes that he is on a journey, evidenced by the encouragement he tries to give himself in the mirror.

Arturo's anxiety about his plan to steal milk, the incongruity of his values and his needs, is the force which stimulates him to write a thirty-page letter to his agent, which will turn out in his favor later.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

At the Columbia Buffet, having used his last nickel for a cup of bad coffee, Arturo enters into an unspoken conflict with an indifferent Mexican waitress who ignores his gestures for service. She is attractive but wears tattered huaraches, which he feels is a defect worthy of criticism. Somehow this observation makes him feel happy. He tells her that if he were her, he would not be seen in them; she says she hates him and hopes he dies of heart failure. He pours half his cold coffee over the nickel on the table and leaves, feeling better.

Arturo does not remember if he went to his radical friend's house that night, which gives him the opportunity to describe Benny Cohen, who may be a Marxist or Communist. He does, however, remember lying in bed with his anger toward the waitress, forgetting he was poor.

Arturo learns from an old man at the closed bar the next morning that the waitress's name is Camilla Lopez. He leaves a copy of *The Little Dog Laughed* for her, erasing his original inscription to a Mayan princess and replacing it with a flippant and insulting note, mentioning her ragged shoes and the fact that not everyone who comes into the bar is a bum.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Arturo is attracted to Camilla even more so during the moments when he feels superior to her. Her ragged shoes give him the opportunity to put her down, since he assumes she purposely ignored him and that she is laughing at him. The nature of his anger is reflected in the two different inscriptions he writes in the magazine. In the first inscription he is humble, even humiliated, and complimentary toward her; in the second inscription he is mean, arrogant and condescending. Arturo's inner battle for self-confidence rages as he tries to make a connection with Camilla. Camilla is self-conscious, but she tries to effect a self-assured facade, which infuriates Arturo. They sense a mutual interest and attraction, but they are both afraid and angry, anticipating and even expecting rejection and judgment from each other. Arturo's snap decision to latch onto the issue of Camilla's shoes is a gut response to his fear of her judgment of him. They are both minorities in a harsh environment and have both been damaged by prejudice.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Full of oranges, which is a steady diet for him, Arturo watches Camilla from a dark doorway on a hot night until a policeman approaches.

Sand covers everything, blowing from the Mojave through Los Angeles. The next morning after a walk, he finally breaks down and weeps with grief, which purges him. Arturo writes an honest letter to his mother asking her for money.

Hellfrick enters Arturo's room and pays back the fifteen cents he owes him, telling him he is an honest man. Arturo uses the money for cookies and with the nickel he has left makes plans to go back to the Columbia Buffet.

Arturo describes a blissful sense of joy while at the restaurant, watching Camilla and now yearning for her ragged huaraches. She apologizes for the bad coffee and the two engage in an exchange of personal criticisms. Camilla brings him a free beer, paid for from her own pocket, which he ceremoniously pours into a spittoon while she watches. In repayment, Camilla takes *The Little Dog Laughed*, tears it into small pieces and lets it fall into a spittoon as he watches. Arturo feels that story represents all that is good in him.

When he leaves the bar, Camilla chases Arturo and apologizes, asking him to come back tomorrow. She says she can be nice, and asks him to forgive her. He asks her if she needs the huaraches to emphasize the fact that she is "a filthy little Greaser." Feeling proud to be an American, he picks up a cigarette butt from the gutter and revels in his patriotism.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Arturo's rude behavior, bigotry, false pride and bloated patriotism is Fante's ironic way of revealing the foolishness of judging one race over the other, especially in a country made up of many races and in a city that is a virtual melting pot. Arturo himself is Italian, but feels superior to Mexicans for some reason. The identity of being an American gives him a needed sense of belonging, since he has nothing else to feel confident or proud of, especially after Camilla has humiliated him almost as viciously as he has humiliated her. Tearing the only emotional resource he has into small pieces, she lets Arturo know that his false pride is meaningless to her. Camilla may be a filthy greaser, but it is Arturo who picks up a used cigarette butt from the gutter and smokes it. Both characters are desperate for some kind of meaning and identity as they struggle with their severely low self-esteem.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Arturo reflects on the new Californians, and how so many people have come from other parts of the country to live out their days in the sunshine, only to find out that California already belongs to the Smiths, Parkers and Jones. He notes that those in polo shirts and sunglasses are the ones who belong here. Although the California culture is not available to everyone, one can still pretend to be in paradise—at least until the relatives come out from back home. People back home think California is about movie stars and prosperity.

Americans with names like Smith, Parker and Jones are the kind who hurt Arturo with prejudice in Colorado, calling him Wop, Dago and Greaser. Their children hurt him, just like he hurt Camilla. Unable to be one of them, he withdrew into books.

Arturo observes people whose faces are "bleak from proximity with their strange gods," coming out of the church of the Great I Am, of which he clearly is not a part.

Seeing these same people everywhere, Arturo feels the old pain of being hated for being different and having a name ending in a soft vowel. He is glad to see them old and dying in the sun and dust, and glad to be young and full of hope and love. He is ashamed for calling Camilla a greaser and is aware that the racial slur comes from his own pain.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Arturo is having a moment of clarity about his anger and emotional agony. In this chapter, he is strictly humble and open about his humiliation, revealing no arrogance whatsoever. He feels so disenfranchised and isolated in this huge city that he is simply lost in his own anguish over feeling outcast and different, a feeling that is not new to him. Although the "white" culture of Los Angeles disgusts him in some respects (vomiting at the newspapers), he hopes that the intolerance of that generation will die away and that his youth and love for his country will overcome his bitterness. His sense of alienation is stark in this chapter and reflects both his hatred for and his envy of those he perceives as having a sense of belonging.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Arturo recalls his first encounter at the Alta Loma hotel with Mrs. Hargraves, who made it clear she would not accept Mexicans or Jews in her hotel. He tells her he is a writer and inscribes one of his magazines to her in flowery language. Mrs. Hargraves informs him she does not like dog stories and insists to him that the city of Boulder, where he is from, is not in Colorado but in Nebraska. She will not be wrong about this, and implies he is being dishonest. Knowing he will not win this argument, Arturo finally agrees that Boulder is in Nebraska.

Arturo is haunted by Mrs. Hargraves' description of her husband and by the fact that his belongings are still in the hotel just as he left them. Bert did not smoke or drink, and his essence threateningly follows Arturo for two days.

Arturo recalls a young hotel guest who was in search of something he never found, who missed his home in Memphis and looked forward to leaving L.A. He also thinks of Heilman, who belonged to the Book of the Month Club, hated the west and the weather, and longed for the Midwest. Another guest was a girl from St. Louis with a curiosity about Filipinos. He notes that she eventually found one. Of all the hotel guests, only one has read *The Little Dog Laughed*, even though Arturo made it abundantly available in the hotel's common rooms.

A young girl named Judy Palmer came to meet Arturo and get a copy of his magazine. He is so thrilled to have a fan that he tries anything to get her to stay, and convinces her to read the story to him aloud while he rests on the bed, listening. Judy's mother eventually comes for her and they leave the hotel, not even having spent one night.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Arturo's self-absorption is significant. He is so desperate for approval that he is unaware of the social inappropriateness of lying on his bed while a young girl reads to him. Or, perhaps, he is aware of the inappropriateness.

It is interesting that Arturo does not really make friends with any of the guests, but can only think of them in terms of whether they have read his story. He does not feel compassion for Mrs. Hargraves' inability to let her husband go, but feels watched and guilty for being in her room and for having habits of which Mr. Hargraves disapproved when he was alive.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

J.C. Hackmuth, whose picture hangs on Arturo's wall, wants to publish Arturo's long letter as a story in his magazine, and has sent him a check for \$175. He will remove the greeting and ending and call it *The Long Lost Hills*. Arturo has a wave of rebellious arrogance, having now been published twice, and feels quite inflated as a writer. He insists on giving Mrs. Hargraves an extra \$5 after paying his rent, which angers her, but he is now feeling wealthy and smug, stating that he never changes his mind.

After a large spending spree during which he buys clothes, a toothbrush, lotion, cigarettes, candy, a watch, a lamp, new paper, ties, a robe and slippers, he bathes and enjoys his new possessions. When his new clothes arrive from the May Company, they also send along his old clothes, which he had asked be sent to the Salvation Army. Arturo tries on his new suit, but everything feels and smells foreign, itchy, stiff and strangling. He feels hogtied and like a buffoon, and wonders if this could really be the creator of *The Long Lost Hills*. The smell of his new lotions suddenly offends him. He undresses, washes again and changes into his old clothing.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Arturo claiming that he never changes his mind is hilarious. As readers we know that his mind shifts constantly.

Arturo worships Hackmuth, considering him brilliant for recognizing Arturo's talent. He over-responds to the money, suddenly behaving like a wealthy man and even forcing money on his landlady. On his usual mental roller coaster, Arturo's manic shopping spree, in the end, is not satisfying to him and, once again, he questions his own identity. Although he wants to pretend he is rich and suave, he is totally out of his comfort zone in his new clothes and feels delight in wrapping himself back into what is familiar.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Taking a taxi to the Columbia Buffet, Arturo makes a big deal out of ordering an expensive cigar and trying to make Camilla keep the change. He orders their most expensive Scotch, buys one for each of the two bartenders and calls it rotgut.

Camilla is uncomfortable in new white high-heeled pumps, and hurt that Arturo has not said much about them. She objects to his comment about her being a Mexican princess, saying she is an American. He tells her she will always be nothing more than a sweet little flower girl from Old Mexico, to which she responds with a racial slur toward him. Now he is hurt and she is angry, but she apologizes and he compliments her on the new shoes.

Camilla and Sammy, the bartender, meet Arturo at her car. Camilla drives aggressively and dangerously. Arturo notices the car is registered to Camilla Lombard, which she says is her professional name; she is not satisfied with her real name.

They get to Palisades and go to the beach. Camilla asks Arturo to teach her to swim. Naked in the ocean, they begin body surfing, but when Arturo comes out of the water, she is beyond the breakers out in the fog, screaming for help. Almost drowning as he tries to rescue her, Arturo imagines this episode written in a book, and worries about excessive adjectives. Sobbing, he gives up. Camilla comes to the shore laughing at him. He picks her up, throws her in a few feet of water and rubs her face in the muddy sand, then wraps himself up with a blanket from her car. Arturo is unable to feel enough passion to make love to her, preoccupied with thoughts of writing and alternately cursing himself.

As they drive away from the beach, he feels hatred toward her and comforts himself with thoughts about his new manuscript. When he tells Camilla where he lives, she insults him. He says the place is perfect because they don't allow Mexicans. Camilla forces a violent kiss on Arturo and, when he gets to his room, his desire finally awakens.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Arturo's writing career represents his survival, both literally and figuratively. Even when his life is in danger, he is writing about it in his head. His fear of intimacy with Camilla is soothed by turning his thoughts to his writing career. Arturo's relationship with himself is one of love and hate, but primarily of survival. He wants Camilla but is frightened by her, and uses old patterns of cruelty he learned as a child to keep his distance from her. His feigned superiority gives him a vehicle to put himself above her to preserve his own ego.



Arturo's humiliation over Camilla's trick at the beach is severe because she has temporarily won the battle between them. He has demonstrated that he cares about her by frantically searching and eventually crying; she in turn makes a joke of it, making him feel stupid.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Arturo's neighbor, Hellfrick, asks him for money for meat, which he craves.

Arturo tries to write his night with Camilla as a piece of fiction, but, instead of going directly into the Columbia Buffet, Arturo sends a telegram to Camilla telling her he loves her and wants to marry her. Although he has changed his mind, he cannot get keep the delivery boy from delivering it. He watches Camilla through the window as she reads the telegram and laughs, sharing it with the bartenders and other men in the bar, who also laugh.

Dejected but determined, Arturo pays to dance with a blond woman and later heads to the Columbia Buffet where he waits for Camilla to get off work. Sitting in her car, Arturo finds Camilla's hat and instead of waiting to see her takes the hat home and sleeps with it.

Arturo decides to go to the church and see a priest. The magazine containing Arturo's story is sitting there and Arturo points it out. The priest says that his story was hogwash. He does not like the reference made in the story to the Blessed Sacrament, which Arturo thinks was brilliant. Arturo no longer wants to talk to the priest. Out of anger, he writes and later disposes of an attack on the Catholic church.

Arturo sends Camilla a romantic poem by Ernest Dowson, substituting her name, but she tears it up and throws it away.

Arturo is so depressed that he considers himself a freakish outcast, "neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring." He tries to spend time with some prostitutes but feels that even sailors have what he doesn't have. His head is swimming with his observations about the women, including their physical ugliness and their nationalities. They talk him into buying a bottle of champagne, and he loves them for their sad lives and their misery. His imagined prose begins to sound insane by the end of this chapter.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Arturo is out of control over his desire for Camilla and his inability to conduct himself in a way that would allow him to have her. The ridiculous telegrams and poetry make him look and feel even worse. Arturo's attempts to enjoy the company of prostitutes only provide him with the most banal company, but do not fill the gap in himself he is seeking to fill. Even his visit to the Catholic church is disheartening and disturbing. If nothing else, Arturo is an honest narrator, describing his ups and his downs, his horrible self-image and his occasional falsely inflated ego.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

His money having almost magically diminished, Arturo is now desperate to see Camilla. He sits in her car and when she arrives with Sammy, Arturo refuses to get out. She says she wants nothing to do with him and walks away with Sammy. Arturo returns to his room confused about why he did this.

An attractive, well-dressed woman with glassy, reckless eyes comes to Arturo's room and frightens him. He does not know her and, for a brief moment, he wants to beat her. He smells liquor, perfume and the decaying smell of aging on her. The woman, Vera, recites Millay and tells Arturo he is a fool, and that his writing is no good. Vera has money and wants to go drinking, so they quietly leave the hotel. She is clearly trying to seduce him, but feels he must already know about her wounds. At the local bar, when she refuses to let him go, Arturo goes to the pinball machine and says he needs to use the men's room. Escaping out the back into an alley, he goes for a hot dog and coffee, not wanting to see her again.

His room is drenched with her odor and she returns calling him her darling and saying she loves him and that his eyes pierced her soul. Vera is extremely lonely. She begins to cry about her soul being good even though her body is ugly, and Arturo tries to reassure her, realizing she is in a hell of her own. Trying to assuage her pain, he tells her all of the strange and shameful things he has done out of loneliness; but she is much farther down in the depths than Arturo.

Vera reveals her burned and disfigured thighs. Although he is struggling, Arturo continues to tell Vera she is lovely and beautiful. He flees to the fire escape to cry about his sadness for her situation, eventually forgetting the unfairness of Vera's problems and returning to his own. When he returns, Vera is dressed and leaving for her home in Long Beach, her scent permeating the room. She invites him to come see her in Long Beach and is confident he will.

Arturo thinks Vera might be able to help him become a new person who can deal with Camilla more passionately. He heads for Long Beach, stopping to give Hellfrick some money for meat.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This bizarre chapter places Arturo with someone who is even more desperate, lonely and insecure than himself. He does try to help Vera and, perhaps, by not rejecting her outright, really does alleviate some of her misery. Vera has obviously recognized a kindred soul in Arturo.



Arturo's initial flash of rage toward Vera is interesting since it almost seems a primal response to fear. His anger toward God for Vera's misfortune very quickly reverts back to self pity.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

As she predicted, Arturo visits Vera in Long Beach. She is all over him, but he avoids her advances, wishing the Jewish girl would slow down. Vera brings him a glass of milk that is warm with scum on the top, and he smells her in it. Arturo talks to Vera about his love for Camilla. Vera finally asks the question Arturo wants her to ask, which is whether Camilla loves him. He replies that she does not and that he doesn't know why. Vera wants to be Camilla for him, and he successfully fantasizes he is making love with Camilla, who is the princess of the desert and mountains and sea, with no California, no dusty streets, no uprooted people. Vera cries, but Arturo will not kiss her. In the heat of passion, Arturo claims his identity as an Italian conqueror and as the greatest writer in the world.

Vera once again becomes Vera, and Arturo takes a nap. With a disoriented feeling, he faces his mortality and that of everyone else, and realizes that he has committed the mortal sin of adultery against Vera Rivken. He examines his old religious beliefs, which are now myths to him, and thinks about the sea of life from which he came, which may or may not be real. Since salt of the sea is in his blood, he decides it will return to its source. He does not know what to do with his guilt and knows he will deal with it until he dies.

While he is on the beach, a major earthquake takes place, and Arturo is sure he caused it. There is chaos in the streets with debris and falling buildings, sirens and screaming people. Arturo sees Vera's building is demolished, her Murphy bed hanging on the side of the ruins. People sing around a bonfire and marines pour through the streets. Feeling critical of the group of Protestants who are singing cheap hymns, Arturo thinks of the Handel and Palestrina sung in his church. The quake is the biggest since San Francisco. Arturo is not allowed to leave Long Beach, which is under martial law for safety. He fully expects Camilla to have died and even pictures her in death, remembering many things about her. He listens for her name, but does not hear it called on the Marines' broadcast of fatalities in Los Angeles.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Arturo's grandiose sense of self-importance and perhaps his faith are confirmed when his adultery causes a major earthquake. In the throes of guilt and while resigning himself to a life of remorse, the earthquake's timing in his life is humorous.

As Arturo observes the people and drama around him, he continuously "writes" their stories in his mind. All of the dead bodies and destruction he observes may be embellished, since Los Angeles reports so little damage. Given his earlier revelation

about mortality, it would make sense that he would exaggerate what he is seeing and misconstrue it as death. We also know that earthquakes are on his list of fears.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Returning to Los Angeles, Arturo is very afraid of falling buildings and admits to himself he is a coward. He is sure these buildings are going to eventually fall down and kill people and is traumatized by his experience. However, he begins telling fantastical stories about being in the quake and watching the dead being taken out; stories about his courage in the face of crisis, and his daring rescue of victims from the rubble. Arturo does not care whether people believe him or not. He tells Hellfrick he was caught at the top of a Ferris wheel with a girl when the quake hit. After inspecting his own room, Hellfrick's room and the building for cracks, Arturo sleeps outside on the ground, convinced that Los Angeles is doomed.

Arturo begins attending mass, gives money to the church, quits smoking and sends his mother five dollars. He is a changed man, blessed and refreshed by his renewed devotion to religion. Symbolically, however, Camilla knocks at his window, and the religion becomes meaningless. The idea for a story about Vera Rivken begins to formulate and flow for him.

Arturo makes another scene as he tries to force Camilla to come with him after work, calling her names. He threatens Sammy and physically wrestles with Camilla, but Sammy takes her away on foot. Getting her address, Arturo goes home and works hard on his writing, determined to become famous and forget about Camilla.

Hellfrick tries to repay his debt to Arturo with his personal belongings, but cooks huge steaks for himself and refuses to share them with Arturo. Hellfrick goes on a two-day drinking binge and buys a Packard. He convinces Arturo to go with him to get some meat and drives to a farm where Hellfrick kills a calf. The murdered calf's mother follows him, mooing for her offspring.

Arturo is mortified and never returns to Hellfrick's room again, deciding he will forget the three dollars he owes him. Arturo now keeps his door bolted.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Telling stories of his heroism in the aftermath of the earthquake and of the blood and gore helps Arturo deal with his deep fears. Suddenly honesty is not an issue for him, and he does not even care if people believe him. He tells these gory stories like one about a child who draws frightening pictures of monsters so that he won't be so afraid.

Identifying his moral boundaries, Arturo realizes he cannot abide murder, even of an animal for food which he earlier relished. His renewed stint of religion has affected him deeply. Although the smell of Hellfrick's meat makes him ravenous, the reality of the dead calf is more than he can handle.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Another digest wants to publish Arturo's Long Lost Hills story, and he receives a hundred dollars. He sends his mother money again and imagines himself a good son. He is now writing a novel and is caught up in the drama of being a novelist giving his work to the people.

Camilla comes to Arturo's room, asking him why they fight all the time. She tells him that Sammy is no longer here, but Arturo is irritated about all of the times she has hurt him, and now she thinks she is in love with Sammy. She tells him Sammy has tuberculosis and shows him two western cowboy manuscripts Sammy has written. Camilla asks Arturo to help Sammy with his writing since he only has a year to live. Humiliated again, Arturo once again hates Camilla and writes a horrible, scathing letter to Sammy about his awful manuscript and how it will be better when Sammy dies.

He is about to mail the letter when he suddenly understands the common destiny of humanity, and that living is hard enough. He goes back into his room and writes a kinder, more helpful criticism, thinking himself truly wonderful.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Arturo's evil side is at war with his moral Catholic side. His problem is that his ego is so overblown that he cannot even be good without judging himself to be wonderful, and he cannot be bad without judging himself to be evil. He is confused, but is at least beginning to be constructive. His experiences are helping him shape himself as an adult.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Arturo makes an extra effort to be mean to Camilla after receiving a thank you note from Sammy, who tells him that he is too nice to her and that Mexican women don't like to be treated like human beings.

He criticizes Camilla's appearance, calling her a cheap imitation of an American. Camilla tries hard to get Arturo to warm up to her, but her beauty scares him and freezes his feelings. She makes him dislike himself and, when he doesn't respond to her, she pushes him away. Camilla thinks he might be homosexual, but he denies it.

Challenged, Arturo holds onto Camilla, but only when she becomes hateful toward him does he begin to desire her. Fantasizing about himself as Bandini, he becomes too forceful. Camilla tells him she hates rough stuff. She leaves, but Arturo's confidence is high now because he knows he will have her.

As he expects, Camilla does show up again. They go to a shooting gallery and she is disgusted that he cannot shoot well. She calls him a sissy and is angry when they leave, telling him to get out of the car and that she hates him and hopes he dies on the way home. He understands her hatred of Bandini, who does not live up to her standards. Camilla sobs as she leaves. Arturo knows he is not good for her.

Chapter 15 Analysis

It is not clear why Camilla keeps coming back to Arturo, since he is so mean and disrespectful to her. He can only feel passion for her when she is angry and hateful toward him, because the aggressive feelings that battling brings out in him make him feel stronger and more confident. He is still dependent upon his identity as a writer for any self-assurance. Camilla seems to know that he has a softer side and she keeps trying to find it, but he continues to disappoint her and himself.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Arturo is spending good days writing his first novel, feeling confident, happy and financially stable. He decides to go see Camilla, but she does not look good and is much thinner.

Arturo realizes when she comes to visit that she has been abused by Sammy, with whom she claims to be in love. They drank together and he was able to love her without fear and was able to say all the things that came into his busy mind. She is his true love, even though she is in love with Sammy. They finally spend a peaceful night together, drunk.

Unsure of the season, his days and nights blending together, Arturo is sailing through his novel. He and Camilla go to Terminal Island where Japanese children play on the beach. Camilla has been drinking too much and does not look well. Arturo hates the seagulls that eat the crabs; Camilla hates the crabs.

Arturo joins a football game with the Japanese children; Camilla threatens to make him walk home again. She leaves and he continues to play, later taking a bus home.

Arturo comes home one night to find his hotel door locked and hears Camilla inside scurrying around before she lets him in. She greets him nervously with feigned passion and is apparently hiding something in the closet. She begs Arturo to go with her to see Sammy, help him with his writing, knowing that Sammy will not make her leave if Arturo is with her. Sammy obviously wants nothing to do with Camilla and does not even want to let her into his house. He orders her to get fire wood and make coffee. Camilla cleans and straightens Sammy's house, fixes them breakfast and does his laundry by hand.

When they get back, Arturo finds the secret in his closet and realizes Camilla smokes marijuana. Calling her a hop-head, he tells her to quit and she promises to do so, although he knows she won't.

After they visit her marijuana dealer in a bad part of town led by a sinister Negro, Arturo finally sees Camilla's dirty, unkempt house. Arturo, after initially rejecting her offer, gives in and smokes marijuana with her and experiences not ever having been the person he normally is. In his dreamy free state, he breaks a lamp, which they find very funny. His passion is strong and present, but when the drug wears off he returns to his guilt, the dirty room, and his sense of destruction. When he leaves with feet cut by the lamp shards, he feels he will never see Camilla again.



Chapter 16 Analysis

Sammy clearly despises Camilla, which seems to make her want him even more. Arturo is resigned to her feelings for Sammy and may even feel some relief. He knows that Sammy is neither smart nor a good writer, which may be why his relationship with Camilla is slightly more comfortable.

Awakening of his deeper senses with marijuana allows Arturo to let go of his constricted judgment and moralizing, and he actually enjoys the temporary freedom. Once it wears off, his mental chains grip him even more tightly.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Arturo finishes and revises his novel about Vera Rivken with ease and submits it to Hackmuth, praying fervently for a miracle. When he receives a telegram that a contract for the book is on its way, Arturo feels his life is over because he is happy enough to die.

The contract arrives with five hundred dollars. Arturo feels so rich he could retire for life. He goes to Camilla to tell her the news but she bedridden, gaunt and broken, wanting to die. Arturo goes out and buys a large supply of groceries and gets her to drink milk, but she vomits. He goes out to buy her a new nightgown and something to read and returns to a locked door. When he tries to get in, she shrieks that he is not her friend, and the other residents threaten to throw him out. He tries again a few days later and finds her apartment empty. The landlady explains that she had to take Camilla to a hospital because she had gone crazy, throwing things out the windows and slashing with a knife. Arturo finally learns she is in a mental hospital.

In the meantime, Arturo is living a dream life, roaming around California in his new car, thinking about his next novels, and exploring the city. He thinks of Camilla, but dismisses it. At the Columbia Buffet, the bartender shows Arturo a week-old newspaper clipping about Camilla's escape from the institution. Camilla does not come to him, as he anticipates, but Arturo receives telegrams signed by Rita Gomez requesting money.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Camilla finally reaches her personal breaking point just as Arturo finally becomes acknowledged as a real author. Whether her breakdown is due to her unrequited love for Sammy or just personal demons is not clear, but her suppressed anger is finally unleashed. Although she does not love Arturo, she knows he cares for her, and she depends on him for money, knowing he will not betray her whereabouts. Arturo is feeling more secure and generally happier, since his career seems to be going well and he has resigned himself to the fact that Camilla is insane and loves Sammy.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Arturo comes home to find Camilla locked in his room, smoking marijuana in the closet. He does not want to make her feel caught, so he goes out and comes back in, as if he does not know what she was doing.

Camilla is in poor health from being on the run. Arturo decides they should live in Laguna Beach together. He can write and take care of her, and they will get a dog. They dream of what they will do when he is rich.

Arturo buys her a puppy, Willie, who Camilla nurses with a bottle. Willie quickly becomes her focus of comfort. Traveling south along the ocean, Arturo is blissful. They find a little house on the beach and Camilla runs on the beach with Willie. After disposing of Camilla's marijuana and leaving some money for food, Arturo heads back to Los Angeles to check out of the hotel. When he returns to the beach house Camilla and Willie are, predictably, gone.

Arturo tries to stay on at the house, but returns to Los Angeles and takes a different room at the Alta Loma, which is strange and cold to him. Arturo now feels everything is wrong, and realizes he is like the people in the streets: worried and lost.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Again, Arturo goes from peaceful bliss to ragged despair in a very short period of time. Camilla's presence is always sporadic and fleeting. Without Camilla, the beach house is no longer the dream it started out as. Los Angeles holds none of the ambiance of the beach house, and now nothing seems like home to him because he is never at home within his own skin. Now that his career is succeeding Arturo finds himself just as lost and depressed as ever, so apparently the career is not the ultimate healing force he has been depending on.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Arturo's book comes out a week later. He sees it in the stores, but does not experience the same level of fun he had when *The Little Dog Laughed* was published. He has had no word from Camilla.

Arturo finally receives a postcard from Sammy asking him to come and get Camilla because he does not want her hanging around. Arturo leaves immediately and drives to the desert, but Sammy tells him Camilla left three days earlier with Willie and a bottle of milk. Sammy can only say the general direction she was headed when she walked away, and Arturo heads out into the desert to find her. Walking all night, he finds no trace of Camilla in the desolate, cold desert, realizing that the desert is indifferent to death and would cover the memory of it with wind, heat and cold.

Arturo gives up, recognizing that he could only bring her back to the brutal wilderness that had broken her. He gives Camilla to the hills, stones, sky and wind. Signing a copy of his novel to her with love from him, he tosses it out into the desert in the direction she had gone, and drives back to Los Angeles.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Camilla's disappearance brings Arturo to a new understanding of life and death. He accepts the insignificance of an individual life by noticing the casualness with which the nights and days pass, and how nature is indifferent to death. He gives up his obsession with Camilla, allowing her to blend back into nature from where she came. In the end, Arturo is neither depressed nor elated, but simply is. The reader can assume that Camilla has served as only one link in the chain of Arturo's learning process and, although he will remember her fondly, he is over her.



Characters

Arturo Bandini

Arturo is a young Italian American from Colorado who moves to Los Angeles to pursue his writing career. Arturo is a naive, inexperienced young man who suffered from poverty and a lack of self-esteem as a child. He intends to prove himself to the world by becoming a famous author, and now that he has one essay published, his desire becomes an obsession. Arturo, understandably, has a dark view of the world. In his determination to appear confident, he comes off as slightly idiotic, but he is searching hard for his identity. When he arrives in Los Angeles at twenty years old, he has had no experience with women. His unfortunate attraction to Camilla is based on the self-hatred they have in common and their struggle to be something they are not. As Arturo has more success with his career, his wild imaginings and fear begin to settle down, and we see him become more mature and logical as the story progresses. He has been subjected to racial abuse and is hyper-sensitive to his surroundings in Los Angeles.

Camilla Lopez

Camilla is a Mexican waitress at the Columbia Buffet restaurant who loves the bartender Sammy, and who is loved by Arturo Bandini. Camilla is a troubled soul. She comes from a poor background, but considers herself an American, not a Mexican. Her feelings for Arturo are mixed; she thinks he is ridiculous but at the same time sees potential in him. She knows he cares for her and wants his attention, but she is not in love with him. When Arturo begins to seem like he really might care enough to support her, such as taking her to Sammy's house, buying her a dog, and trying to move her with him to Laguna Beach, Camilla disappears because she feels so unworthy of anything other than abuse. After losing control of her rag, Camilla is committed to a mental hospital, but she escapes and continues her journey of seeking something she cannot identify. It seems she only likes Arturo when he is being mean to her.

Sammy Wiggins

Sammy is a bartender at the Columbia Buffet who wants to write cowboy novels. He lives in the Mojave Desert and is terminally ill with tuberculosis. Sammy is reclusive and does not want the company of a woman. Camilla pushes herself at him, but he is not interested in having a relationship with her and is cruel to her, having beat her up at least once. He warns Arturo that Camilla is trouble, and asks Arturo to come and get her when she shows up at Sammy's house. Sammy is not a good writer and has no future as an author, but is encouraged by Arturo's kind critique of his writing. Sammy is not a particularly deep character, but is the object of Camilla's affection.



Mr. Hellfrick

Mr. Hellfrick is Arturo's neighbor at the Alta Loma Hotel. He is an alcoholic who is obsessed with his cravings for meat. Hellfrick is bony and dirty, and lives most of the time in his bathrobe. He considers himself an honest man and tries to prove it to Arturo by paying him back the money he owes him, and by helping Arturo steal milk from a friend who is a milkman. Hellfrick's desire for meat gets the better of him when he drives out to a farm and steals a calf away from its mother. Arturo drops him as a friend after this incident because he sees him as a murderer.

J.C. Hackmuth

Hackmuth is Arturo's literary agent in New York. We do not meet Hackmuth except through Arturo's imagination. Arturo worships Hackmuth for recognizing his talent, and keeps Hackmuth's photo in a sort of worshipful way. Hackmuth represents Arturo's ticket to confidence and success, and Arturo thinks highly of him, not only wanting to please him, but also thinking he is a smart man for seeing Arturo's capability as an author.

Mrs. Hargraves

Mrs. Hargraves is the landlady at the Alta Loma Hotel. She is from Bridgeport, Connecticut and lives with the memories of her departed husband, whose belongings remain in place in her room. She tries to bring New England into her surroundings at the hotel. Initially she is rude to Arturo, but warms up to him once she realizes he is an author. She is one of the many people in Los Angeles who is transplanted from another part of the country. Mrs. Hargraves initially challenges Arturo with her insistence that the town of Boulder is in Nebraska, an argument to which Arturo finally gives in, knowing he will not win.

Vera Rivken

Vera follows Arturo and begs him to love her. She has burned, deformed thighs and is desperately in need of assurance that she is desirable. Vera is an alcoholic and one of the more pitiful characters in Fante's story. She is reasonably attractive, but too old for Arturo. She has stalked him and breaks into his house to try to seduce him. She is so pathetic and sad that she finally gets Arturo to say she is beautiful and that he desires her. She pretends to be Camilla for him so he can make love to her. Vera helps Arturo lose his virginity, for which he feels guilty and horrible, thinking he has committed adultery against her. Arturo's first published novel is based on a story about Vera.



Benny Cohen

Benny lives in a room over the Grand Central Market in Arturo's neighborhood. He has a wooden leg that has a door in it where he keeps marijuana. Benny also sells newspapers and has what sounds like a Communist publication in his room. He has a dark vision of the world and may be a Marxist or Communist. Arturo goes to see him after being at the Columbia Buffet. We do not know how or why Arturo knows Benny, but Benny represents a typical disenfranchised resident of Los Angeles, living in a small, dark room, angry and somewhat on the fringe of society. Benny accuses Arturo of abandoning the proletariat class. During the time that this story was written, speaking ideas that were undemocratic or dissenting was looked upon as covert and subversive, and Benny definitely fits into that category. His rantings about the government stir Arturo up and make him "itching for the throat of an imperialist." Benny Cohen warns Arturo about marijuana and shows it to him.

Bert Hargraves

Bert is the late husband of Mrs. Hargraves, Arturo's landlady. Although Bert is deceased, we know about him through Mrs. Hargraves, who has never moved his things and still feels and acts as if he is with her. Arturo sees him only in the picture on Mrs. Hargraves' wall, but knows that Bert always got up early in the morning and that he was handy with tools, having worked as the maintenance man for the hotel for many years. Bert felt he was a better painter than the people who painted the building, and a better barber than the man who cut his hair. Bert is just a memory seen through the eyes of Mrs. Hargraves, but he is a source of fear for Arturo, who feels he is watching him and daring Arturo to think cynically of him. Bert also did not smoke or drink, which triggers Arturo's guilt.

Heilman

We do not know Heilman's first name, but he is a resident at the hotel where Arturo Bandini lives. Heilman is a huge man and former bank teller who had a wife and son in Illinois. Heilman hates everything about California and the southwest, but is stuck there because of his poor health. Seeing a football game where an eastern team was defeated made him sick. Heilman hates everything about the weather, including the sun, the fog and the rain, and is terribly homesick, dreaming of being back in the Midwest. Heilman belongs to the Book-of-the-Month Club and receives books every month, but will not allow Arturo to borrow them. He leaves the newsletter from the shipment in Arturo's box for him, but is an unhappy and unpleasant person. Heilman's son is a university student, and we do not know why his wife has stayed on in Illinois.



Judy Palmer

The only person in the hotel who has read *The Little Dog Laughed*, Judy is a fourteen-year old girl who thinks Arturo's story is wonderful, and comes to see him, hoping he will give her a copy of the magazine. Arturo is so thrilled to have a fan who has read his story that he invites her in, gets her a chair and offers her water or an ice cream or a Coke or root beer. Judy tells him her mother would not want her to stay, but Arturo's enthusiasm is overwhelming. He autographs a copy of the magazine for Judy, telling her he is only eighteen. He asks her if she would do him a favor and read the story aloud to him. She agrees to read to him and he throws himself on his bed, burying his head in his pillow while he listens. When Judy grows tired of reading he pleads with her to continue. Judy's mother enters the room with a fierce expression on her face and takes Judy by the hand and leaves, not even spending the night at the hotel.



Objects/Places

Alta Loma Hotel

The hotel in the old Bunker Hill district of Los Angeles where Arturo Bandini lives. The hotel is built on a hillside so that the main floor is at street level and the remaining floors descend down the hill. Arturo's sixth floor room has a window that looks out to ground level.

Laguna Beach

A resort area on the Pacific Ocean south of Los Angeles where Arturo takes Camilla to start a new life with him.

Long Beach

A coastal town near Los Angeles where Vera Rivken lives and where Arturo is on the beach when the earthquake strikes. Long Beach is also where Arturo and Camilla go to the dog farm and adopt Willie, their puppy.

Columbia Buffet

A restaurant and bar where Camilla works as a waitress and Sammy works as a bartender. The buffet is more of a bar, since they do not usually have fresh coffee and people mostly order beer. They occasionally have live musical entertainment, but this is not a high class place.

The Little Dog Laughed

The name of the essay written by Arturo Bandini that was published in a national magazine. We do not know what the story is about, but only that Arturo considers it poetic and that it is not about dogs. The Little Dog Laughed refers to the part of a nursery rhyme where the cow jumps over the moon.

Long Lost Hills

The title given to a letter that Arturo wrote to his agent, Hackmuth, describing Los Angeles. Hackmuth named and published the body of the letter as a short story, making this Arturo's second work to be published.



Huaraches

Mexican leather woven sandals worn by Camilla Lopez. These are significant because Arturo uses them as a way to humiliate Camilla, and to make her conscious of being a Mexican. Since the sandals are worn and dirty, he makes her ashamed of them. Camilla buys a pair of uncomfortable white pumps to replace her huaraches, but eventually goes back to wearing them.

Hop-head

An old term used for a person who smokes marijuana. Arturo calls Camilla a hop-head because she secretly smokes marijuana.

Mojave Desert

The hot, dry, windy desert outside of Los Angeles, is where Sammy Wiggins lives in a small shack, isolated and desolate. When Camilla finally disappears from Arturo's life, she has gone southeast into the desert with her dog. Arturo goes a hundred yards in that direction, and throws a signed copy of his book for her.

Del Maria Institution

The Del Maria Institution is the mental hospital in Los Angeles to which Camilla Lopez was committed, and from which she eventually escaped.

Temple Street

The street where Camilla lives in "a sick building, a framed place diseased and dying from the sun." Camilla's dirty studio apartment has a Murphy bed. Arturo visits her there and tries to get her to eat. Later, when he returns from shopping and tries to get back into her room, she denies that he is a friend, and the apartments' landlady threatens to call the police on him. The apartment house residents begin to move toward him threateningly, and he is forced to run.

Los Angeles Black Belt, Central Avenue

This is the seedy part of town where Camilla meets her connection at the Club Cuba, and takes Arturo to a room full of people stoned on marijuana. It is described by Fante as an opium den, with people lying in the darkness being flung to the floor like sacks of grain.



Themes

The pitiful human condition

This theme plays out not only in Arturo Bandini's story of himself and Camilla, but also in his descriptions of other characters and the general population in Los Angeles. Arturo sees people as lost, searching, empty and pathetic. During his more positive moments, he appreciates religion and patriotism and honesty, but his primarily dark view of the human condition is transparent throughout the story. Arturo is an astute observer of human nature. He sees the hypocrisy and self-deluded dishonesty that affects people, such as the deceased Mr. Hargraves who had a superiority complex, the damaged and manipulative Camilla, and pathetic Hellfrick. The people in Los Angeles are often disenfranchised, alienated and at times, zombie-like in Fante's description of the general population. Arturo, although at times lost in his own mind, is at least honest and tries to maintain his principles, as evidenced by his negative response to Hellfrick's offer of milk and his killing of a calf, his kindness toward Camilla and his decision to be kind to Sammy.

Coming of age

Arturo is ruled by his busy mind and his emotions for most of the story. He could be described as manic depressive as he fearfully rides the dramatic waves of events in his life, but as he finally gets some success and gives up on Camilla, his thinking seems to mature and stabilize. By the end of the story his fear of death and failure seem to have abated. His basic moral principles are challenged several times in the book, and he is honest about his hateful feelings and occasional lapses into dishonesty, such as stealing the milk. However, as this story progresses his attention begins to turn more toward helping others, his experience with Vera having helped him break through some of his selfishness, not to mention his virginity. Although he struggles to feel good about his Italian heritage, he is defensive about it for much of the story; however, once he is truly successful, his internal bolstering seems to recede somewhat, as his focus becomes less critical of others.

Racial bigotry and prejudice

Many configurations of prejudice surface in this story. Even in 1939, Americans were discriminating against one another for being Italian, Mexican, Jewish or any other nationality or religion that was not part of the mainstream. Words like spick, dago and gringo appear throughout the story. Arturo is an Italian who has suffered as a child from prejudice, and projects his pain onto Camilla using her race as a weapon. Camilla's Mexican heritage is one she tries to break free from by attempting relationships with people like Sammy and Arturo. Her pride in being Mexican is not so evident, and she even changes into terrible shoes to replace the Mexican huaraches that Arturo has



criticized. The fact that Los Angeles is a melting pot of every nationality — the Asians living at the beach, the Japanese store owner, the Mexican population, the black marijuana connection, the German Midwest influence, the Jewish community and Arturo, the Catholic Italian — causes bigotry and prejudice to seem even more absurd, since there is such a dense population and mixture of races and religions. Fante gives prejudice a lot of attention while making his readers realize how utterly illogical it is to harbor it.

Many levels of insanity

There are many levels of insanity throughout the story, including that of Arturo. Arturo might be diagnosed as bi-polar in today's world, with his extreme mood swings, religious fervor, bizarre thinking and strange behaviors. His mind takes him from extreme braggadocio to suicidal insecurity in very short cycles, as he fears failure and tries to make his way in a world that does not seem friendly. Eventually, as he has more experiences and begins to see some success with his writing, his level of sanity seems to stabilize, although other characters' do not necessarily follow suit.

Camilla, after deteriorating mentally, is diagnosed as insane over her rage, but in the early parts of the story she seems much more stable, working at her job and dancing through the bar with her beer tray, challenging Arturo's insults with those of her own. Although her behavior toward Arturo is unconventional, we have no reason to believe that she will have a breakdown later. It is clear that she likes Sammy and is concerned for his health, but there is no indication that her feelings for him will eventually drive her to wanting him as badly as she seems to later; and the more Sammy rejects her, even going as far as physical abuse, the more she needs and wants him. Finally, her mental health diminishes to the point that we can only deduce that she has died in the desert.

Hellfrick seems like an ordinary drunkard who has a liking for meat. He tries to prove his honesty to Arturo by paying him back, and seems like a man who has just had some hard luck. However, when he goes so far as to steal a calf away from its mother and kills it, he crosses the line of sanity into obsession and lunacy.

Vera, whose arrival in the story is fraught with mental illness, seems to mellow out once Arturo shows her some affection. Her imbalance is due to the fact that she feels she will never be loved because of the ugliness of her wounds. Her behaviors, including coming into Arturo's room uninvited, begging him to make her feel better, shrieking, sobbing and accusing when Arturo does not even know her, represent the actions of a crazy woman. However, we begin to realize her insanity is due to grief and pain.



Style

Point of View

This story is written from Arturo Badini's richly abundant mind and through his viewpoint. At times Arturo addresses himself, but for the most part he simply lets the reader in on his stream of consciousness, which is often confused and tends to bounce up and down like a rubber ball emotionally. Arturo's thinking flows like a mental diary or journal, hiding nothing, and allowing the reader to ride along with him on his bumpy journey through early adulthood.

The story is consistently told through Arturo's viewpoint as a budding author. Other characters' thoughts are revealed only through Arturo's version of his dialogues with them and our observation of their behavior through his eyes. Therefore, we cannot know Camilla's thinking or Vera's thinking, but can only deduce from their speech and actions, reported to us by Arturo, what they are feeling and reacting to. Arturo is an honest narrator who shows the reader all sides of his neuroses, and, although he exaggerates his successes as well as his defeats, he does not pretend to be balanced or stable, but lets his mind take its own course, reporting on its activities.

Setting

The dirty, dusty streets of Los Angeles set the stage for Ask the Dust. Much of the story takes place inside Arturo's hotel room. The Alta Loma Hotel is built on a hillside, so that Bandini's 6th floor hotel room window is at ground level and looks out on a lone palm tree trunk.

Arturo and Camilla take a night-time swim in the ocean in Santa Monica. Arturo spends a day in Long Beach outside of Los Angeles, as well as a day in Laguna Beach, south of Los Angeles. He and Camilla adopt their puppy, Willie, from a dog farm in Long Beach. We experience some of the journeys between the two, and the atmosphere of the beaches, as well. Arturo notes that most people have come to LA for the weather, which is consistently sunny.

For much of the story, Arturo is too poor to travel much, so he spends most of his time in his room or walking the streets of inner-city Los Angeles. Bunker Hill, his neighborhood, is in the heart of the city and is a poorer district. Temple Street, where Camilla lives, is a very poor district. On a day trip Arturo and Camilla go to Terminal Island, where there are canneries, brown houses and Japanese kids playing. Arturo also frequents some cheesy nightclubs and a bar in his neighborhood. All of these places seem somewhat dismal and depressing.

During his more serene period of time while he is not seeing Camilla, Arturo drives his new convertible up and down the coastline of California, visiting Ventura and Santa



Barbara to the north and San Diego to the south. He also explored the city's alleys with old trees and rotting houses.

Arturo leaves the Alta Loma Hotel but returns to it shortly thereafter; however, he is assigned a different room the second time.

Language and Meaning

John Fante's experimental writing style was highly unusual for the times in which he lived. Arturo Bandini's self-effacing running commentary on his life is a refreshing and enlightening read, with each sentence holding meaning beyond itself. Fante's writing style is so simple and engrossing that it is easy to forget one is reading a novel, and seems more like observing a movie inside Arturo's brain.

Arturo's guilt, fear, bravado, arrogance, hatred, hope, confusion, humility and depression are honestly and willingly exposed to the reader with no holds barred. His language is pure American, which is one of the themes of the story. This is evident in the melting pot that makes up Los Angeles. We occasionally hear a bit of Latin from Arturo, who has a strong Catholic background. This story is layered with meaning, addressing issues associated with fear, success, alienation, love, sanity, prejudice, religion and poverty.

Arturo's dialogue with other characters is mostly short and clipped and at times incorporated into the rambling nature of his thinking and recalling. For example, in discussing his encounter with a prostitute, he describes the dialogue rather than cites it: "How were conditions these days? How did she like this kind of life? Oh, come on honey, let's not talk, let's get down to business. No, I want to talk to you, this is important, new book, material. I do this often. How did you ever get into this racket. Oh honey, Chrissakes, you going to ask me that too? But money is no object, I tell you. But my time is valuable, honey. Then here's a couple more bucks..."

Structure

A relatively short novel of 165 pages, the story is broken into nineteen chapters, told chronologically. The story begins when Arturo is 20 years old and covers an unknown period of time, perhaps a year. Originally written in 1939, the novel is prefaced by Charles Bukowski in 1979 in this re-released 1980 edition.

The primary plot involves Arturo Bandini's life in Los Angeles as he struggles to become an professional writer. However, the subplot involving his relationship with Camilla Lopez becomes just as important as the progress in his career, as do his relationships with other people in his life, particularly Vera. Fante's writing, which follows the activity in Arturo's mind, is so unusual that it is somewhat daunting at first, but as the story progresses the reader becomes intimate with Arturo, and it is easy to assign feelings to him that he does not necessarily talk about in his rambling. In a way, the reader is privileged to know more about Arturo than he knows about himself. Although there are a

few plot twists and turns, the story is basically a slice of Arturo's life in the city. This is an excellent story to read and re-read, since it is layered with meaning, symbolism and history, being as relevant now as when Fante wrote it in 1939.



Quotes

"Bandini on the bed, put himself there with an air of casualness, like a man who knew how to sit on a bed." (25)

"Sick in my soul I tried to face the ordeal of seeking forgiveness. From whom? What God, what Christ? They were myths I once believed and now they were beliefs I felt were myths." (96)

"I got up from the counter and walked away in fear, walking fast down the boardwalk, passing people who seemed strange and ghostly: the world seemed a myth, a transparent plane and all things upon it were here for only a little while; all of us, Bandini, and Hackmuth and Camilla and Vera, all of us were here for a little while and then we were somewhere else; we were not alive at all; we approached living but we never achieved it. We are going to die. Everybody was going to die. Even you, Arturo, even you must die." (96)

"Ever south we followed the beautiful white line. I drove slowly. A tender day, a sky like the sea, the sea like the sky. On the left the golden hills, the gold of winter. A day for saying nothing, for admiring lonely trees, sand dunes, and piles of white stones along the road. Camilla's land, Camilla's home, the sea and the desert, the beautiful earth, the immense sky, and far to the north, the moon, still there from the night before." (159)

"When I got back to the hotel, someone had taken my old room during the night. Everything was awry now. I took another room on the main floor, but I didn't like it. Everything was going to pieces. The new room was so strange, so cold, without one memory. When I looked out the window the ground was twenty feet away. No more climbing out the window, no more pebbles against the glass. I set my typewriter in one place and then another. it didn't seem to fit anywhere. Something was wrong, everything was wrong." (160)

"War in Europe, a speech by Hitler, trouble in Poland, these were the topics of the day. What piffle! You warmongers, you old folks in the lobby of the Alta Loma Hotel, here is the news, here: this little paper with all the fancy legal writing, my book! To hell with that Hitler, this is more important than Hitler, this is about my book. It won't shake the world, it won't kill a soul, it won't fire a gun, ah, but you'll remember it to the day you die, you'll lie there breathing your last, and you'll smile as you remember the book. The story of Vera Rivken, a slice out of life." (146)

"Goodbye, goodbye, you keep that eight bucks, you buy yourself something nice, goodbye, goodbye, running down the stairs, running away the welcome fog in the doorway below, you keep that eight bucks, oh sweet fog I see you and I'm coming, you clean air, you wonderful world, I'm coming to you, goodbye, yelling up the stairs, I'll see you again, you keep that eight dollars and buy yourself something nice. Eight dollars pouring out of my eyes, Oh Jesus kill me dead and ship my body home, kill me dead



and make me die like a pagan fool with no priest to absolve me, no extreme unction, eight dollars, eight dollars...." (26)

"You are a coward, Bandini, a traitor to your soul, a feeble liar before your weeping Christ. This is why you write, this is why it would be better if you died." (20)

"Afraid of a woman! Ha, great writer this! How can he write about women, when he's never had a woman? Oh you lousy fake, you phony, no wonder you can't write! No wonder there wasn't a woman in *The Little Dog Laughed*. No wonder it wasn't a love story, you fool, you dirty little schoolboy. To write a love story, to learn about life." (18)

"She asked me to hold her, and I held her, and she kissed me, her lips wet and cool. We lay a long time, and I was worried and afraid and without passion. Something like a grey flower grew between us. I didn't know what it was. I felt her waiting." (68)



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the many ways in which milk shows up in this story, and what symbolism Fante may have intended.

What is the significance of the dog, Willie, in Camilla's life?

Sammy Wiggins lives in isolation on the Mojave Desert. Discuss his character and why he is so seemingly cruel and strange.

Discuss Arturo's guilt. How is it tied to religion, and to what degree does it drive his behavior?

Fante's characters in Los Angeles come from many different places. What is the significance of "home" in this story?

Why are Camilla and Arturo attracted to each other? Discuss the significance of the mean-spirited interchanges between them.

Discuss the symbolism of the beach in *Ask the Dust*. Contrast that environment with Los Angeles, and discuss its effect on the characters.

What are some possible meanings behind the story's title, "Ask the Dust?" Dust is prevalent in the story — what does it symbolize?