

The Acid House Study Guide

The Acid House by Irvine Welsh

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The Shooter and Eurotrash

The Shooter and Eurotrash Summary

The Acid House is a collection of short stories and a novella by Irvine Welsh, a Scottish writer who first came to the attention of U.S. readers as the author of *Trainspotting*, from which a popular film was made. The gritty realism of Welsh's style is evident in the first story of the collection, "The Shooter." The story's narrator, Jock, has dinner at the home of his friend Gary. The meal is cooked by Gary's good-looking wife, Marge. Their young daughter, Lisa, does not like the food, and Gary becomes unnervingly angry at the child. Gary has just gotten out of prison. After dinner, he announces that he and Jock have business to discuss. Marge pleads with them, especially with Jock, not to do anything illegal, because Gary has promised to go straight. They go to a pub, where they discuss Whitworth, who owes them money and has not paid. Gary's plan is that they should visit Whitworth at his house, beat him up, and demand payment by a certain date. Jock agrees, and the two meet the next evening. When they reach Whitworth's place, Gary produces a sawed-off shotgun, which he says is not loaded. When they knock on the door, a child answers. This worries Jock. Whitworth appears, and Gary shoots him in the face, killing him. In the car, Gary says that Whitworth was having an affair with Marge while Gary was in jail, and Whitworth also had molested Lisa. Gary says he did not want to involve Jock, but Jock had insisted on being included in the deal with Whitworth. They go to Jock's flat, where Gary points the shotgun at Jock. Gary says softly that he heard Jock had been seeing a lot of Marge, and his finger tightens on the trigger.

In "Eurotrash," Euan, the narrator, is an antisocial heroin addict who has been clean for two weeks. He is staying at the Amsterdam flat of a fellow Scotsman named Rab, who now calls himself Robbie. Euan does little all day, which annoys Robbie, a hard-working laborer. At a bar, Euan encounters a flabby woman with track marks on her arm named Chrissie, who is talking to the rather effeminate bartender, Richard. The two are obviously close, but Chrissie flirts with Euan, calling the three of them Eurotrash. Euan resolves to seduce her, even though he finds her repulsive. The three agree to go to the beach the next day, although Richard is a reluctant participant. At the beach, Richard lets Euan know that he realizes he is an addict, and the antipathy between the two men mounts. Later, the three return to the bar, and eventually, Euan takes Chrissie home while a dejected Richard stays at work. When Chrissie takes off her clothes to have sex, Euan is shocked at the ruined look of her vagina, which she says was caused by rough play with a girlfriend and a bottle. She suggests anal sex, and he complies. Their affair continues for a while, to Richard's dismay, and then Euan gets a job as a clerk in a hotel, moves into his own flat, and takes up with a lovely young woman named Anna. One day, he and Anna bump into Chrissie in the square. They have a drink together at Richard's bar, but Chrissie asks Euan if he has anal sex with Anna, as did with her. Chrissie begins screaming at Euan and throws her drink on him. Shaken, Euan tells the whole story to Anna, who understands. A while later, Richard comes to Euan's flat. Outraged, he says Chrissie has committed suicide, and it is Euan's fault. A contrite Euan



asks where the funeral will be held, and Richard says it will be in the Channel Islands, but he will not attend. Euan goes to the funeral, taking Anna with him. At the funeral, Chrissie's father calls his dead child Christopher, and Euan realizes that Chrissie had a sex change. Back in Amsterdam, he looks up Richard and learns that he and Christopher had been lovers. Euan reflects that they were not Eurotrash, but were simply people trying to survive.

The Shooter and Eurotrash Analysis

The Acid House combines fully fledged short stories with vignettes that sometimes are not much more than character sketches, and one novella. The first piece, "The Shooter," is a bona fide short story, yet it is not as ambitious as several other stories in the collection. Its placement at the start of the book is useful in signaling that extreme troublemaking and even criminality will be characteristic in these stories. Also, Jock sets a tone as narrator that other protagonists will repeat throughout the book. This tone is one of complicity by the narrator in wrongdoing, yet with a moral sense that he is being bad, which often contrasts to the relatively thoughtless havoc wreaked by his friends. Such insight makes the narrator more likeable than his mates, which is important, because the description of so much ugly behavior would not provide much incentive to continue reading the book, if the narrator were not in some way appealing. Gary is a murderous sociopath, and Jock may or may not have been having an affair with his wife. The point is not too complex: Gary is a killer, aiming a shotgun at Jock.

"Eurotrash," on the other hand, presents a complex picture of antipathy, need, confusion, and guilt that says much about this segment of Scottish society. As a recovering heroin addict, Euan can be expected to be unreliable and selfish, which he is. Richard's sexuality appears to be ambiguous, and Chrissie is an exploitative, nasty personality. Euan's decision to seduce Chrissie is made from malice, because he recognizes Richard's infatuation with Chrissie and wants to belittle this man he has just met. Chrissie's participation in the humiliation is disheartening, and the sex with Euan is grotesque. The happiness Euan later finds with Anna is threatened by their meeting with Chrissie, but that turns out to be merely a prelude to her suicide, and the revelation that she had a sex change. This well-executed plot twist puts the story in a new light. The ordinary sleaziness of Richard and Chrissie as a heterosexual couple takes on pathos when Christopher's struggles with sexual identity are revealed. Euan understands this, and a story that had seemed merely depressing becomes poignant at the end.



Stoke Newington Blues, Vat '96, A Soft Touch, and The Last Resort on the Adriatic

Stoke Newington Blues, Vat '96, A Soft Touch, and The Last Resort on the Adriatic Summary

In "Stoke Newington Blues," Euan is a heroin addict who takes his last shot on a North Sea ferry before he gets on the subway in London to Hackney, where he hopes to score more dope from Donovan. At the apartment, another addict named Ange answers the door. She says Don is getting more dope, and she and Euan take the last two hits. When Don returns, he has failed to score. The police break in, and take the three into custody. At the station, a policeman offers Euan a bag of heroin if he will sign a paper that says Don has been dealing to schoolchildren. Euan figures the police want Don because he is black. He signs, and outside the station, he sees a distressed Ange, who admits she also signed. She insists on coming with him, because the flat will be ruined now by looters. Euan is unhappy about it, but he is relieved that he will soon get high again. In "Vat '96," Fiona and Keith invite Valerie and Crawford for dinner, but when they arrive, they are startled to see Keith's head floating in a tank in the living room. Val explains that he had a car accident but a new machine is keeping his head and brain intact. Keith winks. Crawford thinks about a body transplant, considering politicians as candidates. The three have a nice dinner, during which Val tells about her new boyfriend, a sexual dynamo who took her on the couch one afternoon. Later, when she asks if Crawford thinks she should move Keith's tank, he says yes, noticing that the couch is directly across from it.

"A Soft Touch," written phonetically in a thick, Scottish brogue, is told by John, who is speaking to Katriona, the mother of their child, Chantel. Katriona, who has abandoned both Chantel and John, is pregnant again, by another man. John recalls with bitterness her infidelity even when they were together. She took up with a deranged man named Larry who lived upstairs from them. Katriona's dangerous brothers are in the drug trade and John reluctantly works for one of them, which makes him afraid to try to control Katriona. John works as a house-painter and whenever he returns home, he either finds Larry there or hears the two of them upstairs, having sex. Larry's electricity gets cut off, so he brings an extension cord downstairs and uses John's electricity. Larry says if John wants to have sex with Katriona, the price will be low, but it's likely to rise. Eventually, they move away, and John has a couple of casual affairs, but the story now returns to the opening scene, and Katriona tells him that Larry left her. She wants John to go to the pub with her, and he agrees, admitting to himself that he probably still loves her. "The Last Resort on the Adriatic" is narrated by a man named Jim on a luxury ship cruise who is mourning the death by suicide of his wife, Joan. At dinner, he meets Marianne, a good-looking woman with whom he gets on well. He confides to her that



Joan killed herself by going over the side on an earlier cruise on this same ship. A sympathetic Marianne says she never married, having taken care of her mother for years. The two go to her cabin and make love, which is wonderful until Jim mistakenly calls out Joan's name. Marianne is appalled, and Jim leaves, apologizing that he is a one-woman man. He goes back to his cabin and writes a note to Marianne. He already has made a videotape and has written an explanatory note for his two children. He goes on deck, climbs the barrier, and readies himself to jump into the sea.

Stoke Newington Blues, Vat '96, A Soft Touch, and The Last Resort on the Adriatic Analysis

"Stoke Newington Blues" reads like a vignette, in that the characters of Euan, Ange, and Don are sketchily developed. Clearly, the suggestion is that addicts will do whatever it takes to get a fix, which does not provide much insight into the characters as individuals. The story does not do much more than depict tawdry existence and shaky loyalties of the addict's life. "Vat '96" is a complete departure from the previous stories. A blackly comic science fiction tale, it revolves around the bizarre image of a living head floating in a tank. Symbolically, this represents the philosophical distinction between mind or soul and body, a theme that is parodied by the joke of Keith's head being forced to witness Val having sex with another man. "A Soft Touch" is a well-developed story that explores the willingness of one who is in love to forgive the transgressions of the beloved. In this story, both the transgression and the forgiveness take extreme forms, which not only provides comic effect but also carries the lacerating truth of good satire. John's fear of Katriona's brothers and his subjugation by Larry are symbolic of the dominance Katriona exerts over him, because of his love for her. The suggestion is that love can make willing fools of us all. "The Last Resort on the Adriatic" again deals with the dominating power of love. In this case, Jim's devastation by the suicide of Joan is so intense that he can find only a moment's release from it with Marianne, before he reverts to his obsession with his lost wife. Even so, the satire is evident in Jim's maudlin choice of the same cruise on which Joan committed suicide to repeat the act himself. Nor does he actually jump into the sea. He stands ready, but the implication is that he might well return to his cabin. Despair is not the focus of this story. Instead, the author is poking rather harsh fun at Jim's self-pity.



Sexual Disaster Quartet, Snuff, A Blockage in the System, Wayne Foster, and Where the Debris Meets the Sea

Sexual Disaster Quartet, Snuff, A Blockage in the System, Wayne Foster, and Where the Debris Meets the Sea Summary

"Sexual Disaster Quartet" comprises four very short pieces. In "A Good Son," a young man loves his mother but can't make love to her with his father sitting in the room. The young man leaves, and the father tells his son, Oedipus, that he's complex. In "The Cruel Bastard and the Selfish Fucker Get It On," a woman is the cruel bastard and a man she meets at a bar is the selfish fucker. She insults him, then they go to her place and have sex, after which she disparages his performance. They start living together, and it seems to be all right. In "Lots of Laughter and Sex," a couple agree that laughter and sex are necessary to a relationship, but the man complains that they should not happen at the same time. "Robert K. Laird: A Sexual History," is two sentences about a man who never had sex and did not seem to mind. In "Snuff" Ian Smith constantly watches videos of movies, trying to see every film in the compendium, Halliwell's Film Guide. He writes down brief commentaries about each film. His wife, Julie, left him because he was boring, although she found his sexual stamina impressive. His workmates make fun of him. One weekend night, his brother Pete comes to the door, but Ian continues watching a film and does not answer. On Monday, Ian discovers a note from Pete that says their mother is seriously ill, and when he calls, Pete says she has died. He watches more videos, and goes for a walk one night in a rough part of town, where he meets a prostitute and takes her home. He has sex with her until she climaxes, but he does not climax, which outrages her. After she leaves, he finishes watching the last movie in the film guide, and then turns on a video camera he has purchased. He ties a rope around a ceiling beam and hangs himself in front of the video, which is set on "record."

"A Blockage in the System," written in brogue, concerns several council sewerage workers playing cards at the office who are told by their foreman, Knoxie, that they must fix a blockage causing flooding at a twenty-story apartment building. The men contend that the problem must be coming from outside the flats, which makes it a regional issue not in their jurisdiction. Knoxie, who has been to a management course, insists they go. Once the men arrive, they refuse to go inside the building. In a rage, Knoxie says he will do the job alone, which the men note is precisely the opposite of his management training's objective to get others to do the work. They go to the pub. In "Wayne Foster," young men in a bar argue about the merits of a football player named Wayne Foster. Two of the men, called Sperryheids by the others, are supporters of a competing team. The Sperryheids are with two local women, both of whom have had sex in the past with



the bartender, who thinks of himself as the Classical Scholar. He decides to stop serving the Sperryheids, who complain but leave the pub peacefully. Impressed, the young women invite the Classical Scholar to their place, although they insist it is not for sex. He agrees to go, curious about why else they would want him. "Where the Debris Meets the Sea" is set in Santa Monica, California, where four women sit around a swimming pool at a luxurious home. It turns out they all speak in heavy Scottish brogues, although their names are Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Victoria Principal, and Kim Basinger. In graphic terms, they muse about having sex with various Scottish sportsmen and celebrities, although Kim is interested in Deek Prentice, a tradesman whose everyday life has been profiled in a magazine she is reading. The four women talk excitedly of going to Scotland and having a lot of sex, but they admit that the idea of the trip is just a dream.

Sexual Disaster Quartet, Snuff, A Blockage in the System, Wayne Foster, and Where the Debris Meets the Sea Analysis

The first piece in "Sexual Disaster Quartet," called "Good Son," is a little joke about the Oedipus complex, identified by Sigmund Freud, which posits that boys go through a psychological developmental phase in which they subconsciously want to kill their fathers and make love to their mothers. Similarly, the other three very short pieces in the collection are jokes about sexuality, concerning selfish and mean couples, self-confidence issues, and abstinence. "Snuff" is a character study of alienation. Ian's fascination with films is symbolic of his removal from real-life encounters, just as his determination to get through every video in the film guide indicates his deep commitment to avoiding human encounters. His girlfriend leaves him because of this detachment, and even a prostitute is outraged by his disinterest, signaled by his inability to climax. Ian is functioning on auto-pilot. When the films are finished, his last foothold in the world goes with them. Yet he wants to leave behind something for the living. Why not a movie of his death?

"A Blockage in the System" is an amusing take on the pompousness of managers and the petty revolts of repressed workers. Similarly, "Wayne Foster" makes a funny but fairly one-dimensional comment on the tribalism of male sports fans, which extends, of course, to battles over females. "Where the Debris Meets the Sea" is a witty re-casting of American actresses as lower-class Scottish women. The incisive point this story makes is that the lustiness of the women is more blatant when they are Scottish but perhaps not much different than if they were Americans. Nor are the male objects of their desire any different, except in the relatively superficial senses of economic status and fame. The last, best joke in the story is when the women finally agree that to visit Scotland is nothing more than a dream. As movie stars, they could afford to go in a moment. The question the author prompts through this situation is what is stopping them? The question that follows is what stops anyone from realizing their dreams?



Granny's Old Junk, The House of John Deaf, Across the Hall, Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum, The Two Philosophers, and Disnae Matter

Granny's Old Junk, The House of John Deaf, Across the Hall, Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum, The Two Philosophers, and Disnae Matter Summary

In "Granny's Old Junk," a scruffy young man comes to an assisted living facility to visit his grandmother for the first time in five years. A heroin addict in need of a hit, he knows she keeps a tin can full of money under her bed, and his intention is to steal it. Granny is surprised by the visit, and asks about the family, and asks if the young man, Graham, is staying away from drugs. He says yes, asks where the bathroom is, and then sneaks into her room. Instead of finding money in the tin, he finds heroin. She catches him, is enraged, and then admits that she got the habit from a merchant seaman and now must sell to young people to get enough dope. They cook up the heroin, shoot it, and devise a plan for dealing dope together. "The House of John Deaf," written in brogue, is about a deaf and dumb sixteen-year-old who keeps hundreds of white mice in his house. He never went to school but is extremely strong and a fine football player. One day, the eleven-year-old narrator catches John Deaf in his house about to have sex with the narrator's sister. He hits John Deaf, who beats him up. Downstairs, John Deaf's grandfather apparently has died in his chair. The narrator deliberately crushes a mouse underfoot. John Deaf leaves the neighborhood and never returns. "Across the Hall" gives the thoughts of Frank and Stephanie, who live across the hall from one another. While masturbating, each fantasizes about having sex with the other. When they meet in the hallway, they exchange embarrassed hellos and go their separate ways.

In "Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum," Lisa's mother is delighted that her little daughter has been chosen to hand the Queen Mother a bouquet, but Lisa tells the Queen Mother she has "bad breath and smells of wee." The other mothers snigger, but Lisa's mother gets to meet the Queen Mother. Nevertheless, she remains very upset with her daughter. "The Two Philosophers" is about an American professor named Lou Ornstein and a Scottish professor named Gus McGlone, who are old friends and rivals. They meet for drinks at a Scottish pub, and just as they always do at their occasional meetings, they argue about philosophy. Ornstein favors the rationalist views of Marx and Thomas Kuhn, while McGlone backs the science-based philosophy of Karl Popper. Agreeing to let an everyday person arbitrate the argument, they go to a rough part of town, which worries McGlone but not Ornstein. In a pub, they ask an old man his opinion, but the man's tough son and his football hooligan mates intrude. They make the two professors go outside to solve their dispute with a fistfight. Ornstein, who is drunk,



clobbers McGlone. The police arrive and take both of them to jail, where McGlone tries to pull rank and is beaten up, while Ornstein is released, delighted to realize that he knows how to fight. In "Disnae Matter," written in brogue, the narrator gets a sum of money from work and decides to take his family to Disneyland. When a youth in a bear suit leaps in front of the narrator's daughter, frightening her, the narrator punches the costumed fellow. A manager arrives and says he will fire the boy for frightening the child, but the narrator says he does not want the youth to lose his job. The youth apologizes and thanks him, and the narrator considers hitting him again, but lets him go.

Granny's Old Junk, The House of John Deaf, Across the Hall, Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum, The Two Philosophers, and Disnae Matter Analysis

Underneath the one-joke surface of "Granny's Old Junk" that an apparently sweet old lady is actually a junkie and a dealer, the story makes the sad point that Graham is surrounded by trouble, extending even to his grandmother. "The House of John Deaf" introduces a character whose deaf and dumb condition is symbolic of the failure of many characters in the book to heed the rules of civilized living. John Deaf is physically strong but weak in communicative ability. The young narrator's attack on John Deaf is not to protect his sister's honor but to keep himself from becoming a laughing stock among his friends. The mice represent disorder, or of problems left untended. When the narrator crushes one of the mice underfoot, the act symbolizes his yearning to destroy John Deaf, and by extension, to eliminate all the incomprehensible difficulties of his disorderly life. "Across the Hall" is another of the author's studies of alienation in this volume. In much of the story, the thoughts of the two characters are provided side-by-side in two columns, which enhances the point that they are thinking similar thoughts, but cannot connect. Their inability to say what they feel when they encounter each other in the hall shows how withdrawn each person has become, which is an indictment not only of their own lack of will, but of a society that produces such psychologically crippled individuals.

"Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum" pokes fun at the silliness of celebrity worship, but, as is typical in this collection, the author makes a serious point underneath the levity. In this case, his story decries the blindness of a mother who would chastise her small daughter for simply speaking the truth. "The Two Philosophers" is one of the strongest stories in the collection, and also that one that expends the most energy on exploration of ideas. The opposing philosophical stances of the two academicians represent two approaches to understanding life, one through intuition and the other through empirical evidence. Lou goes with his gut instinct, which tells him to punch his old rival, while Gus tries to reason his way out of the confrontation. Lou gets away with the violence and Gus is punished, which suggests that the author believes that civilizing influences can put people dangerously out of touch with their more primal instincts. "Disnae Matter" deals with a similar concern, but in a different way. The narrator's first response to boy who inadvertently frightens his daughter is hit the youth. It is significant that the young man is working at a theme park in an animal disguise. It could be a young woman

underneath the bear suit, for all the narrator knows. Even after the matter is resolved, his response to the youth's thanks is to refrain from hitting him again, which is both funny and pitiful, as are many actions of characters in this volume.



The Granton Star Cause, Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel, and Sport for All

The Granton Star Cause, Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel, and Sport for All Summary

In "The Granton Star Cause," Boab Hoyle is told by his friend Kev Hyslop that he will no longer be allowed to play football for the Granton Star team in the Edinburgh Churches League. Kev is captain, and the team has a chance for the finals, followed by possible elevation from Division Three to Division Two. Outraged, Boab leaves the pub where they're talking and gets drunk on his own. At home, his parents tell him he has to leave the house in two weeks, because at age 23, he is too old to still be at home, and they want time to be alone together. Boab calls his girlfriend, who dumps him, because he is sexually boring. He savages the pay phone, is arrested, and battered by the police in jail. Early in the morning, he eats at a café but discovers he does not have quite enough money to pay, and is punched by the proprietor. He goes to work and is laid off. At the pub, he is approached by a white-haired man in his fifties who identifies himself as God. He says Boab has failed miserably in life and God has decided to turn him into an insect. God leaves and when Kev enters the pub, Boab tells him about God's threat. That night, Kev is at home when a fly enters the room and spells Kev's name on the wall in ketchup. Shaken, Kev takes care of the fly for several days. Boab flies to his former girlfriend's house and discovers that she is having wild sex with the football player who replaced him on the team. He flies to his parents' house and finds them having bizarre sex with outfits and toys. His mother spots the fly and swats it. In the morning, their son lies broken and dying on the floor. After Boab's death, Kev begins drinking heavily. His girlfriend leaves him, his play on the football team suffers, and the team loses.

In "Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel," a boy named Bobby Cartwright is sad and frantic because a squirrel named Rico is running away from the family home. Bobby's mother, Sarah, holds back her tears as she explains that Rico needs to help other families now, but the boy is uncomforted, and becomes angry. In a boxed section of text, a man speaking in brogue tells children to turn off the television and go outside. The man, Tony, wants to have sex with the children's mother, Maggie Robertson, who has a sexually transmitted disease but is quite willing. The story shifts back to Bob Cartwright Senior trying to console his son by telling a story about Big Al Kennedy, a professional baseball star, who once return from a hunting trip to visit a boy in a hospital. The boy, who was in a coma, opened his eyes. In another boxed section, Tony and Maggie have sex as he daydreams about Madonna and she about Keanu Reeves. Tony then spots the children watching from the window and runs outside, chasing them. Next, Mrs. Cartwright switches off the television, calling it a terrible program for this hour, although Bobby wants to keep watching it. Rico, the talking squirrel, returns. He



has brought hundreds of squirrels with him to help spread love. Bobby wonders if the boy and girl on TV show will get help, and Rico mutters it isn't likely, but the Cartwrights do not hear, they are so delighted by his return. "Sport for All" is typeset like poem. It is a dialogue between football fans at a bar. One young man engages another in a threatening conversation, while his friends urge him to take it easy. The besieged young man turns out to be a trainee accountant, which further raises the ire of his tormenter. He forces the fellow, named Alistair, to sing a football song, lets him go, and then tells his friends what a fool Alistair was.

The Granton Star Cause, Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel, and Sport for All Analysis

"The Granton Star Cause" is mordant farce, in which everything that could possibly go wrong in Boab's life happens. It utilizes the same humorous science-fiction approach as "Vat '96." When a disgruntled God appears in the story, speaking in brogue, and announces he will turn Boab into a fly, the story already has moved into farce through the sheer, implausible weight of one bad thing after another befalling Boab. Once again, Irvine Welsh employs wacky humor to illustrate the sadder truths of Boab's death at the hand of his mother and the destruction of Kev's life after the death of the friend he had betrayed. Similarly, Welsh again portrays sex as an attempt to escape crushing economic and social restraints, which, in the case of Boab's parents, is both funny and sad. "Snowman Building Parts for Rico the Squirrel" is a clever send-up of the sentimentality of much popular entertainment. At first, it appears that the Scottish family is watching the Cartwrights on television, but later, it becomes evident that the reverse is the case. Indeed, both families might be watching one another on TV, and this possibility is itself an incisive comment, not only on the ubiquity of electronic media but on the fantasy lives it encourages. Each family idolizes and misinterprets the other. The funniest thing is that the goody two-shoes Cartwrights believe in a talking squirrel, which means if they are not acting in a TV program, they are insane. "Sport for All" returns to the character sketch, demonstrating how the brutality of sports fans can underpin their fierce devotion to a team, which is really about control over terrain or the law of the jungle.



The Acid House

The Acid House Summary

This story begins with Coco Bryce witnessing strange, luminous phenomena in the sky, which seem otherworldly until he reflects that he should not have dropped that second tab of acid. He is in a park in a neighborhood called Pilton at 3:30 in the morning, in a lightning storm. Suddenly, he turns hot and falls to the pavement before he even has to think that he has been hit by lightning. When he regains consciousness, he is not sure if he is dead or alive. He seems drawn toward a light, but his movements are slow, as if he were encased in jelly. The scene shifts to Rory Weston, who has just called an ambulance for his pregnant girlfriend, Jenny Moore. Jenny is screaming from labor pains and is very angry with Rory, because he has it so easy. The ambulance takes them but then quickly stops, as the attendants realize the baby has to come now. As Jenny is delivering, the ambulance is struck by lightning. Meanwhile, Coco is still pushing through gel toward light, which has become kaleidoscopic. In boxes of text on the page, he recalls key moments in his life, particularly a teacher warning him about becoming a worthless gangster. Coco becomes frightened, as he senses two great forces pulling him in opposite directions, and then the light surrounds him and he hears voices. Someone tells Jen it's a boy, and Coco feels his body being lifted. He tries to shout but cannot make a noise. Someone strikes him on the back and he lets out a whoosh of air and a scream.

In the next section, Dr. Callaghan watches the comatose Coco thrashing and screaming, unable to speak. In the hospital bed, Jenny holds her son, whom Rory wants to name Jack. She names him Tom. The press is undecided about whether Coco lost his mind from the lightning strike or the acid, but the doctors see hints of hope and encourage his friends and family to visit. Coco, aware that his mind has somehow entered the body of Tom, thinks about how he wants beer, not milk, but when Jenny breast feeds him, he decides being Tom is all right. At home, Rory is startled when Tom stands up in the crib to watch him and Jenny make love. Jenny scoffs, but the parents move Tom to the nursery. Coco's mates visit, but are unimpressed by his screaming. Rory goes back to work, and Jenny notices wine on Tom's breath and empty bottles under the crib. She suspects Rory of trying to poison Tom, whom she takes to her mother's house. Tom starts talking to Jenny, who is startled by his genius. She agrees to tell no one, and reflects that he will be her little man. Coco begins talking, and his girlfriend, Kirsty, realizes she can mold him into a new man. Tom insists that Jenny take him to a football match. Tom still knows he is Coco in a new body, but he has grown contented with the situation. Meanwhile, Kirsty teaches Coco how to make love, and he pleases her. They get married, and on a bus one day, they encounter an infant who is fascinated by Coco, calling him "Kokirbigh." As Jenny gets off the bus, she assures Tom that the young man is not Kokirbigh, a demon from the child's dreams. Kirsty talks happily about babies, not noticing the terror and befuddlement on Coco's face.



The Acid House Analysis

The science fiction/fantasy conceit of lightning causing a person's mind to enter the body of a newborn child signals two things. First, the story will be a thought experiment rather than naturalistic. Second, the author wants to explore the concept of second chances, or living a life over again. Rather than reincarnation, he is interested in the idea of starting life anew with all one's experiences and attitudes intact. This concerns an age-old question about nature and nurture: how much of a personality is innate, and how much of it is learned? Coco's mind has been effectively erased, and Tom's mind is presumed to be virtually a blank slate, since he is an infant. Kirsty does not have much trouble molding the new Coco that she wants, but Jenny is likely to have much more difficulty with Tom, who has come to her laden with Coco's attitudes. The author's point is that nurture can have its largest impact on impressionable minds. Once the personality is set, relearning new ways is highly problematic. Good luck to Jenny and Tom.



A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 1-4

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 1-4 Summary

In Chapter 1, "Park Patrol," the narrator, Brian, is working at Inverleith Park in central Edinburgh. He picks the pockets of golfers to supplement his pay and save up to move to London. He has hidden a mattress, sleeping bag, and portable television in the attendants' office, where he secretly spends the night to avoid rent. Sometimes, he is too lazy to turn on the hot water for the football players' showers and then, to avoid the wrath of the players, he must concoct a complex story about a systemic problem the park management will not fix. He likes the sense of power this prank provides. He reads a great deal, but only biographies, which pleases the kindly manager, Mr. Garland. Later, the mobile Park Patrol arrives to ask about the showers, but Brian says he has heard no complaints. He learns that the park's assistant superintendent, Bert "The Shark" Rutherford, is wary of Brian, who he thinks is a "smart cunt." After work, Brian goes to see if he can score speed from a friend named Veitchy. In Chapter 2, "Afternoon Telly," Brian's father, Jeff, is drinking tea at home with the upstairs neighbor, Norma Culbertson. The two are talking about a council plan to open a needle exchange and methadone center in the neighborhood, which they oppose. Brian leaves the kitchen and eavesdrops on them as Norma praises Jeff for how well he has raised his two sons alone. Jeff says Brian is a problem, bringing women home even while he is supposed to be pining from the recent departure of his girlfriend, but Derek is a good boy. Brian goes upstairs, and when Jeff and Norma go to her place, Brian shoots heroin, watches TV and daydreams about old friends, people at work, and his mother, who tells him she left because his birth was a mistake. He later tells his father he has the flu and spends the next three days in bed.

In Chapter 3, "Associates as Opiates," Brian vows to never again use heroin. He decides to stick with speed and ecstasy. He is reading a biography of Mother Theresa, which he dislikes, because she claims that God directs her rather than taking personal responsibility for her actions. His friend Raymie Airlie arrives at the park office with heroin, and the two shoot up. Brian starts dreaming of fish and swimming, and then discovers that Raymie is gone and the Shark is standing over him. The Shark wants the keys to the office, and in a daze, Brian produces them. The Shark then realizes he is on drugs, but Brian leaves the office. He daydreams about being with an unnamed woman in a restaurant atop the Montparnasse Tower in Paris. She wants to walk down the stairs but he is afraid of the dark and takes the elevator, which keeps going down, to floor minus-89. He becomes trapped in a gummy substance, and when he steps out of the elevator, a figure with the head of a reptile says he is in the complaints department, and offers sex. With a start, Brian finds himself on a heavily trafficked road, where a driver is yelling at him. He goes to Veitchy's place and watches television. The next day, a friend says Brian was in his tower block apartment, but he cannot remember. He reflects that all women, even his mother, have left him. In Chapter 4, "Constructive Discipline," Mr. Garland questions Brian as the Shark watches. Brian claims he does not have a drug problem, but he takes antidepressants, and accidentally took an overdose.



Garland suspends him for the rest of the week, with pay, while his case is considered. Brian goes out drinking and when he returns to the family home, he finds his friend Ronnie sleeping in his bed. He pulls Ronnie onto the floor, and in the morning, Brian packs for London.

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A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 5-8

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5, "Speeding," is written mostly in brogue. The narrator, apparently Brian, seems to be in London now, although it is not specifically mentioned. He is playing pool with Simmy, and the two of them have been on speed for days. Brian wins the game but Simmy claims victory on a technicality. Annoyed, Brian goes to Nazneem, with whom he hopes to have sex, but she is utterly disinterested. She remarks that he does not seem happy and says he is a smart-alec, which he considers "a posh name for a smart cunt." He goes to a club with Nazneem and her friends, takes ecstasy and has fun, but when he meets up with the unlikeable Simmy the next day, Brian decides it is time to visit Edinburgh. In Chapter 6, "Christmas with Blind Cunt," Brian is drinking with friends in Edinburgh and talking about people they do not like, one of whom is Blind Cunt. A few nights later, they encounter Blind Cunt at another pub, and are annoyed by his pedantic corrections of whatever they say. When Blind Cunt, who is actually blind, leaves the pub, Roxy mentions how much money he had, and suggests robbing him. They find him walking in the snow, and Roxy hits him on the head with a piece of slate that fell from a roof. Brian kicks snow on Blind Cunt. They take his money, go to a bar, and discover in the morning that he died of a brain hemorrhage. Roxy pretends surprise, and Brian reflects to himself that he wishes he could remember Blind Cunt's name.

In Chapter 7, "Jellies and Cock Sucking," Brian is with Ronnie, who is so stoned that he can hardly stay awake. They go to Veitch's place, where they also find Denise and Penman. They all snort coke except for Ronnie, who is unconscious. Denise, who is a man, takes Ronnie's penis out of his pants and begins sucking on it, to no response, while the others laugh. Penman takes Brian into the next room to show him a drawer full of ecstasy. Brian collects 40 pills and asks why Penman keeps the drugs at Veitch's place, to which Penman replies that Veitch is the only one stupid enough to let him do it. They take ecstasy and go back into the living room, where Denise and Veitch have stuck their erections into Ronnie's ears. Veitch goes out to get more cocaine. Denise tells a story about having sex with a woman, which secretly bothers Brian, because it was the same woman who had rejected his advances not long ago. Bored, the three men decide to cover the unconscious Ronnie with foodstuffs from the kitchen. Denise then defecates on him, and Brian vomits on him. Giggling, the three take photos of Ronnie and go to a nightclub, worried that Veitch will be angry about damage to the rug and Ronnie will want revenge. Veitch arrives at the club later and is not angry. He tells how Ronnie awoke, jumped into the shower fully dressed, and went home, enraged. In Chapter 8, "Paranoia," Brian awakens and asks his brother, Derek, if he remembers their mother. Derek was six when she left. He says he recalls her, but he seems uninterested in the topic. Derek is studying for an exam to enter the Civil Service. As Brian heads to a friend's house for drugs, he reflects that his friends can be categorized by the different types of drugs he does with them. Later, he takes acid with Penman, who tells Brian he should be careful about being a "smart cunt," which makes Brian paranoid. He goes to visit Roxy, and they talk about Blind Cunt's death. Brian is very



stressed, but Roxy claims that Blind Cunt would have died soon anyway. Brian leaves, and begins crying, convinced that he is a bad person and there is no hope for the world.

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Chapter 5, "Speeding," shows that Brian's change of place has had no effect on his drug usage. The company of Nazneem and her friends seems to be a step up in quality from that of Simmy, and it is sadly funny that Brian considers taking ecstasy to non-dangerous and fun compared to the other drugs he takes. Chapter 6, "Christmas with Blind Cunt," shows just how bad the company is that he keeps in Edinburgh. Roxy's proposal that they rob someone they know is made worse by Brian's drunken agreement, and rather than being shocked when Roxy viciously bashes the man, Brian signals his complicity by kicking snow on the victim. Suddenly, whatever sympathy Brian has accrued as a character is thoroughly compromised. He has become accessory to a murder, for no reason other than they did not like the pretentiousness of drinking mate whose name Brian cannot even remember. Chapter 7, "Jellies and Cock Sucking," features a display of behavior so gross and callous that it is more disturbing to read than the description of the murder. It is now painfully clear that more than simply being wild, troubled youth, these characters are depraved. The author's intent appears to be to destroy any remnants of good will toward the characters by showing them at the most disgusting light he can create. The question now becomes why he would do this, and the only answer must be as a way to condemn the society that produces such a class of individuals. In Chapter 8, "Paranoia," Brian's classification of his friends by the drugs he takes with them shows how narrowly his social life is circumscribed. His guilt over the murder is depicted as arising principally from the effect of drugs, as if would have no conscience without them. The irony is that he probably would not have participated in the killing if not for the effects drugs and alcohol. Roxy's denial of culpability in the death is just the sort of rationalizing that allows people to do evil things.



A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 9-12

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9, "Plastic Surgery," begins with Brian holding his face, which is gushing blood, while people around him gasp. His friend Hobo has smashed a glass in his face. Brian has been taking heroin for a week and was hassling Hobo for more drugs. A woman says he needs stitches and takes him to the hospital. He recognizes her as the woman who rejected him, the one who was with Denise. His wound is superficial, and requires only eight stitches. The woman says her name is Olly, short for Olivia. She takes him home, but he feels too sick to have sex with her. Instead, he waits until she is asleep and masturbates, ejaculating on her back. In the morning, they have sex and both enjoy it. In the afternoon, they have sex lying on their sides, so Brian can watch the football scores. Later, he asks why she rejected him earlier, and she says he was too stoned. She says angrily that Denise never had sex with her, although he tells everyone he did. Brian realizes he will have a scar, and thinks with satisfaction that this will give his face character. In Chapter 10, "Young Queens," Brian's old friend Donny Armstrong tries unsuccessfully to recruit Brian's dad into a far leftwing Scottish political party. He then tries to recruit Brian, who also rejects him. After Donny leaves, Ronnie arrives. He is not angry about the other night, but is heavily narcotized. He leaves after a while, and Brian goes to bed. He meets Denise at a bar the next day. Denise arrives with two young homosexual friends. When one of them puts a song on the jukebox, Denise becomes enraged, because it is his favorite song and in his mind only he is allowed to play it. They have drinks, but Olly is not mentioned. As Brian leaves, he wonders what Denise will say about him behind his back.

Chapter 11, "Love and Shagging," introduces Olly's friend Tina, a high-energy young woman who Olly says has a crush on Ronnie. They are at a party, and a stoned Ronnie is sitting mesmerized by the Christmas tree. Olly warns Brian that if Denise shows up, he must not talk to him, which angers Brian. Later, Tina announces to Brian that she is going to "fire intae" Ronnie. She approaches him and they start necking. Olly wants to go home and have sex, but Brian is uninterested. They argue, and Brian spends the night at Roxy's place. Some days later, he bumps into Tina, who is worried about Ronnie being constantly stoned. She invites Brian to her house with Ronnie, to prove to her parents that not all his friends are druggies, which surprises Brian. He has a boring dinner with her family and the semi-conscious Ronnie, and then goes to a bar with Roxy. Another friend, called the PATH, is with a fat woman named Lucia who wants to have sex with all three men. Brian likes the idea but Roxy rejects it. Later, they encounter the PATH and Lucia having sex on the ground. The two men urinate nearby, their streams running into the couple. In the morning, Roxy and Brian awaken in a flat, uncertain of where they are. Outside, they see Mad Audrey, who wants them to tell the PATH to bring Lucia to a bar that night, so she can fight Lucia over who gets the PATH. Brian hears later that Lucia's size and strength won out in the fight, and the PATH went home with her. In Chapter 12, "Career Opportunities and Fanny Licking," Brian hears that Simmy from London has been jailed, which means there is room for Brian in the



flat. He returns to London and soon gets a computer-based job with the Ealing Council. He does not like the job or Gleaves, the manager, who wants him to dress more respectably, but he does like the people with whom he shares the flat. A middle-aged woman at work named May often invites him to dinner with her husband and whomever of their four lovely daughters are at home that night, which he enjoys. One night, he stays late, admiring one of the daughters, and when May drives him home, she stops the car. She explains that her husband, Des, takes a blood thinner that prevents erections, and says she needs a bit of fun. They have sex in the car, while Brian thinks of the daughter. He wonders if he will be asked to dinner again.

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 9-12 Analysis

In Chapter 9, "Plastic Surgery," Brian's week-long heroin binge is an attempt to erase the guilt of the murder from his mind. He regards the cuts to his face as deserved retribution, but that does not prevent him from considering the sympathy and sex offered by Olly as a necessary respite from the cares of his life. His masturbation over her while she sleeps, his focus on the football scores while they have sex, and his interest in how the scar will look on his face are all signs of morbid self-involvement. In Chapter 10, "Young Queens," the failure of Donny to get either Jeff or Brian involved in party politics shows the extent of their disengagement from the world of ideals and pragmatic action. Brian's night of drinking with Denise and his friends demonstrates that he holds no prejudice toward homosexuality but in the light of Brian's earlier behavior with Denise and Roxy at Veitch's flat, this is little consolation. Chapter 11, "Love and Shagging," chronicles yet more deplorable behavior. Tina's interest in Ronnie is laughable, considering his near-comatose condition, but it also shows how deeply unaware people can be, especially when they are interested only in themselves. The episode with the PATH and Lucia is pure degradation, as demonstrated by Roxy and Brian urinating on the couple. The fight between Lucia and Mad Audrey is yet another example of an event that would be funny if it were not so sad. Chapter 12, "Career Opportunities and Fanny Licking," again sends Brian to London just when it seems that things could not get worse for him in Edinburgh. Mr. Gleaves is an example of the sort of martinet who forces young men with spirit into open rebellion. May seems like one of the few benevolent influences in Brian's fraught life, but even she turns out to have selfish motives for her generosity. Brian's response, to comply with her wishes, is accompanied by his own selfish fantasies.



A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 13-15

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 13-15 Summary

In Chapter 13, "Marriage," May acts at the office as if nothing has happened between Brian and her, although she takes to patting him at the photocopier. Brian gets an invitation to the wedding of Tina and Ronnie, followed by a phone call from Tina, who says she thought Ronnie was in London with Brian. She says he wanted to personally ask Brian to be best man. Ronnie soon appears, drugged as usual. He spends a couple of days in London and returns to Edinburgh, still drugged. When Brian arrives in Edinburgh, his father announces that he and Norma are getting married and are moving to a new flat. Brian congratulates them, although the decision brings up sad thoughts of his mother. Jeff defends his decision by saying Brian's mother abandoned the children and never so much as wrote a letter saying she wanted to see them. That night, Brian goes out, and encounters Olly, with whom he has a strained conversation. He gets drunk at Ronnie's stag party, where someone says he could have his old job again at the park if he wanted it. On the wedding day, Ronnie is barely conscious long enough to assent to marrying Tina. At the reception in a hotel, Brian and Roxy take acid. Roxy, who rarely takes hallucinogenic drugs, begins talking morosely about how he killed Blind Cunt, and Brian takes him to Roxy's place, where they drink. Roxy realizes his mistake in confessing aloud, and Brian is relieved. He reflects that he did not kick snow in Blind Cunt's face that night, he actually kicked him in the head, and perhaps he is as guilty as Roxy of murder. In Chapter 14, "Interview," Mr. Garland interviews Brian for his old job at the park. Garland says he trusts that Brian's depression is gone, and Brian assures him it is. He asks if Brian is still reading biographies, and Brian says he has just finished the biography of Peter O'Toole and is starting on that of Jean Paul Sartre. Garland approves, saying some of the park workers read depressing philosophical material that gives them a bad attitude. He rehires Brian.

In Chapter 15, "Pish," five months have passed. Brian, who has not had sex in that period, is at the City Café, hoping to find a woman. He sees Tina, who is disappointed in her marriage, because Ronnie got a Nintendo that he plays constantly on television instead of doing drugs. She says she liked him better when he was stoned. The two of them go to a club, where Tina starts necking with one of Brian's friends. At closing time, Roxy says he wants to take Brian somewhere special. They take a cab to the outskirts of the city, and climb a fence around a cemetery. Roxy shows Brian the gravestone of Craig Gifford, who Brian realizes is Blind Cunt. Roxy begins urinating on the gravestone. Brian attacks him, and Roxy beats him up. Roxy apologizes, but Brian staggers away. He throws up twice on his shirt, which is already covered in blood. Two young men recognize him as Denise's friend, and beat and kick him, because they think he is homosexual. He goes to the new flat of his father and Norma, sleeps, and when they leave the house in the morning, he takes a bath and feels better. Looking through unpacked boxes, he finds a container full of old photos and letters from his mother that he never knew existed. For years, she wrote from Australia, pleading to see her sons. The letters stopped suddenly in 1989. Using the return address, Brian finds a phone



number and calls. The man who answers says that Norma died in a house fire in 1989. Crying, the man says Norma got their daughter out of the fire but the child also died later of smoke inhalation. Brian hangs up, and the phone immediately rings, but he does not answer.

A Smart Cunt: A Novella, Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Chapter 13, "Marriage," contrasts the marriage of Ronnie and Tina to that of Jeff and Norma. The first one seems doomed to failure, and the second is justified by Jeff with the strange logic that his first wife was a bad mother. It is completely understandable that Brian would look askance at both these unions, just as it would be hard to imagine any successful marriage under the confused and unhappy circumstances of these characters' lives. The major revelation in this chapter, which comes at the end, is that Brian actually kicked the murder victim in the head. One reason this piece of information was withheld is probably to avoid alienating Brian from readers, because a thoroughly unlikable protagonist can destroy an audience's interest in the outcome of a story. Chapter 14, "Interview," has a little joke about Garland's trusting and naïve nature. He thinks Brian's reading choices are good because they are not depressing, but the British actor Peter O'Toole was a notorious alcoholic, and the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre is connected to the existentialist movement, which often is accused of nihilism. Chapter 15, "Pish," has another sad joke, this one about Tina's preference for Ronnie when he was constantly stoned compared to now that he constantly plays video games. It is no surprise that she takes up with another man. Far from providing closure, the trip by Roxy and Brian to the grave of Craig Gifford creates yet more chaos. The two beatings Brian takes and his own vomiting on himself are symbolic of how he and others have cooperated in ruining his life. The final insult in this blackest of comedies is Brian's discovery that his mother frequently begged to see the children, and that Jeff had lied about it all these years. Refusing to pick up the phone and speak again to the probable caller, his mother's second husband, is a tacit suggestion that in response to everything that has happened, the cocky Brian now has nothing left to say.



Characters

Brian appears in A Smart Cunt

Brian is the protagonist in the collection's novella, "A Smart Cunt." Like the narrators of other stories in the book, he is quick-witted, rebellious, a heavy drinker and drug abuser, and has a strong antisocial streak that shades into criminal tendencies, yet he also is capable of remorse and even self-hatred over the bad things he does. The book's author, Irvine Welsh, does not present Brian or the narrators of other stories in a forgiving light, yet in showing that they sometimes agonize over their wrongs, he implies that they would be better people if they had not been raised in such morally impoverished surroundings. Brian and the other narrators, Jock, Euan, and Graham, appear to be alter-egos of the author, especially because they are more intelligent than the other roughnecks with whom they associate, and because most of the stories are told by them in first person. Usually, the protagonists are led into trouble through a combination of alcohol, drugs, and deplorable behavior initiated by others, but they are never unwilling participants. No hint is offered that the book's protagonists are not responsible for what they do, or that they should be forgiven their trespasses. Instead, the circumstances under which they cause trouble are presented as the primer mover of all this chaos. In other words, the protagonists cannot be absolved of the choices they make, but the author seems intent on making the point that these characters get into such mischief because of underlying societal weaknesses.

Ronnie appears in A Smart Cunt

Ronnie is probably the closest friend of Brian in the novella, although the paradox is that Brian does not like him very much. Ronnie is a sketchy personality type in the story, because he is unfailingly stoned on drugs, mumbling and only partially conscious. He tends to stumble in and out of scenes, saying very little, staring into space, and falling asleep often. In one scene, he is so catatonic that Brian and his other so-called friends cover him in filth and leave him, worried about his rage when he awakens, because he apparently has the potential to be violently vengeful. He later forgives Brian, does not seek revenge, and Brian becomes his best man at his wedding. How Ronnie manages to attract a bride is part of the black comedy that pervades this book. At first, his girlfriend seems oblivious that he is a hopeless addict, and when she finally realizes it, she accepts it with a shrug. Only later, when Ronnie takes up Nintendo, does his new wife complain that she liked him better when he was obsessed with drugs. Brian is relieved when Ronnie marries, because the new domestic situation takes Ronnie off his hands. This is significant, because Brian actually needs to wash his hands of all his friends, who have no interests beyond getting stoned and causing mayhem. Ronnie is the extreme example of how the wrong friends in the wrong environment can lead to a dead-end life.



Olly appears in A Smart Cunt

Olly, which is short for Olivia, is Brian's girlfriend for a while in the novella. She first enters the story as a woman who supposedly had sex with Brian's bisexual friend, which bothers Brian, because Olly had once rebuffed his advances. After an acquaintance hits Brian in the face with a glass at a bar, Olly takes him to the hospital and later brings him home. Their affair is blackly comic, in that they appear to be using one another for sex, and yet neither of them feels used, because this is the norm for both of them. At one point, Brian reflects to himself that he prefers to make love with someone he cares about, rather than merely having sex, but he also seems quite comfortable with the casual arrangement. After the two break up, they encounter each other socially and are friendly, but neither one pines for the other. Brian thinks Olly was trying to be like her friends when he first met her, and her friends were trying to be like other people, but later he believes she has progressed to simply wanting to be like the other people that her friends want to be like. This characterization of someone as envious of the envious is a cruel but witty assessment of the hapless Olly.

Craig Gifford appears in A Smart Cunt

Craig Gifford is the victim of the worst crime in the novella and, indeed, in the book. He is killed by Roxy, with Brian's participation, after which the two rob the body and spend the money in bars. Neither of his killers even now his real name, instead referring to him as Blind Cunt, because he is blind. Gifford is an annoying person, given to making petty corrections of whatever anyone says. Brian and his friends drink with him, but they do not like him. On the night of the murder, after Gifford leaves the bar, Roxy notes that he was flashing a lot of cash, and concocts the plan to rob him. After Roxy hits him with a piece of slate, Brian kicks snow in his face, but later he admits that he actually kicked Gifford in the head and therefore may have contributed to the brain hemorrhaging that led to his death. The murder of Gifford leads to later shows of remorse by both Roxy and Brian, yet their principal concern is obviously that they might get caught and punished for the crime. Near the end of the novella, Roxy takes Brian to the graveyard where Gifford is buried, which is where Brian learns his victim's name. When Roxy urinates on the gravestone, Brian attacks him, and is thrashed for this show of conscience. In the story, Gifford's murder represents the extent of the heartlessness of which Brian and his mates are capable.

Jeff appears in A Smart Cunt

Jeff is Brian's father. He comes across as an upstanding, although rough-hewn fellow who raised his two sons after their mother abandoned the family. Later, however, it becomes evident that for years he lied in contending that his wife never made contact or asked to see the boys. In fact, she had written repeatedly, pleading to see her sons, and Jeff had never told them. This revelation at the end of the novella is the last in a series of betrayals Brian has endured throughout the book.



Tina appears in A Smart Cunt

Tina is Ronnie's girlfriend, who later becomes his wife. She is classically clueless. At one point, asks Brian to accompany her and Ronnie to her parents' house, so her parents can see that not all of Ronnie's friends use drugs. Brian is astonished, given that he uses alcohol and drugs nonstop. After Tina marries Ronnie but then loses interest in him because he starts playing too much Nintendo, she goes to a bar with Brian and falls into the arms of the first available man. The mindlessness of the characters in this book is represented by Tina in terms of romantic entanglements.

Mr. Gleaves

Mr. Gleaves is the manager who gives Brian a job on the parks service, and who only suspends him with pay after learning he was under the influence of drugs while on the job. After Brian goes to London and then returns to Edinburgh, Mr. Gleaves rehires him. A hopeful, kind liberal who either cannot see or will not look at hard truths, Mr. Gleaves is liked by Brian, yet with a hint of contempt in his good will toward the manager.

Chrissie appears in Eurotrash

Chrissie is a transsexual in the collection's opening story, "Eurotrash." Her sex change operation is revealed as a surprise near the end of the story, and this information casts her life and actions in a more forgivable light. She is a harsh and vindictive character.

Richard appears in Eurotrash

Richard is the gay bartender who was Chrissie's lover when she was Christopher. He is a sad figure, betrayed by Chrissie, who nevertheless clings to him for emotional support. He loved Christopher and retains his loyalty to Chrissie, as well as keeping the secret of her transexuality.

Jim Banks appears in The Last Resort on the Adriatic

Jim Banks is the protagonist of "The Last Resort on the Adriatic." On a sea cruise after the suicide of his wife, he meets a woman but feels that he cannot shake his loyalty to his former spouse. At the end of the story, he is about to jump over the side of the ship into the ocean, committing suicide in the way, on the same cruise, as did his late wife.

Lou Ornstein appears in The Two Philosophers

Lou Ornstein is an American philosopher visiting Scotland in "The Two Philosophers." He gets into a drunken debate with his Scottish colleague about the same philosophical points over which the two rivals argue every time they meet. This time, they are goaded



into a fistfight to settle the issue, and after Lou punches his friend, he is surprised to discover that he has a knack for fighting, and likes it.

John Deaf appears in John Deaf

John Deaf, the title character of one of the short stories, is a strong, teenaged boy who is both deaf and dumb. Caught in a dalliance with another character's sister, he beats up the boy, but when he goes downstairs, he finds that his grandfather has died sitting in his chair. John Deaf leaves town and never returns.

Boab Coyle appears in The Granton Star Cause

Boab Coyle is a character in "The Granton Star Cause" who loses his position on the social football team, is kicked out of the family home by his parents, dumped by his girlfriend, loses his job, gets arrested and beaten by the police, is slugged by a restaurateur, and then is turned into a fly by God. His unwitting mother then swats him, and he dies.

Coco Bryce appears in The Acid House

Coco Bryce is the protagonist of the story, "The Acid House." He is hit by lightning in the same storm during which a woman is giving birth to a child in an ambulance that also is hit by lightning. Coco goes into a coma, but his mind enters the body of the newborn infant. When Coco emerges from the coma, his mind is effectively erased, and he starts life anew as an adult, while the baby starts life with the fully formed mind of the old Coco.

Veitch appears in A Smart Cunt

Veitch, one of Brian's friends in the novella, is so stupid that he allows a drug dealer to keep his wares at Veitch's apartment, putting himself rather than the dealer at risk of a bust.

Simmy appears in A Smart Cunt

Simmy, one of Brian's mates in London, is an amphetamines addict who is as wild as Brian's friends in Edinburgh.

Nazneem appears in A Smart Cunt

Nazneem is a young woman in London who befriends Brian, although she does not succumb to his desire to have an affair.



Marianne appears in The Last Resort on the Adriatic

Marianne has a brief affair with the main character, Jim, in "The Last Resort on the Adriatic."

Raymie Airle appears in A Smart Cunt

Description



Objects/Places

Edinburgh appears in A Smart Cunt, and various stories

Edinburgh is the Scottish city where the novella and a number of the short stories in the book are set. The city's economically depressed neighborhoods and seedy bars are the principal locales, and the overall impression is one of oppression.

Glasgow appears in The Two Philosophers

Glasgow is the Scottish city where Lou Ornstein and his Scottish colleague, Gus McGlone, meet in the story, "The Two Philosophers." The story takes place in bars, in an alley outside a bar, and at a police station.

Stoke Newington appears in The Shooter and Stoke Newington Blues

Stoke Newington is a neighborhood in Edinburgh where Gary and Jock meet in the story, "The Shooter." Gary lives there, with his wife and child. It is also the place from which the protagonist travels in Stoke Newington Blues, although that story is set in London.

Amsterdam appears in Eurotrash

Amsterdam is the principal setting of the story "Eurotrash," taking place mostly in a bar and at the homes of the transsexual character, Chrissie, and the narrator, Euan.

Jersey appears in Eurotrash

Jersey is one of the Channel Islands, where Euan and his girlfriend go for the funeral of Chrissie, in "Eurotrash."

Santa Monica appears in Where the Debris Meets the Sea

Santa Monica is the California setting of "Where the Debris Meets the Sea." It takes place entirely in a luxury home, where four famous American actresses have somehow developed Scottish brogues.



London appears in A Smart Cunt

London is the city in England to which Brian escapes on two occasions in the novella, "A Smart Cunt." In each instance, the life he leads there is only marginally less messy than the one he left in Edinburgh.

Iford appears in Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum

Iford is the town in East London visited by Great Britain's Queen Mother in the story, "Lisa's Mum Meets the Queen Mum."

Inverleith appears in A Smart Cunt

Inverleith is a central suburb of Edinburgh where the park is located in which Brian works in the novella, "A Smart Cunt." He has a key to the park's offices and also secretly sleeps there each night.

Pilton appears in The Acid House

Pilton, a suburb of Edinburgh, is the home of Coco Bryce in the story, "The Acid House."

Kingsmead Estate appears in Stoke Newington Blues

Kingsmead Estate is a depressed housing development in the London suburb of Hackney where the narrator, Euan, goes to score heroin in the story, "Stoke Newington Blues."

Halliwell's Film Guide appears in Snuff

Halliwell's Film Guide, a noted compendium of mini-reviews of movies, is read by the protagonist of the short story, "Snuff." His objective is to tick off each entry in the book as he rents and watches a video of it.

Edinburgh Churches League appears in The Granton Star Cause

Edinburgh Churches League is a social soccer league in which Boab Coyle competes in the story, "The Granton Star Cause." Boab loses his place on his team when the captain decides to replace him in an attempt to win more games and move to a higher division in the league.



Themes

Nature versus Nurture

The age-old debate over whether the personalities of individuals are most influenced by inherited tendencies or by external influences is a regularly explored theme in this collection. Often, the protagonists in these stories seem to be on the verge of escaping a cycle of damaging behavior and turning over a new leaf. It is clear that they have within them the potential to be more or better than what they are, yet each glimmer of hope is snuffed out, either through the malign influences of old mates up to no good or through what appears to be the inability of the protagonist to change. This pattern causes the question to arise of whether a character's continual backsliding is just the nature of the person. This would be considered an innate weakness, symbolic of what Christians would call original sin or the result of being too easily led into trouble by peers. Rather than directly facing this question in the stories or attempting to answer it definitively, the author sets up a series of situations that force characters to make choices. Usually, the choice is to get into more trouble, which is not much help in terms of determining whether nature or nurture is more at fault. Nevertheless, these scenes engender hope that if the protagonist could simply get away from drugs and troublemakers, his better instincts might assert themselves. The author is suggesting that one's environment, including friends and family, can create a kind of behavioral trap, in which a person is expected to act in certain ways, and therefore does so. Nurture is powerful in these stories, and the implication is that the only chance to escape its influence is by finding a healthier environment.

Nonconformity and Rebellion

Antisocial and violent acts occur frequently in these stories, and often the perpetrators have little idea of what drives them. They are classic rebels without causes, in that their motivations for the havoc they wreak are unfocused anger, boredom, petty greed, and senseless nastiness. Rather than being driven by ideals or fighting against an unfair system, they do not think deeply enough to be anything more than punks and thugs. Out-of-control behavior is their way of entertaining themselves. The irony is that the attempts of these characters to demonstrate their freedom from the restraints of civilized living merely show how entirely they are victimized by their circumstances. Among the young people in the stories, the only ones who show potential to rise above such victimization are the various protagonists or narrators. These characters are more insightful than the others. They create just as much trouble as their friends, but they think more deeply about the implications of their actions, a trait likely to lead to the development of conscience. Rather than mindless rebellion, these characters engage in wrongdoing as a form of reckless nonconformity. It is much easier to envision their thoughtless peers eventually succumbing to the strictures of society and becoming defeated minions of the system than it is to imagine the protagonists taking such a course. The protagonists are true nonconformists, while their wild mates are simply



conforming to the rules of a lawless subculture rather than to the rules of the wider society.

The Drug Culture

Intoxicants of many descriptions fill the pages of this collection, but more important than their prevalence is the power they exert over the lives of the characters who use them. Interestingly, in these stories the degradations of addiction to, say, heroin, cocaine, or alcohol are not the focus of how characters are dominated by drugs. Instead, the chaotic behavior induced by such drug use provides much of the drama. Drug abuse as a social disruptor is a recurrent theme. The interactions of characters and what they do when they're out on the town are principally determined by drug use. In one story, the narrator even points out that his friendships with various people can be subcategorized by the different types of drugs he ingests with them. To a significant degree, these stories are explorations of drug cultures, demonstrating how heavy drug use will lead to actions that are stupid, callous, and even murderous. The stories show how selfish and delusional people become under the influence of chronic drug use, and how their behavior can degenerate to such a primitive level that it becomes virtually identical to that of animals. The author seems to have no concern about creating characters who will engage the sympathy of readers, even though the stories often give the impression that he sympathizes with these wayward people. He shows what drugs do to the characters, how nasty and vicious they become, but he refrains from judging them. Clearly, he regards them as victims, at least as much as they are perpetrators. The point is that the drug culture arises from, and is a symptom of problems within, the larger society. In showing the degradations of the drug culture, this volume indicts the society that produces it.



Style

Point of View

Most of the short stories and the novella are written from the first-person perspective. The narrator's name often changes from one tale to another, but he has the same personality. He is more intelligent than most of the people with whom he associates, but is just as rebellious as his wild friends are. This apparent alter-ego of the author not only functions as a commentator on the action, but provides elements of reflection and remorse that otherwise would be missing in these stories of thoughtlessly reckless behavior. This is essential to preventing the entire volume from sinking into absolute nihilism. Without the "I" character's awareness that he is living under hellish conditions, it would be hard to sustain interest in the other chaotic characters, simply because they are so mindless. First person also allows the author to remain non-judgmental of his characters, because the protagonist can do that work for him. This is useful because if Welsh were to condemn or criticize his characters, he would risk allowing the stories to fall into the realms of polemic or morality tale, which would detract from their dramatic impact. In some of the stories, Irvine Welsh uses third person. These pieces usually employ a good deal of dialogue or monologue, to enhance the drama and to reveal what the characters think and feel. On a rare occasion, Welsh does enter the mind of a character that he is presenting in third person, but this is only to provide a brief thought that is important to the story, which the scene will not allow him to otherwise present. He seems most comfortable with first person, for the intimacy it allows in presenting his out-of-control characters.

Setting

The principal setting in this book is Edinburgh. Several scenes in the novella are set in London, two of the short stories are set in the United States, one in Amsterdam, and one in Glasgow, but such exceptions are dominated by the vernacular and attitudes of Scottish characters. Edinburgh is seldom identified as such, the author preferring to name particular neighborhoods, parks, or bars. The characters often travel from one suburb to another, but the differences between settings are minimal. In one instance, a protagonist talks about the slightly more gentrified ambience of his neighborhood compared to that of another character, but it is clear that this distinction is mostly in his head. The parts of Edinburgh frequented by the characters in these stories are unfailingly poor, tasteless and bleak. Edinburgh is a kind of purgatory or prison, but it is one that the characters carry with them. On the rare occasions when they leave Edinburgh, they remain so thoroughly imbued with the ideas, interests, and speech of their native city that they might as well still be there. A funny example of this is the story, "When the Debris Meets the Sea," in which the author has fun with four well-known American actresses, giving them Scottish accents and backgrounds, although they live in Santa Monica. The four dream of going to Scotland and have plenty of money to do so, but know in their hearts that they are forever stuck in California, which is an amusing



comment on the glue-like effect Edinburgh has on the author's other characters. In the novella, the protagonist escapes the turmoil of his life in Edinburgh to live and work in London, but he brings all his personal problems with him, and his life is not improved there. He happily returns to chaotic friends, escapes them again when his life becomes almost uncontrollable, but once more is drawn back to Edinburgh. In this book, setting is a curse, a compulsion, and a love-hate affair that controls the lives of the characters.

Language and Meaning

The most remarkable aspect of the language in these stories is the phonetic rendering of Scottish brogue. Such renderings vary in intensity from one story to another. For example, only occasional words or sentences spelled phonetically appear in some stories, while others are written entirely in such dialect. Some words are regional slang that could be difficult to understand, even in context. For example, "ken" is slang for "understand" or "see" and "pish" means "urinate" or "piss." These first two sentences from one of the stories written entirely in brogue show that the text can be a little difficult to follow: "Ah wis it that Disneyland in Florida, ken. Took hur n the bairn." The first three words mean, "I was at," while the second sentence indicates he brought his wife and child with him. Once the reader becomes familiar with a few slang terms and with the phonetic spellings of everyday words, the language becomes entertaining, and very evocative of a strong Scottish accent. A second important aspect of the author's use of language, closely related to the brogue, is the frequency of profanity. The liberal use of "fuck" is not particularly surprising to American eyes, but more shocking is that any character in this book is likely to be called a "cunt" by another character. The term can be used in almost any context, such as rage, humor, praise, or even as a rough endearment between friends. Profanity, liberally mixed with brogue, is sometimes sprinkled with erudite statements by the protagonist, who is smarter and more well-read than his mates. The language in this book produces powerful effects that can be strange, funny, and unsettling, but most of all, it creates a vivid portrait of how these young and mainly Scottish men think and interact.

Structure

This volume is a collection of 21 stories of varying length, followed by a novella. The stories are not interconnected, although the narrator or protagonist occasionally has the same name in more than one story. In those cases, the stories appear in sequence, but there is no continuity of plot from one story to the next. The book begins with a poem written by a friend of the author. The poem, about a mushroom that obviously has psychedelic properties, suggests that unconventional or socially unacceptable experiences are the only way for questing minds to find the right answers in life. The pieces that follow alternate, in no perceptible pattern, between vignettes, extended anecdotes or character sketches, and fully realized short stories. The title story is the last one before the novella begins. The novella comprises more than a third of the book, but its title, "A Smart Cunt," no doubt was considered inadvisable as the title for the entire volume. The novella is divided into 15 chapters, each of which is numbered, given



a title, and introduced on a separate Contents page. The novella is dedicated to a friend, whereas the short stories are preceded by a dedication to the author's parents, further separating it from the other works in the book. The structure of the novella is chronological, with no flashbacks or flash-forwards, as is also the case in the short stories, and the overall style and subject matter of the novella are very similar to that of the other stories, making it a good fit in the collection.



Quotes

"Tony Whitworth's convulsing body lay there. What was once his face was now a broken, crushed mass of blood and grey matter" (The Shooter, p. 7).

"You could lacerate yourself badly on her nose, cheekbones and jawline" (Stoke Newington Blues, p. 33).

"A human head, disembodied, decapitated. Moreover, the head seemed alive" (Vat '96, p. 43).

"Ah wanted tae check her fanny, tae se if ah could tell that she'd been shagged" (A Soft Touch, p. 48).

"Two Sperryheids sit at a table in a public house talking shite about the football. The Sperryheids are almost indistinguishable from each other with their soft brown feathery heads, open, tense, belligerent beaks and slimy liquorice eyes" (Wayne Foster, p. 82).

"God looked Boab in the eye. He seemed upset" (The Granton Star Cause, p. 129).

"He took stock of his situation: Coco Bryce, tripping alone in the park at roughly three o'clock in the morning, lightning flashing from a foreboding sky above him" (The Acid House, p. 153).

"I suppose I could learn to drive, then I could get a job which offered the two important features of solitude and mobility, but a car would tie me down, stop me from taking drugs. And that would never do" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 1, p. 182).

"There's nothing worth than a violent beating from an unremarkable person" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 3, p. 199).

"That's okay for him; he's a fat, ugly, weedjie, soapdodging orange-bigoted, hun bastard with a small cheesy cock and a face disfigured by Indian ink, scar tissue, burst blood vessels, and he's got that frizzy hair that a lot of huns seem to have which looks like it's been transplanted form somebody's pubes and he also has a gross arse which is prone to fecal leakage" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 5, p. 206).

"Stockbridge, mate, I shout to the driver, reasoning that Ronnie was suffering from chemical imbalance and what he needed was some amphetamine to get him back into some kind of equilibrium" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 7, p. 218).

"This is what being alive's all about, all those fucked-up feelings. You've got to have them; when you stop, watch out" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 7, p. 223).

"Her friends wanted to be like somebody else; she only wanted to be like them" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 11, p. 247).

"It seemed that drug-taking over the years had reduced me to the sum total of the negative and positive strokes I received from people; a big blank canvas others completed" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 11, p. 250).

"Ah couldnae hack wearin a tie, man, that's a pure phallic symbol, a compensatory psychological device for men who feel insecure about their sexuality. I cannae get into that sortay arena" (A Smart Cunt, Chapter 12, p. 259).



Topics for Discussion

The characters in these stories often do stupid things and cause much havoc. What do you think are the reasons for such behavior? How would you describe the world view of these young people?

The older people in this collection are generally more law-abiding than the younger characters. How are they portrayed in terms of their interactions with the younger people, and what do you think the author is trying to say about relationships between the generations?

Alcohol and drug abuse are unremitting in these stories. Considering the various effects of such abuse in the book, discuss the symbolic significance of drugs and alcohol in the stories. Specifically, what does the act of drug use represent? What does a drugged condition symbolize in the context of the stories?

Sexual liaisons in the book are sometimes pleasurable but never are normal. Why do you think the author depicts only sexual encounters that are degrading or have an element of the bizarre in them?

The thick Scottish accents and the cursing in this book certainly create a strong atmosphere. Aside from that, what do you think the author's objective is in writing this way? How would you guess he feels about the language used by his characters?

The various narrators of the stories are always a little smarter and more soulful than their friends, yet they still get into the same amount of trouble. If they have insight, why do they make the same mistakes as everyone else? Why do they not learn? They seem to be leaders. Why do they not lead others away from the chaos?

Do you see any hope in this book? Could there be ways for these characters to change their lives for the better? What do you think the author is trying to tell us about how people cope with oppressive conditions in their lives?