

Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story Study Guide

Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story by Paul Monette

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Plot Summary

Paul Monette tells the story of his life: growing up gay in a world where he felt gay was seen as just not right. He grows up in Andover, Massachusetts, a primarily Catholic upper-middle class town. His loving parents soon add a younger brother to the family. After witnessing vicious bullies call a quiet nerdy classmate "homo," Paul learns that he must hide his homosexuality at all costs. He throws himself into the role of class clown and charmer, making every attempt to keep attention away from his sexuality. Paul's confusion increases as he begins experimenting sexually with neighborhood boys and his feelings grow. Outside of his sexual encounters, Paul never feels comfortable around boys his own age. Unable to understand their dirty jokes and completely inept when it comes to sports, he just isn't able to fit in with them.

Paul moves on from grade school to an all-boy prep school, where he immediately feels out of place beside boys who are endowed with athletic prowess and muscular statures. He performs well in school, however and moves on to attend Yale University. The male ideal is the same at Yale as it had been in prep school and his two roommates fit the picture of the male athletes Paul had worshipped. The only difference this time is that he is able to befriend these men, desperately seeking their approval. Paul develops a couple of unrequited crushes, which lead him to nothing but further frustration. He finally grows tired of falling in love with men who don't love him back.

Paul heads to Cambridge on a fellowship. He is meant to study Tennyson's letters for his thesis, but he soon grows tired of working and heads off to explore Europe. During this trip, Paul begins work on his novel. He is endlessly proud of it and devotes himself to it even after returning to Yale. Another highlight of his time in college is his induction to a society called Elihu. He develops close friendships with his brothers in the society. He becomes closest friends with one particular member of the society, so close that he plans to come out to him the night after graduation. Paul cannot bring himself to come out in person, so he plans to write his friend a letter. Before Paul can do this, he learns that his friend has died unexpectedly. Paul is devastated.

After college, Paul begins teaching at an all-boy school and immediately becomes popular with his students. One student lures him into a sexual relationship and then reports him for it. Paul is not convicted of any charges, since the child has had problems at schools before, but Paul leaves the school, moving on to a much better one. Paul teaches at Canton for six years and during that time he begins an interior decorating business with a close friend.

Paul begins therapy at the insistence of a friend who is concerned that he looks suicidal. The therapist encourages Paul to try to go straight. Paul begins a series of relationships with women, trying to convince himself he could be straight, but he still longs for men. Eventually, Paul realizes that he is gay and there is no changing this. He has known it all along. Throughout his entire life, Paul has remained petrified of coming out and has not been able to do so, no matter how much he longs to free himself of the pain of the

closet. Finally, as the story comes to a close, Paul meets his soul mate, Roger and with his help, is finally able to come out.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Paul Monette feels as if his childhood is completely different from that of any straight man. While the straight children lead their lives with all the expected milestones, he feels as if nothing of importance ever happened to him and nothing ever would. He accepts this life without question until age 25. While in the closet, he lives off of his own self-pity and others in his situation do the same. Slowly dying, at the age of 46, he finally sees that people's lives don't align in the details, as he had previously thought, but at the core. He finds himself surrounded by death from AIDS, having buried yet another lover, Stephen Kolzak. In series of World War II references, Monette uses the plight of the Jews in concentration camps as an analogy to the plight of gays. He wonders why the straight world hates gays, fears them and wants them invisible.

Monette believes it is necessary to leave a "map" behind to aid gays who come after him, no longer allowing the story to be taken to the grave. Paul believes that getting out of the closet is a necessity: with it comes an escape from pain and the knowledge that the pain will never return. Those who read his words and are still in the closet, however, are not capable of fully understanding his message. Paul no longer considers this hidden life as life at all and can no longer conceive of it.

Paul grows up in Andover, Massachusetts, a town located about 10 miles west of Salem, where countless witches were once burned, most of them gay and lesbian. His father, Paul, was French Canadian and his mother, Jackie, was English. Both were 23 when Paul was born. They were married four years prior to Paul's birth and high school sweethearts before that. They moved into their first house together at 116 High Street in 1950. During this time, Roy Cohn, J. Edgar Hoover and Cardinal Spellman were attacking gays during the Red Scare, according to Paul, in order to divert attention from their own sexual desires.

Paul remembers two memories from his childhood clearly. In the first memory, his mother goes to the hospital to have her appendix removed. He and his father are in the car on their way to visit her and as they pass a cemetery, he asks his father if his mother is there. Paul recognizes his fatalistic personality in this memory, the first trace of it he can recall in his memories from childhood.

In the second memory he recalls from childhood, he is walking to school with his mother and she slips on something and falls down. A couple of adults come over to help her and Paul remembers being embarrassed that they had made a scene. Thirty years later, he asks his mother if she remembers the incident and she replies that she had been pregnant with Paul's brother, Bobby, at the time and the fall could have been very serious. After hearing this, Paul supposes that the reason he remembers these two memories so vividly is because of guilt.



His brother, Bobby, is born with Spina Bifida and the doctors tell the family from the start that he will never walk. Paul realizes later how brave his parents were just to bring him home. In those days, many people didn't. Paul and Jackie go on as if nothing were wrong and Paul thinks his little brother is perfect when he first lays eyes on him after his parents bring him home from the hospital.

In second grade at Central, Paul receives all As and his teacher writes, "Paul is perfect," on his report card. Even at this young age, he has shamelessly begun playing with his mother's high-heeled shoes in front of everyone. He also acquires a fascination with paper dolls and one day he overhears an argument between his parents about his play habits. Paul's dad seems most upset, but he doesn't force Paul to stop. Bobby soon becomes obsessed with sports, which diverts attention from a relieved Paul, who is happy to let the sports fans do as they please.

Paul mentions a theory debate among gender scholars. The essentialists believe that there is a genetic predisposition to being gay or lesbian and therefore, gays and lesbians have always existed throughout history as nurturers, healers, teachers, etc. According to E.O. Wilson, "Homosexuals may be genetic carriers of mankind's rare altruistic impulses." On the other hand, constructivists believe gender and sexual identity are entirely modern ideas and therefore, there was no such thing as "gay" in history. In the eyes of classical analytic theorists, homosexuals are seen as deviant for never following the Oedipal rule. Freud refuted this view in a famous letter to the mother of a gay man, where he tells her that being gay is not only inborn but also perfectly healthy.

Paul insists that his family did not make him gay and that the deviant in society is only the homophobe. As a child, his family attends Catholic mass and Paul never misses a Sunday all the way through sixth grade. He is even confirmed, though he thinks of himself as a closet atheist. In third grade, a classmate named Maidie Lynch tells him he will go to hell because his father has committed a mortal sin by converting. Paul considers this his first real lesson in religion: God does not come out on top.

Paul's grandfather, Joe Monette, is well known in his town. His four sisters all became nuns in Montreal and his wife, Ubaldine, Paul's grandmother, made her own money by renting rooms in a boarding house, not trusting her husband to be her only source of income. Paul's father is the boss of a crew of drivers and mechanics; Paul is fiercely proud of his father for this occupation and loves going to work with him. The crewmembers treat Paul like royalty and the little boy is thrilled at being a part of this rough "world of men."

Paul's next-door neighbor Joyce receives Ds and Fs in school, but this does not keep the two from becoming good friends. They play cowboy games together and, in retrospect, Paul is sure she must have been a lesbian. She eventually drops out of school. Presumably, she is dyslexic, but there is no word for that in those days. His main childhood playmate is Toby. Together, the two boys act out scenes from Lassie. Paul always gets to be Jeff, while Toby plays the part of his sidekick, Porky.



In 1990, shortly after the death of his lover, Steve, Paul attends a camp of fellow gays. The man who invited him, Winston, is Paul's new lover. Winston takes Paul for a walk through the trees and points out a grassy clearing, telling Paul that this was where Lassie was shot. The visit immediately releases a rush of memories of Paul and Toby running through the grass, acting out those scenes.

At about nine and a half, Paul's point of view changes when he meets Kite, the town bully. The two boys take a liking to one another and begin to experiment sexually with one another. Paul is hooked with pleasure from this moment on. Their actions seem normal to him, since he has not yet heard the words "queer" and "homo." After these encounters with Kite, Paul is unable to keep the same relationship he once had with Toby and the two boys drift apart. Paul longs to grow up and leave his childhood behind him.

Not long after, Toby's mother is killed in a car accident and Paul's parents send him over to say he is sorry. Toby opens the door but keeps the screen between them as Paul expresses his condolences. Toby and his family move away soon after and Toby never says good-bye to him. Paul feels that he has failed his friend, having traded him in for his secret relationship with Kite.

One day, Paul and Kite are playing naked in his dark bedroom when his mother walks in on them. She asks what they are doing and Paul replies simply, "Nothing." The tone in this mother's voice makes him feel as if he has done something wrong and he prays for forgiveness, swearing it would never happen again.

As an adult, Paul shares with his mother how guilty he felt as a child about being gay and how unbearable this caused his childhood to be. His mom feels guilty upon hearing this, wanting him to remember the happy times in the pictures from her photo album, but Paul refuses, saying the pictures are lies. Paul has forgiven his mother long ago, although that day she walked in on him with Kite has caused him a great deal of grief. That spring, the family moves away from High Street and Paul is overcome with relief at leaving everything behind him.

Chapter 1 Analysis

As Paul grows up as a young child in the small town of Andover, he feels vaguely different from other boys his age, but he is too young to realize that his gay tendencies are not normal. He is adamant that his family did not cause him to be gay. The introduction of the different schools of thought in gender studies shows that Paul subscribes to the essentialist school of thought. He believes that there is a genetic predisposition to being gay and that gays have existed throughout history, though the label "gay" is only a modern term.

Paul goes through the motions of appearing normal, attending church although his beliefs are not aligned with those of the Catholics around him. His homosexual tendencies begin at an early age, when he begins dressing in his mother's clothes and



playing with paper dolls, happy to allow his father and brother to be the sports enthusiasts and leave him alone. His friendships with Joyce and Toby are normal enough. When he meets Kite, he discovers a new type of relationship. Once Paul discovers the sexual excitement he feels with Kite, he is unable to see Toby the same way and can no longer continue their friendship. Paul's relationship with Kite becomes his first sexual contact with the male sex and he longs for it from that day forward.

Although they did not understand him, Paul has forgiven his parents for any of their misunderstandings. He thinks fondly of them otherwise. He gives credit to them for their bravery with Bobby and for not forcing him to discontinue his so-called abnormal hobbies. Paul interweaves his description of his childhood with his insight as an adult and the reader can see how he views his childhood in retrospect. He mentions the death of his lover, Stephen and the AIDS around him as an adult. The impact of AIDS seems to have given him a sense of reality that only dire circumstances could have provided.

In the introduction to the chapter and the book itself, Paul emphasizes the terrible depression, pain and, most of all, self-pity that comes from a life in the closet. He emphasizes even more the necessity to escape it, to come out. Only then will one be able to escape that pain and know it will never return. Paul has written this book, not only as an autobiography, but as a guide to other gays who find themselves in his shoes. He warns, though, that those who read his words and are still in the closet will not fully understand his meaning until they escape. After describing what life is like in the closet and how life is not worth living until one can escape from the closet, Paul begins the story of his childhood. He soon finds himself heading into the closet from which he had fought so hard to escape.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

There is only one black family in Andover, but by the fourth grade, Paul recalls his peers telling racial jokes. Jewish slurs are whispered about his friend, Peter Goodman and Paul confirms that bigotry must be taught, since children are not born with this kind of hatred. Despite the prejudice that exists toward gays, he tries not to hate Catholics, taking assurance in the fact that God hates sin and not the sinner.

Paul witnesses Vinnie O'Connor, a sixth grade bully, pin a small, nerdy boy named Austin Singer up against the wall and viciously call him a homo, punching him each time. Vinnie and his friends laugh as they hold Austin down. Vinnie spits on the wall beside Austin and forces the boy to lick his phlegm off the wall and swallow it. Content after this, the group of boys run off, laughing, leaving Austin crying in a heap on the floor.

Paul is nearby and can't help but see the horrible spectacle. He fears he would be ridiculed if he came to his rescue. Instead, he takes the incident as a lesson that he must blend in and not appear gay. He wonders how much of the bullying has to do with Catholicism. Later on in his 20s, he witnesses a drunk man in a bar, who is a Vinnie O'Connor look-alike, chase two men down the street for holding hands. The man yells and threatens to bash their heads in.

Paul and his family move to Stratford Road, a part of town that is primarily white and upper class. He finds himself avoiding other boys his age, mostly because he can't play sports and doesn't fit in. When boys tell dirty jokes, he doesn't understand them. He doesn't understand the physical concept of sex. While other boys around him are beginning puberty, the only thing he remembers about his body is being allergic to bees. He retains one vivid memory of an attack so severe it causes his entire body to swell and he recalls this attack as the moment he begins puberty, his body changing and becoming something foreign.

During this time, Bobby is accepted to the Shriner's Hospital for Crippled Children, where he stays for an extended period. Paul, since he is under 16, is not permitted to visit. When Bobby finally returns home, he has casts on his legs to reset his bones and heal them straight so he will be able to stand on crutches. His crutches, however, are only for special occasions. For everyday activities, he uses his cart. Created by two mechanics, the cart is made of iron, with four wheels. Bobby sits inside and pumps a lever up and down to move it forward. The contraption gives him true independence for the first time and the sight of Bobby riding up and down the streets in his cart becomes a fixture in the town.



Even as a child, Bobby has always been free of self-pity and fear. From walking to playing baseball, he is hungry for life and never lets his handicap get the best of him. Paul feels guilty for being able to walk while his brother cannot.

In school, Paul continues receiving straight As. He becomes the class clown and in seventh grade is voted "Most Popular." He considers his role that of the "courtier," which means he is charming and entertaining, all-around popular and well liked. Paul becomes friends with Cilla Fitzgerald, who is considered the Elizabeth Taylor of seventh grade. He helps her choose one of her many suitors for prom. In retrospect, he sees this as self-denial. He has no part in this "straight men mating dance." During middle school, Paul feels he has no real friends, although he can dazzle the mother chaperones at junior prom with his dancing skills.

Meanwhile, Bobby goes to school at Miss Marland's, where the town's mentally and physically handicapped are grouped together. Public schools at the time were unable to accommodate the physically handicapped, so Bobby is left with no other choice. He receives no formal education at Miss Marland's, since he is lumped together with mentally handicapped children although his brain is entirely undamaged. Somehow he is later able to make it through high school and college.

As for Paul, when he learns about Jesus and his miracles in school, he thinks of it as just a story, unable to believe it really happened. He is afraid to *not* believe in God, however and goes through the motions of attending church.

Paul meets and befriends Richie, who invites him to join his guy's club. This club consists of a group of five boys who get together and play with themselves and each other. They do not admit any gay tendencies, however. They experiment with one another, yet always continue to talk about girls and send each other on dares. Paul continues trying to fit in with other boys his age. He and Richie begin to experiment alone together. Richie is one year younger than Paul and less developed. The two share the same relationship Paul had with Kite, except Paul feels tender feelings toward Richie. He wants to kiss Richie but is sure it wouldn't be appropriate. Paul keeps his feelings to himself.

During this time, Bobby finds himself surrounded by bullies who call Paul a "queer," but protect Bobby. Confused, Bobby goes home and asks his mother what the boys mean by this word. His mother dismisses it as nothing, asking Bobby to keep it a secret between them. When Paul finds out about the incident later on, the only thing that bothers him is that, despite all of his efforts to keep his sexuality hidden, they had all known. One day, Paul comes across Richie with two other boys as he walks by in school. Paul greets them and as he walks on, he hears one of them speak the word "homo." This hurts him a great deal. Although he likes to think it wasn't Richie who called out the word, he swears to himself at that moment he will not be intimate with anyone else so that no one else will suspect him of being queer.

That summer, before moving on to prep school in the fall, Paul begins working as a clerk and cashier at the Andover Spa. Its Greek owners, Nick and Stavros, are well



known in the town. Paul begins to see the place as a sanctuary, as the members of the town begin to associate him with the store. He notices more and more discrimination around him and hopes his new school will be different.

Chapter 2 Analysis

As Paul grows older, he finds it more and more obvious that he is different from other boys his age. After witnessing the vicious bullying of Austin Singer, Paul vows not to allow himself to appear gay. In an attempt to divert attention from his sexual orientation, he throws himself into the role that he refers to as the "courtier," funny, likeable, charming, the class clown. He finds himself desperately wanting to avoid other boys his age. Paul feels that because he is clumsy and not good at sports, he is unable to fit in with other boys and in addition, the childhood addiction to telling dirty jokes makes him feel uncomfortable because he doesn't understand them. All of this only emphasizes his resolve to hide his gay tendencies and he throws himself into the so-called "courtier's role."

Paul feels guilty that he is able to walk while his brother is not. He is also clearly bothered by the way Bobby is thrown into school at Miss Marland's, lumped together with the mentally handicapped children in town. Since the public schools were not capable of providing for physically handicapped children like him, Bobby is forced to attend Miss Marland's where he receives no formal education. Paul marvels at how his brother is able to make it through high school and college later in life. The two boys' handicaps can be compared. Bobby has an outward, physical handicap, but Paul's sexual orientation is a hidden handicap to a normal life. Society is not truly prepared to deal with either.

Paul begins his second childhood sexual relationship with Richie and the two experiment sexually, as Paul had experimented with Kite. Paul's feelings, though, have grown and Paul feels tenderness towards Richie and the urge to kiss him. Paul's homosexual feelings are developing beyond merely sexual pleasure and into intimacy. When he hears the word "homo" uttered as he passes Richie and his friends in school, Paul vows never to allow himself to be touched intimately again. He shuts his feelings inside of him now more than ever.

Paul's job at Nick's provides a safe haven for him. He is so intent on hiding his sexuality that he is relieved when the people of the town begin to associate him with the store. This association takes away from others' interest about him as a person and allows him to remain unidentified as homosexual.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Paul feels like an outcast from the first day at his new school when he learns that day students like him are considered second class. The other boys around him are confident and athletic, unlike him. Those with scholarships, like him, are separated from the other students and are assigned four hours a week of chores. Already he feels like an outsider. The boys are separated into three athletic groups. The first group is Apollo, for the supreme athletes. Just below them is the second group, Dionysus and Paul belongs to the third group, which consists of the athletically challenged nerds. The fact that he does not fit into the school's ideal of manhood serves as proof to Paul that he is not a man, since, to him, there is no other kind.

Paul befriends two other fellow nerds, Gene and Francis. He is sure that the three of them are all queer, but they never discuss it. Paul begins an obsession with Liz Taylor, keeping a scrapbook full of her pictures. Somehow he feels he identifies with her. In his report card, one of Paul's teachers writes a note informing his parents that he is spending too much of his time acting silly with his friends. The teacher tells his parents that his behavior is not healthy and that he has a lot of growing up to do if he ever wants to be a man. Paul's grades drop slightly from the straight As he used to receive to the B/B- range.

Paul finds himself in awe of the athletic boys around him, fixated on their developed bodies. He can't help but stare in the locker room. He feels small beside them and thinks of them as he masturbates, though he does not think of himself as ever being intimate with them. He knows they are too far above his level for any sexual relationship to be conceivable. Instead, he wants to be one of them. Paul's sexuality remains hidden for 12 years, until he goes into therapy at age 26.

Paul is preoccupied with hiding the fact that he is different and continues working at Nick's, his sanctuary from the world. He spends his Friday nights with his Nana Lamb, the member of the family he is closest to. They enjoy their time together. Paul feels worldly when he is out with her. He never tires of hearing about her trip to California. Nana Lamb was the first of the family to take a trip on a commercial airline and Paul knew he had to go see Hollywood.

In school, Paul continues trying to get out of playing sports. He feels androgynous next to the "men" in his class and feels more at home with the freshmen in Latin. One of his teachers turns out to be the father of Austin Singer, the nerd who had been so viciously picked on in school and Paul wonders if the teacher knew what his son had gone through.

A sad-eyed, gray-haired man visits Nick's every Sunday and one day he asks Paul to come to his house to see his paintings. Paul finally agrees and after showing Paul his



paintings briefly, the man performs oral sex on him and then asks him how much he charges. After this encounter, Paul lets no one else touch him sexually for five years. He grows invisible and devotes himself to his studies. He ends to his sophomore year by earning first prize in the Latin Declamation Contest and later takes part in a Latin play. Paul feels alone as he watches his straight classmates with their dates and he knows it would take more to appear normal in their eyes. Throughout high school, Paul feels he has no real friends.

That summer, he and his family stay at Rye Harbor in New Hampshire and Paul begins writing poetry at night. He also begins collecting "Tomorrow's Man" magazines, which picture men wearing nothing but a piece of cloth over their genitals. Paul stares at these pictures and recognizes them as men who want to be admired. It is his first indication that gay men exist out in the real world.

In October, after Bobby emerges from an 8-hour bladder surgery, his kidneys stop working and his fever goes up to 108, as high as the thermometer could go. His frightened parents hold out, not wanting their son to undergo another surgery so soon and finally the fever breaks and never returns. In adulthood, Paul remembers this incident when he takes Roger's temperature as he battles with AIDS.

Paul begins visiting the Addison Gallery of American Art and his interest in the arts flourishes as he continued writing poetry and performing in plays. Meanwhile, he keeps his sex life completely private, telling himself there is no need to incorporate it into his life. He feels it would be inconceivable to reconcile his sexuality with his life. To further cement his "straight" image, Paul befriends athletes and teases nerds. He cannot handle the thought of someone finding out he is gay.

Mr. Fitts, a handicapped teacher at Paul's school with legs like Bobby's, encourages Paul to read. Despite his handicap, none of the students ever tease the man. Mr. Fitts is such a wonderful teacher that he leaves them in awe of his probing mind and no one questions him. Because of Mr. Fitts, Paul participates in a Latin play, starring in the lead role. In retrospect, he believes that these plays granted him admission into Yale. During this time, one of the teachers at school is thrown out for going too far with a student while giving him a backrub. The teacher is married with children and Paul learns a lesson from the incident: not even marriage is a true cover-up and you can throw your entire life away in one wrong move. Also during this time, Nana has a blood clot in her leg and is forced to have it amputated. Although it is a difficult time for him, Paul doesn't share the information with anyone, not wanting any attention.

One day, Paul's mother walks into his room without knocking while Paul is looking at one of his "Muscleboy" magazines. Although he manages to hide the magazine in time, his mother sees the guilty look on his face and asks if there is something he wants to tell her, adding that he can always talk to her or his father. Paul feels dirty at almost being caught, just like the time she walked in on him with Kite. Later, his father tells him that there is nothing wrong with his girlie magazines, since he is almost a man, but the homo ones are no good. He doesn't push the issue further and Paul simply nods and agrees.



Paul is accepted into Harvard, Yale and Brown and is extremely excited when he hears the news. As an adult, Paul feels his lover Roger is much smarter than he is, but Roger tells Paul that he was brokenhearted when he received rejections from Harvard and Yale. This taints Paul's memory of his college acceptances. In the end, Paul leans toward Yale because the university offers him a better scholarship: \$1,600 versus Harvard's \$1,550. The dean at his school attempts to convince him to attend Brown. Paul graduates from school quietly, feeling only relief that he has not been uncovered as gay.

Chapter 3 Analysis

As he grows older, Paul finds it more and more difficult and, at the same time, more and more necessary to keep his homosexuality hidden. His high school years are difficult since he feels so much like an outsider beside the athletes with whom he shares his classes. Gym class only contributes more to his feelings of being an outcast. He cannot conceive of someone finding out he is gay and takes all precautions possible, including making fun of less popular boys.

Paul's homosexuality makes him feel like an outcast in his family, as well as in his classes. When his mother walks in on him with his magazine, she knows Paul is hiding something. She probes him with her question, but Paul insists it is nothing, the same answer he gave when she walked in on him with Kite. He senses his mother knows something, but the fact remains unspoken.

The teacher who is thrown out of school for inappropriate behavior with a student serves as another lesson for Paul. He believes that he must proceed carefully if he wants to succeed in the charade he has begun, passing himself off as straight. Even marriage is not a secure cover-up. Paul resolves to never let his guard down from that day on. Although Paul graduates from high school and receives acceptance letters from Harvard, Yale and Brown, his main source of contentment is his relief at having graduated without anyone discovering that he is gay. After all, that is his main goal throughout high school, high above any others: to hide his sexuality.

Paul's unhappiness regarding his sexuality seems to grow as he matures, but he still has no one to confide in. He passes through high school with no real friends and his feelings eat him up from the inside and cause him grief he cannot share with anyone. Throughout the chapter, Paul interjects his insights as an adult into his descriptions of the past, giving the story more depth by showing how his point of view has changed.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The summer before Paul leaves for Yale, he continues his job at Nick's and befriends Nick's flamboyantly gay son, Alex. To his father's dismay, Alex is gay and proud, almost like a drag queen without the dress. Paul envies Alex for his ability to be himself. The two boys go to the mall together for school clothes. Paul has little money and makes an impulse decision to steal a package of underwear. Then, he decides he will continue stealing only the little things he needs so he can afford a nice jacket. In the next store, however, he is apprehended by mall security as he tries to steal a pair of pajamas. From that day on, he never wears pajamas again.

Both stores press charges and Paul is asked to appear at the Salem courthouse the following day. His father warns him that if Yale learns of the charges, he will not be permitted to attend. At his hearing, Paul pleads with the judge in a long speech. Paul promises to be a model citizen from then on and never to steal again. The judge throws out the case, warning Paul that he is no longer welcome at the mall.

Paul's father warns him not to get involved with the wrong kind of girl in school. Once he reaches Yale, Paul learns that he has three roommates: one classmate from Andover named Russell and two masculine athletes named Sean and Jake. Paul is immediately smitten by them and sees them as his salvation. He is eager to make friends with Sean and Jake, seeing them as the boys from Andover whom he idolized but who would have nothing to do with him. He climbs mountains with Sean for his approval and longs to be a writer because Jake wants to be a writer. Because Jake dislikes queers, Paul goes along with teasing them in order to make Jake happy, although he feels a twinge of guilt for mocking his brothers.

Paul makes up stories about heterosexual escapades by drawing details from stories he has heard from other men. He dates to seal his cover-up. He can't be one of the guys without dating and Paul cares too much about their opinions to refrain. He never goes beyond the first date, however, for fear of the girls' expectations. During this time, Kennedy is assassinated. Paul finds a new sanctuary in the Yale Art Gallery.

That summer, Paul works on one of his father's delivery trucks. Though it is a cold and dirty job, it pays well and Paul is willing to make the sacrifice in order to make money to keep up with the straight social life at Yale. Paul feels poorer at Yale than he ever had at Andover and is desperate to keep up. Paul develops a crush on Sean and accompanies him on a trip to California the following summer. He feels jealous of Sean's relationship with his girlfriend and soon befriends her and her mother, much to Sean's discontent.

Paul and Sean drift apart and Paul soon heads alone to a party in Napa Valley. When he arrives, he is overcome by the wealth he sees. He meets a woman named Lois and immediately falls for her. Their feelings are mutual and the two share long nights



together, talking. They find they have a great deal in common. In retrospect, Paul believes she must have known he was gay. At the end of the weekend, however, Lois leaves with her family to Hawaii, leaving Paul alone.

Sean soon becomes convinced that Paul tried to steal his girlfriend and the two barely speak to each other afterwards. However, after having met Lois, Paul feels he doesn't need Sean and Jake. He joins a play at school and soon realizes that most of the members of the drama department are gay. Paul soon meets Doug. Paul double dates with Doug in his heterosexual persona, but when they are alone, Doug teases Paul sexually. Although Paul finds Doug very attractive and wants to give in, Paul never allows himself to for fear his gay identity would be discovered.

Paul soon discovers his affinity for poetry. He begins working at the Master's Office and he meets the secretary, who is interested in poetry. She shows him poetry so that Paul sees it in a completely different light and Paul soon discovers that her mentor had been Mr. Fitts, Paul's beloved teacher from Andover. Paul soon finds himself writing more and more poetry, using it as an outlet for his secret problems.

That summer, he works 19-hour days as a "bead boy" at a hotel. He has no friends among the staff, but one of the waiters, a flamboyantly gay man in his 40s, can't keep his eyes off Paul. At first, Paul finds this creepy, but eventually Paul finds himself enjoying the attention. On the Fourth of July, he has his first adult gay sexual experience with the waiter. The experience is not an entirely pleasant one, however and Paul never speaks to the man after that. Having had enough after six weeks at the hotel with its long hours, Paul has his parents pick him up and spends the remainder of the summer quiet and brooding.

Paul's new roommate the next year is an artist named Cody. Paul romanticizes him a great deal. He sees the two artists living together like a joining of muses. Paul even learns to smoke like Cody until he is hooked. He feels jealous of Cody's girlfriend and is almost glad when they fight. He and Cody have grown to be close friends and Paul feels no one has ever known him as well as Cody. Paul's emotional attachment to Cody increases and so does his jealousy of his girlfriend. During this time, Paul is still so frightened of being discovered as gay that he lies on questionnaires in Psychology class that ask about his fantasies, phobias, dreams, sex habits, etc., even though the questionnaires are entirely anonymous.

Paul is chosen by one of the campus societies, named Elihu, the most diverse, least preppy of the societies. He is elated by his new membership. The only drawback is that Cody disapproves. The society informs its new inductees that they will be required to recite an autobiography to their new brothers and Paul knows immediately that he will lie in his.

Paul wins a summer traveling fellowship to Cambridge and the school's committee awards him a check for \$1000. After a \$300 plane ticket, this leaves him \$700 for 13 weeks in Europe. He plans his trip in excitement, however, planning to meet friends on different legs of his journey. Before leaving, he and Cody spend some time together.



One night, the two go out drinking and Cody falls into a drunken sleep in Paul's lap. Paul strokes his hair, knowing Cody in his drunken stupor won't wake up and freak out about it. He feels that when he says good-bye to Cody, things will never be the same between them. After that moment with Cody, Paul swears never to hold another man who would not hold him back.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Throughout college, Paul becomes increasingly fixated upon fitting in. He sacrifices himself, allowing himself to be defined by the likes and dislikes of his new roommates. He sees Jake and Sean in the same light as the athletes at Andover he idolized. These boys, though, are willing to accept Paul as a friend and he is more than willing to do anything to please them, even ridiculing other gays at his school, the men Paul secretly considers his brothers. His preoccupation with fitting in includes making up a heterosexual dating life, playing the role of the typical heterosexual man at Yale and continuing to bury his true self.

Paul continues burying his feelings inside, so that when he has the opportunity to work on his poetry, he throws himself into it. The woman who encourages Paul's poetry is a pupil of Paul's beloved Mr. Fitts from Andover and this coincidence makes the study and writing of poetry even more inviting. Paul's bottled up feelings have an outlet and his passion for poetry begins in full swing.

Paul's sexually frustrated and misguided feelings toward Sean abate after their disagreements in California and Paul's brief relationship with Lois gives him a new view on the world. He finally has, if not a romantic relationship, a relationship with a person whom he feels truly understands him. Although the subject of his sexuality never arises, the two share so much in common that he feels himself falling in love with her immediately. Their brief relationship leaves Paul with a new viewpoint on his relationship with Jake and Sean and he goes back to Yale convinced that he no longer needs them, seemingly having been fulfilled with Lois instead.

Paul is so desperate for an outlet for his sexual frustrations that he allows himself to be courted by the waiter at his hotel job over the summer. He goes along with the man's overtures and this leads Paul to his first sexual encounter. The experience is not one he enjoys, however. He feels disgraced afterward and runs away, never speaking to the man again and spending the rest of his summer in quiet, lonely brooding.

Paul's misguided feelings continue with his roommate, Cody, for whom he quickly develops feelings. Paul is drawn to Cody's artistic brooding and the two artists share much in common, becoming close friends. Paul feels that no one has ever understood or known him as well as Cody did. These feelings only increase with jealousy when Cody is with his girlfriend and Paul again finds himself in the clutches of an unrequited crush, much like his crush on Sean. Paul identifies a great deal with a woman in a poem he reads, with a caged heart much like his own.



When Cody drunkenly falls asleep in Paul's lap, Paul enjoys their final moments together but fears things will not be the same between them again. Stroking Cody's hair while the boy is drunk is the only chance Paul has to touch him tenderly without fear of scaring him away forever. Paul swears to himself that he will not become involved with another man who does not reciprocate his feelings, for he seems to have had enough of unrequited feelings.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

During Paul's summer fellowship at Cambridge, he is supposed to read through Tennyson's letters in the school library and as he does so, he feels that Tennyson was even more depressed than he. Paul relates the subject of unrequited love to his own life. Eventually he grows tired of reading in the library and leaves, to explore this new country. Paul hitchhikes all over it, determined to find a man and make love to him. Despite his determination, Paul is unwilling to make the first move and waits for someone else to do so.

One evening, Paul meets an older gay man who has been in the Navy and Paul plays to the preppie Yale student typecast the man seems attracted to, eventually going home with him. The two sit up together talking, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes and soon find themselves in bed together. This is Paul's first true physical gay sex with a man. Paul is too shy to stop and feels guilty the following day. Paul feels he has taken the woman's role in their sexual exchange, when his goal is to prove his manhood. Feeling as if he has missed his chance to become a man, Paul runs away the following morning, even though his partner of the night before is friendly the next morning. After this experience, Paul feels sure he won't get in bed with anyone anytime soon and after making this resolution to himself, he feels ready to talk to anyone.

Paul falls into the brooding writer/poet role and continues his journey through Europe, never allowing himself to think about staying with the Navy man. Instead, he spends days on the beach writing, excited to be able to tell anyone who asks him what he is doing, "Writing a novel." Paul's lifestyle and lack of money cause him to lose twenty pounds, but he doesn't mind and almost likes the look he has taken on. One night, he meets three American girls and makes out with one named Betsy. They hit it off and decide to head to Monaco together, hitching a ride in the back of a pick-up truck. Although he doesn't remember saying good-bye to Betsy, Paul does remember a moment when they are sitting together on a bench and she has fallen asleep in his lap. As they sit there together, a group of soldiers drives by on trucks and waves and whistles at them together. Paul realizes they are the picture of love: a boy and a girl together. When Paul runs into his friend Francis from Andover, Paul denies fiercely that he is gay, telling his friend all about Betsy to scare him off, refusing to admit his homosexuality.

During Paul's senior year at Yale, which is satisfying for the most part, Paul cares about nothing more than writing his novel. Ten years later, as he looks back on this same year, however, he describes it as an extended nervous breakdown. Although Paul and Cody are still roommates, they barely speak and Paul spends most of his time with his Elihu brothers, feeling he relates with them. When he shares his autobiography with them, it is the first time he has ever told anyone so much about his life and about his brother. Instead of divulging that he is gay, he tells his brothers he is merely depressed. In



response, they all decide to cheer him up and encourage him with his writings. While each of his brothers is either headed for law school or medical school, Paul has no plans yet for the future.

Paul continues feeling depressed, although he doesn't consider suicide. He has shut himself off to accept his lonely, depressed life. He blames Yale for his unhappiness, but as an adult looking back, he wonders why. He remembers a single conversation with his parents from Christmas that year. He tells them that he wants to continue writing after college. They respond by telling him that writing is a hobby, not a job, adding also that if anything happens to them, Paul will have to take care of Bobby, something he has never considered. Bobby is now struggling his way through junior high, attending a public school that has no idea how to handle a physically handicapped child. Not able to go upstairs, he is forced to sit in a janitor's closet and listen through a tube that goes upstairs to his science class. He is also dealing with his hormones and the fact that girls his age won't pay any attention to him. Paul is afraid to ask Bobby about his problems for fear Bobby will ask Paul to help him become a man.

Paul returns to school after Christmas break, angry with his parents for their close-minded opinions and angry at having to give up his life for his brother. For the first time, he uses his brother's situation to his advantage, asking for an extension on his thesis and telling his advisor his brother has fallen very ill.

Bill Hilgendorf, one of Paul's Elihu brothers, soon becomes the object of Paul's worship. In his autobiography, Bill shares his dream to one day become president. Paul is never sexually attracted to Bill and becomes friends with his girlfriend, Star. She is from Hawaii and Paul thinks she is one of the most beautiful girls he has ever seen. She soon becomes Paul's biggest fan, encouraging him with his writing. At her urging, Paul applies to a writing program at Stanford, which becomes his only hope for plans after college.

Paul soon begins worrying about the war and the possibility of getting drafted. He puts off his thesis on Tennyson, attending cast parties instead and working on his novel. When he finally sits down to work on his paper, he realizes that all his writings on Tennyson's letters from Cambridge are missing and nowhere to be found. In the end, he substitutes another work he has already finished, adding forty pages of padding but giving up the possibility of graduating magna cum laude. During this time, Paul receives a rejection from Stanford: a form letter with an upside-down stamp at the bottom. Soon after, Bill finds Paul's work on Tennyson's letters in a pile of papers and it sits on Paul's desk for the rest of the year, as if taunting him. To Paul, the entire ordeal proves that he has no place in graduate school.

Paul is given the position of writing the class poem. He composes it in five sections, each of them after a futile crush. The homosexual angle is well hidden, however and only a true queer would have been able to pick it out. In the end, the poem is about friendship. Paul begins to feel emotional, as graduation approaches, bringing the inevitable disbanding of the Elihu brothers Paul has grown so close to.



At graduation, Paul reads his poem and thinks of it as a rebuke against his parents for telling him that writing is not a life. He has received a last-minute fellowship at Oxford. The fellowship is unexpected and not really what he wants, but at the same time he is glad to have an answer when people ask what his plans are after college. After the ceremony, he heads back to campus and meets up with Bill, spending the night with him at the Elihu house. Paul decides that night to tell Bill that he is gay and admit the truth once and for all. In the end, he can't bring himself to do it and Bill falls asleep as he listens to Paul talk about his problems. Instead of a verbal confession, Paul promises himself that he will confess his secret in a letter to Bill, the first man Paul has loved without being sexually attracted to him.

Paul drives home with his parents and finds out three days later that his fellowship at Oxford has fallen through. He is frantic, trying to find somewhere to go. He begins working in a bookstore and reading about the war in case he gets drafted. In the meantime, Paul contacts his deans from Yale, asking for favors. Finally, one comes through with a one-year Carnegie Fellowship at Yale teaching English 15 and taking a couple of graduate courses. The weeks of frantic searching have postponed Paul's letter to Bill, but he promises himself he will write it soon. When he arrives back at Yale, a security guard tells him that Bill is dead. Bill fell off a mountain on his first day in Hong Kong. Paul is devastated and sets about telling his classmates the bad news.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Paul makes it successfully through college at Yale without anyone discovering that he is gay. His trip to Europe allows him to experiment, since he is far away from home. The concept of "becoming a man" and what it means to be a man is an important theme. After his first gay sexual experience, Paul feels nothing but guilt and resentment for having failed to prove his manhood and submitted to the woman's role in their sexual exchange. The entire incident makes him so entirely unhappy that he literally runs away from the man's apartment, despite his friendliness. Afterwards, Paul throws himself into his writing and is content to work on his novel. He is happy just writing on the beach and his passion for writing follows him back to Yale, where he neglects work on his thesis, preferring to work on his novel instead.

During his senior year at Yale, Paul seems to grow closer to his brothers at Elihu than ever before. He shares things with them in his autobiography that he has not shared with anyone in the past, such as his brother's handicap. Paul cannot bring himself to come out to them, however and in his autobiography, he substitutes depression for being gay. Equating being gay with depression provides an interesting insight. Paul's sexual orientation has given him nothing but depression, resentment, frustration and guilt. He is still too scared to allow the rest of the world to recognize him as gay.

Paul's writing has become a large part of his life. He is frustrated and angry at his parents' response when he informs them that he wants to continue writing after college. He feels they are being unfair, though he admits that he has never thought about taking care of Bobby if something does happen to their parents. Paul returns to Yale from

Christmas break still angry with his parents and when he reads his graduation poem, he considers it a rebuke to their comment.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Paul believes that he would have ended up as a dumpy schoolteacher at a second-rate school if he continued the way he was headed. He says that coming out saved him from this fate. He could not have done it on his own, though. He had to meet Roger before he was able to take the final step. In Paul's book, *Borrowed Time*, he tells about his loving relationship with Roger and Roger's death from AIDS. Their hearts grow together during their struggle with Roger's AIDS, until Roger says at one point that they are really the same person.

Still, even as Paul matures and is able to come out, his past never completely goes away and intimacy is always a struggle for him. He is jealous of his new lovers' experiences, feeling that he can never catch up to them. He is afraid that if his lovers knew the lonely kid he once was, they would be scared away. These kinds of feelings abate once Paul begins to realize that everyone has baggage. Although Paul believes in the idea of true love and longs to be in a happy relationship, he does not intend to push any traditional ideal onto his readers. He knows many people who are happy being single, but as for him, he has had enough being alone in the first 25 years of his life to last him a lifetime.

Paul rents a cottage by the beach in New Hampshire and his father brings him an old car to commute to and from school. When his parents see his new living accommodations, his father tells him he will freeze and his mother is shocked, calling his cottage a mere shack. Despite hardships, Paul continues working on his novel until he realizes he has nothing more to write. The characters he has created will not fall in love and without that, he has no story. After this realization, he begins reading more and more, identifying with the lonely heroes in the books.

As winter approaches, Paul finds himself avoiding going home to his freezing cabin to stare at the blank page of his writing. Instead, he goes to random bars and finds himself waiting for something to happen, though he is unsure of what, exactly, he is waiting for. Despite his homosexuality, Paul still sees gays as "others," and he prefers remaining lonely to coming out and becoming one of them. He has created a vision in his mind of two men laughing together, totally in love, though he has never seen anything like this in his life. On the contrary, society seems to tell him it is impossible, but he keeps on dreaming.

Paul becomes self-conscious about his looks, hating his big, French nose and unsure of what to do sexually. He battles his attraction to homoeroticism, telling himself it is wrong but always going back to it. In school, he agrees to tutor a group of inner-city kids and takes a particular liking to a girl named Emerald who longs to be a poet. She idolizes him and he continues meeting with her, at some level needing and enjoying her idolization. Finally, one day she tells him she is unable to go to college. Her mom is sick and there



are three other children in her family. She will have to work to support them all. Emerald is afraid she has let Paul down when she tells him the news. During this time, Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated.

Paul's mother questions his apparent unhappiness, but when she asks him about it, all he hears is, "What were you doing with Kite?" The incident with Kite has remained vividly in his memory through his adult years. The rift between Paul and his mother seems to grow and they both share guilt about Bobby.

Paul continues his relationship with Star after Bill's death. She comes to stay with him in his cottage and they read poetry and talk together, helping each other with their grief and pain. He doesn't hide being gay around her but can't bring himself to come out and say it. The last thing she tells him before leaving for Asia is to keep writing.

Paul teaches a summer session at a camp at Andover. It is his first time teaching a co-ed group and he becomes the life of the party on the same campus where he had been so miserable in high school. His outgoing personality is the queerest he allows himself to be.

In the Navy yard, facing a possible draft, Paul provides documentation for allergies to bees and penicillin. On his questionnaire, when asked if he is homosexual, he checks "yes," officially admitting that he is gay for the first time ever. He reasons that he sexuality has caused him so much anguish that he might as well get something out of it.

At home in Andover, Paul sees Bobby, who has just gotten his driver's license. Bobby is experiencing joy and vitality at finally having true independence. Bobby also has a girlfriend named Brenda, with whom he seems very happy. Paul is happy for his brother, but he remains unhappy himself. One day, while sunbathing, he strips naked and screams in the middle of the woods, "Somebody find me!" but no one comes.

Paul begins a job at Sutton High School, where he is in charge of a dorm of 35 boys. The buildings look like a reform school. The unruly boys he finds inside, though, mesh with him immediately and he stays up late at night talking with them. One boy, Greg, sees that Paul is gay and begins a sexual relationship with him. Greg takes the dominant role and they always met at his whim. Paul experiences guilt and self-loathing as he continues their meetings. He has become what straight people fear: a recruiter. In retrospect, however, Paul sees the situation differently. He has heard stories from many gay men of seducing older gay men as adolescents. Paul feels dead more and more every month, petrified of getting caught with Greg, He does everything possible to avoid detection.

During this time, the Stonewall Riot occurs only 70 miles away, but Paul never hears about it. When Greg speaks of his girlfriend back home, Paul is jealous. At the same time, he is relieved that he has not turned Greg entirely gay. Paul tries to convince himself that he doesn't care about Greg. Still, he buys Greg an Opel GT, which is Greg's idea of a cool car although it is a total lemon. Paul meets a man in town who, although he insists he isn't gay, agrees to have sex with Paul. They begin meeting every week at



a hotel. Through this superficial relationship, Paul is able to keep Greg at a distance. This is the only time he feels he has any power in their relationship.

When Greg's grades drop, he is called in for counseling and in a rage, tells Paul he doesn't care about him. Hurt, Paul consents to tutor Greg. When Paul's hook-up in town stops showing up, he again has sex with Greg. Their sexual meetings were always under the guise of Greg missing his girlfriend, making Paul just a stand-in for her. Paul understands this but at the same time can't stop. One day, Greg tries to pretend that Paul has forced him into sexual favors and reports him to the administration at school. Paul assumes he will lose his job over the accusations and begins making mental plans to move to California and live under a pseudonym.

When the dean calls Paul in to discuss the accusations, he asks him directly if he has taken advantage of Greg. Paul says he has not and is going to tell the truth about their relationship. The dean interrupts him, saying that Greg had pulled a similar stunt at a school he attended earlier and would be expelled immediately. Greg tells his classmates that he wanted to get expelled all along and Paul is almost disappointed he can't run away to California. His students assure him that he is still the best, but things are never the same at school afterward.

Paul begins applying to different schools as a writer-in-residence but is rejected from each of them. The vision of his "laughing man" begins to fade and he resigns himself to a life of misery. In the meantime, his students do very well and their parents send Paul gifts and notes of thanks in return. Toward the end of the school year, Paul contracts bacterial pneumonia, becomes very ill and is hospitalized. He is not allowed visitors and his parents must suit up in protective gear and stay ten feet away to see him. The only call he gets from his school during this time informs him that his insurance will not cover his hospitalization.

Another call comes for him though: a job offer to teach at Canton from the chairman of the English department, who had taught with Paul at Andover. Paul accepts the job immediately, stipulating that he must not be in charge of a dorm or sports team. Paul wants to stay away from boys as much as possible to avoid repeating the situation with Greg. Paul leaves Sutton without saying good-bye or leaving a forwarding address, fearing the incident with Greg might follow him to Canton.

Chapter 6 Analysis

In the introduction to the chapter, Paul discusses his inability to come out. He believes that he might never have been able to come out, ending up as a pathetic schoolteacher at a second-rate school, without Roger, who entered his life and helped him realize who he truly was. Although Paul had a healthy, successful relationship with Roger and even with another love after Roger's death, Paul is never able to truly forget the lonely child he once was. Although coming out of the closet eases his pain, the pain of childhood comes back to him time and time again. Paul has the nagging feeling that if any of his new lovers finds out about the lonely child he was once, he would surely run away.



Once Paul realized, however, that everyone has baggage, he is able to ease his feeling of dread and move past it. Paul adds that, as a result of his lonely childhood and having been essentially alone until age 25, he has had enough of being alone. He longs for someone to share his life with, but this is only his opinion. He adds that he knows many people who are content to be single.

Soon after moving into his beachside cottage, Paul realizes he has come to a dead-end in his novel: his characters stubbornly refuse to fall in love with one another and without that, he has no story. The stagnation in his writing reflects Paul's stagnation in life. He cannot find love and his characters cannot find love. Paul dreads going home to the empty pages he faces there, so he goes to random bars, simply waiting. His life and his novel have reached a dead-end at the same time. Paul's feelings of worthlessness are eased by Emerald's idolization of him and the two seem to help each other during their tutoring sessions. He helps Emerald with her poetry and writing and her confidence in him gives him a boost he desperately needs.

Paul's unhappiness does not go unnoticed by his mother. When she asks him why he is so unhappy, Paul doesn't hear her words. Instead he hears the question she had asked when he was a child and she walked in on him with Kite in his bedroom. This was the first time his mother spoke to him with an accusatory tone and the first time she caught him doing something that seemed wrong. His mother's response let Paul know that homosexuality was wrong and he had remembers the incident vividly into adulthood. Her reaction to his sexuality is the answer to her own question: why is he unhappy? He is unhappy because he is gay, but the world around him says it is wrong to be gay. He struggles with his homosexuality and wonders if it is truly wrong.

At Sutton, Paul's relationship with Greg could destroy his entire world. In a way, he welcomes destruction. If his life were destroyed, he could start a new life, somewhere else, under another name. This shows how little he values his current life. The dean does not believe the boy's accusations, though and Paul is given a chance to start over at Canton.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Paul spends his first year at Canton recovering from Sutton Hill. Canton is a much more historical and refined school. A street separates the boys from the girls and the school emphasizes family history. Paul will teach here for six years. He fits in immediately because, to the people there, being literate means a person is civilized. Paul is certainly literate, having spent his entire life reading. The staff and students at Canton enjoy having a poet around and for his first two years there, Paul sits up late at night writing poetry.

Paul is appointed faculty adviser and avoids getting close to any students. He considers the senior girls safe, however and they enjoy his poetry. Later on, they tell him that they knew he was gay. Paul identifies himself as "poet/not gay," although in '71 many people, especially women, are perfectly accepting of homosexuality. People at his new school give him many chances to talk about his sexuality, but Paul never does. No one pushes the issue, so, Paul continues to live in the persona of straight poet.

At Canton, his closest friend is Eleanor, the wife of the department chairman. They spend hours talking together and she encourages him to continue writing. Paul also befriends Myra, whose three children are in college and whose husband is away on business with a girlfriend, leaving her at home, lonely. She needs Paul for company and has him hold her as she falls asleep.

César becomes Paul's first real friend. He teaches languages at a nearby school and spends a lot of time traveling. He is the most social person Paul has ever met. Paul knows César is gay and César knows Paul is gay. Paul never discusses the topic, though, nor allows any kind of romantic relationship. César is Paul's first real gay friend and Paul wants to keep their friendship. César allows Paul to define the boundaries of their relationship, respecting his wishes, although César would have acquiesced to a romantic relationship with Paul.

César and Paul have a great deal in common. Both had been lonely as children. In their conversations, they share their deepest secrets. César was raped by his gardener at age six. At one point César lost 150 pounds, leaving him with loose skin on his stomach that made César proud of his achievement instead of embarrassed. Paul notices César's especially expressive mouth and a dot next to his iris in one eye that makes his gaze particularly penetrating. The two share intimacy without sex.

Paul makes a New Year's resolution not to run away the next time someone shows interest in him. He meets a man on an airplane. The man is older and brags about the guys he has slept with. This man immediately assumes Paul is gay and for the first time, this doesn't bother Paul. Paul and the man see each other a few times after they meet on the plane, until Paul finally stops seeing him. Paul thinks that the man asks too many



questions about his gay life and didn't want him to be the one to lead him out of the closet.

Paul becomes close friends with a woman named Alida, a painter and poet. One day, during an idle conversation, they begin talking about the possibility of starting an interior decorating business together. Soon, the business becomes a reality and Paul begins telling his friends about it. Since the business of interior decorating is populated with so many homosexuals, most of his friends hoped that Paul would come out of the closet. When among members of the trade, though, Paul clings to Alida, allowing the homosexuals in the crowd to believe they are a couple. One day, Alida asks him directly, "Are you gay?" to which Paul replies, "not exactly," preferring to appear sexless rather than gay. The topic of moving their relationship to the next level comes up and Alida tells Paul she is happy being friends. Unfortunately, she is not truly happy as "just friends" and believes she can change Paul and that he will eventually develop feelings for her.

In the meantime, people who see Paul and Alida together, including close friends, assume they are a couple. Bobby even thinks Paul and Alida are a couple and asks if they are sleeping together. Paul says "no" and that his penis doesn't work properly. Bobby realizes, after this conversation, that Paul is gay, but Paul believes his secret is still intact.

The company begins to grow and Alida drops out of Princeton to pursue the business full-time. Scott, one of Paul's students who wanted to become a poet, begins tutoring sessions with him. At first, Paul is reluctant to tutor Scott because he dislikes Scott, but soon Paul grows fond of the boy.

One night, when Paul is in bed with the flu, Alida receives a drunken phone call from Greg. Paul has been writing a poem for Scott and when Alida hears it, she recognizes it as a love letter. Alida realizes that she will never be the one for Paul. They consider closing the business, but they are too invested in it to drop it now.

Scott chooses to attend Yale instead of Harvard and Paul is overjoyed at the news. He believes that Scott will have the amazing time at Yale, something that Paul's secret had deprived him of. Scott could be a real writer, while Paul is forced to write in code. Paul sees this as his opportunity to be selfless, a mentor. Paul writes poems to vent his frustrations, makes copies of them and passes them out in class. In return, he receives praise from his students. None of them know the truth about Paul's frustrations. Paul is stressed over Scott leaving and finally saying good-bye.

Paul goes to stay with Bobby while his parents are out of town and he hits his emotional rock bottom in the same room he grew up in as a child. Bobby is angry that Paul has come to babysit him. Bobby has just finished a year of junior college and is about to start a four-year business program. Bobby is out every night with Brenda planning a real life, including marriage. Paul doesn't want to cloud his brother's happiness with his own problems. Finally, however, a friend forces Paul to see a shrink, telling Paul he is beginning to look suicidal.



Paul agrees to the therapy and begins working with a man named Cantwell. Paul is terrified at first, but admits his homosexuality. All of his fears and problems begin to come out at once. When Cantwell asks Paul what he wants, Paul replies that he longs to just be straight. Cantwell suggests that Paul tries to be straight and Paul takes the advice. Paul feels like a new man after making the decision to have a heterosexual life. He deals with losing Scott and Alida drops out of their business after having had enough of his depression. Trying to be straight seems to help. Paul feels able to make his own mistakes.

Paul soon has a chance to housesit in Cambridge, which proves the perfect opportunity for him. Paul continues working hard at his therapy, trying heterosexual relationships. When he feels himself lusting after men, he tries to convince himself that he wants to *be* those men, not have sex with them. When he falls into his old ways, however, he berates himself in Cantwell's office.

Paul keeps in touch with Scott, though he feels Scott only corresponds with him out of good manners and obligation. Paul longs to prove that he can be as heterosexual as Scott. A friend from Yale sets him up with a girl named Julia and the two hit it off immediately. They talk, make out and spend time together. Paul begins to feel heterosexual and isn't even scared when Julia admits she is falling in love him. They court like any sexual couple, though Paul puts off having sex with her, preferring to wait. Paul breaks his writing hand in an accident and his journal stays quiet during this time. Julia takes care of him tenderly and Paul's business continues to do well. When Paul and Julia finally make love, he is sure it is the right thing and what he really wanted.

Paul's journal begins again on November 17th and he is already sleeping with another girl. The girl is practically engaged to a friend of Paul's and Paul is almost ready to break things off with Julia. Scott has decided to be a novelist instead of a poet, a subject he discusses at length with Paul while Paul tries not to stare at Scott's pants.

Chapter 7 Analysis

At Canton, Paul recovers from his experience at Sutton Hill and blends in well with the students and faculty because of his background in literature. Although the time period has become more liberal and homosexuality has become more widely accepted, Paul refuses to come out. By now, though, it is obvious to many people around him that he is gay.

Paul longs for a close friend who can truly relate to him. He has never really been close with anyone gay before. Because of this, he treasures his relationship with César. The two share the same lonely childhood. They spend hours talking with each other and Paul shares almost everything with him. Although Paul knows that César is gay and César knows that Paul is gay, Paul refuses to openly admit his homosexuality. The two have an intimate relationship, sharing their deepest feelings, secrets and emotions, but their relationship never includes courtship or sex. This is Paul's decision and César allows Paul to set the boundaries for their relationship. Paul is glad to finally have a



close gay friend and he seems afraid to let things get romantic, for fear of losing the friendship.

After resolving not to run away from an interested man, Paul begins a brief courtship with the older man on the plane. Paul is drawn to the man's rough nature and outward gayness. The man asks too many questions about Paul's gay life to which he has no answers and Paul soon grows tired of their relationship. Paul knew that being with this man would require being out and Paul is not ready to come out alone and doesn't want this man to lead the way for him. Paul's close friendship with Alida leads Alida to have unrequited feelings toward Paul. She finally sees that she can never really be the one for him. Paul, on the other hand, deals with his own misguided feelings for his student, Scott.

The most pivotal part of this chapter is Paul's therapy with Cantwell and his subsequent quest to become a heterosexual. Rather than cause him grief, the therapy is initially great for Paul. He works hard at being straight, feeling that this goal of heterosexuality has made a new man out of him. Paul is better equipped to deal with the loss of Scott and Alida and he begins a successful heterosexual relationship with Julia. His relationship with Julia doesn't last, though. Paul begins an affair with another woman, one who is practically engaged to someone else. At the same time, he is sexually drawn to Scott. This is the first indication that Paul's effort to become heterosexual may be a failure.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

From Paul's vantage point as an adult outside the closet, it is easy to ridicule the time he spent attempting to be straight and gain societal approval. He does not consider this time to have been wasted, though. Paul would not have been able to open himself up to any man without the women of '72 and '73. He wonders if his relationship with Julia would have failed if such a distance had not separated them. He adds that they looked like a great couple when they were together.

Justin, an architect and a friend of Paul's from Yale, had a girlfriend named Sally. Paul is smitten from the first time he meets her by her beautiful looks and her personality. When Justin breaks the news to Sally that he wants to see other people, Paul jumps at the chance to be with her. They begin a relationship and Paul sees the two of them as two wounds healing together. Paul continues his relationship with Julia, reasoning that the double sex will speed his heterosexual development. Soon, Julia breaks up with him, saying that they are too strong for each other. Because they both want the same things, one of them would have to win and it would never work out between them.

Paul stays with Sally, who becomes not only his love advisor but also his girlfriend. Alida gets in touch with Paul and admits to him that she has never stopped loving him. Paul suggests that they have an unattached affair. Alida agrees reluctantly and Paul begins to share his time between Alida and Sally. Alida is unhappy with this arrangement and Paul can see it in her eyes when he leaves her in the morning. Paul thinks that with his experience at heterosexual sex, he will be ready to be Star's lover when she returns from the Orient.

Cantwell's diagnosis of Paul's desire to find a fulfilling relationship is that Paul feels the need to replace the relationship he lost with his mother when she found him with Kite. After hearing this, Paul questions his true desire to be straight, but continues on his quest anyway.

Scott stays with Paul and Sally for a while and Paul is proud to have a woman to boast of. When Sally invites Paul to live with her, he thinks their arrangement could result in marriage. However, Sally soon leaves Paul for Justin, telling Paul that she can't take the cheating anymore. When Paul hears this, he cries and feels overwhelming grief, thinking that after this he will never be straight.

Paul begins a relationship with Edie, a cook who turns out to have more emotional problems than Paul bargained for. Eventually, Edie tells him she isn't ready for a relationship. At the same time, he begins a relationship with Pip, an architect he met at a party. After Edie has a breakdown in front of him, Paul breaks off their relationship. Paul feels that he is a magnet for lonely and troubled people and perhaps he is irreversibly disturbed from having been gay for so long. Paul clings to the belief that



passion will win in the end. He continues his relationships with Sally and Pip, though Sally accuses Paul of being in love with Pip. Paul soon finds out that Justin has had an affair with Alida.

Paul meets Ellen, whose attractive features he describes as mysterious. He continues seeing Sally and Pip. He hasn't initiated sex with Pip, though, because he is afraid to scare Pip off. Cantwell suggests that Paul break off his relationship with Pip. When Pip finally breaks up with Paul, he spends the next two days crying and this intensifies his divided nature. Soon after, Sally asks him to move out. During this time, Paul hesitates to have sex with Ellen because he feels impotent.

Paul spends a few days in Vermont with Justin and when the two of them have sex, Paul laughs out loud to a bewildered Justin. The reason for Paul's laughter is the dysfunctional circle they have created between Sally, Alida, Pip, Justin and Paul. All of them are involved, but none of them know how to make love work.

Paul finds a publisher for a manuscript of his poems: an old fling of Sally's. This seems fitting since his poems are a reflection of his sexual doubt. Finally publishing his work makes him giddy with pride. Paul continues his relationship with Ellen but also continues to doubt his sexual performance. He still desires men and begs Cantwell for permission to break up with her. A man who sees the two of them together tells Ellen that her lover is gay. Ellen responds that she loves him even though he isn't very good in bed. When Paul learns of this, he feels angry and betrayed.

Paul begins reading Thoreau's *Walden Pond*, which takes him a year and a half to finish, since he savors the work. He is still in the closet and needs time to himself. Fifteen months of therapy leaves him inarticulate and out of excuses. He knows he needs to change his life.

Paul meets a young poet named Sandy. They share long talks and a close friendship. Cantwell suggests that Paul begin a relationship with him, but Paul can't bring himself to do it. Paul is still petrified of being labeled "queer," so he and Sandy remain friends. Paul remains with Ellen and he shies away from breaking up with her. He contracts herpes and keeps it a secret from Ellen until she finds out that she also has herpes. She feels betrayed by Paul. The two slowly grow apart.

Paul begins a courtship with a gay man named Harold and Cantwell encourages this relationship. In public, they get along very well, but when they are together alone, Paul freezes up. He soon admits that he only wants to feel taken care of. The two break up soon after. Harold warns Paul that he will run away from love one too many times and end up with none at all.

Star returns from her six-year trip to Asia and comes to visit Paul. The two of them make love, but soon afterward they mutually decide that they make better friends than lovers. Star encourages Paul's quest for a "laughing man."

Paul takes a trip with Sandy but can't bring himself to make a move toward a sexual relationship. Paul knows Sandy is open to it, ready for him to be ready. Instead, Paul



does nothing and keeps their relationship platonic. He considers the trip a milestone for him anyway, since it is the most he has ever been able to share with a gay man. Unhappily, Paul plans to return to Canton in the fall.

Through mutual friends, Paul meets Roger Horwitz. On their first night out alone together, they laugh easily with one another. That night is the only time Paul has ever made love all night. He wants desperately to make a good impression. Soon after they meet, Paul and Roger fall in love. To Paul, life becomes about seeing the world with Roger and making their relationship work. Roger is the only one who can make the 25 years of pain seem worthwhile, because if any one thing in his life had gone differently, he may never have met Roger at all. Paul believes this much was up to fate.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The final chapter of the book is mainly a whirlwind of failed relationships in combination with Paul's therapy. It leads up to Paul's relationship with Roger Horwitz, which the reader already knows will be a lasting love. Paul's quest for heterosexuality goes downhill after failed attempts at relationships with Sally, Alida and Ellen and his gay relationships with Pip, Harold and even Sandy fail. Paul continues to struggle with intimacy problems and he is unsure whether he is gay or straight. Cantwell suggests a number of relationships, but Paul seems unable to keep any of them intact. Throughout his trials and tribulations, Paul keeps the ideal of his "laughing man" in mind and even after his quest for heterosexuality, he realizes that the "laughing man" is what he truly wants in his life.

In the end, Paul meets Roger and things begin to look up immediately. Roger and Paul hit it off from the moment they meet. Their first night out alone together turns out to be full of laughter. Paul has finally found his laughing man. It seems that through his relationship with Roger, Paul is able to solve his most significant issues. He shares everything with Roger, making love to him all night. Paul conquers the problems with intimacy that have caused him so much grief, finally combining true friendship with true sexual desire. With Roger's help, Paul is able to escape the painful world inside the closet, the lonely place he has been living his entire life.

Paul's entire life has been wrought with difficulty and frustration, pain and loneliness and feelings of self-pity and self-loathing. After meeting Roger, Paul states that 25 years of negatives can be worthwhile for one person and that person is Roger. Paul has traveled a long and painful road and he finds Roger waiting at the end of it.



Characters

Paul and Jackie

Paul's parents, high school sweethearts, married for four years when Paul was born. Paul sees his parents differently as an adult than he did as he was growing up. Although the main struggle of the story centers on Paul himself, his parents are important in Paul's development. Paul mentions parents' bravery when they bring Bobby home from the hospital after he is born with *spina bifida*. Many people during this time did not bring home handicapped children. This bravery can be contrasted to Paul's parents' refusal to face their son's homosexual tendencies. Paul speaks most about his relationship with his mother, who walks in on him during a nude play session with a playmate and while looking at homosexual magazines, both incidents he remembered his entire life. Paul his father's attitude only briefly. Paul's father is upset when Paul, as a child, begins developing interests in paper dolls and his mother's cloths. He also looks back as an adult on the time that his father confronted him about his magazines, telling him that the girlie ones were fine but the homosexual ones were no good. Paul is thankful that his father didn't push the issue any further than that. In college, Paul is upset when he tells his parents of his career aspirations of becoming a writer and they tell him writing is a hobby, not a real career. When he comes out, Paul mentions only that his mother deals with guilt at hearing that Paul had a lonely and unhappy childhood, although Paul had forgiven both of his parents long before.

Bobby

Paul's younger brother, born with *spina bifida*, which caused paralysis in his legs. Paul takes a liking to his brother from the moment his parents bring him home from the hospital. He is relieved as his brother grows up to become a sports fanatic. Paul is happy to let Bobby and his father share the pastime Paul wants to avoid. Bobby endures surgeries and a great deal of time at the hospital as a result of his condition, but he never seems to feel any self-pity. On the contrary, he is fearless with everything from walking to playing sports. Bobby attends a school where he was lumped in with mentally retarded children and deals with a great deal of hardship at a public school that is entirely unprepared to deal with a special needs child. Still, Bobby manages to successfully complete high school and college and end up happily married.

Kite

Kite is one of the town bullies of Andover as Paul is growing up. When the two boys meet, they immediately begin a relationship of sexual experimentation. These were Paul's first homosexual acts and he admits to being hooked from the first time. Kite's main role in the development of the story is an incident when he and Paul are playing naked together. Paul's mom walks in on them. Paul knows immediately from his



mother's actions and tone of voice that what they are doing is wrong and from this moment on, a rift grows between Paul and his mother. Their relationship is never the same.

Richie

Also a classmate of Paul's and his second sexual partner. Richie and Paul share a relationship similar to Paul's relationship with Kite. The only difference is that Paul begins to develop tender feelings toward Richie. He longs to kiss him, but knows this would only scare Richie away. This is a turning point in the development of Paul's homosexual feelings. Paul's feelings had gone beyond sex to include tenderness and caring.

Sean

Paul's roommate at Yale, for whom Paul develops an unrequited crush. Their relationship begins as more of an idol-worship on Paul's part. Paul is willing to do anything to attain Sean's approval. Paul befriends Sean through pretending to be heterosexual. Soon, Paul begins to develop deeper feelings for his friend. They travel to California together, where Sean begins to see his girlfriend and Paul begins to get jealous of their time together. Paul's unrequited feelings turn bitter. Paul befriends Sean's girlfriend and his friendship with Sean dissolves when Sean accuses Paul of trying to steal his girlfriend from him.

Cody

Paul's roommate at Yale. He is an artist and Paul sees them as muses joining together. He enjoys their time together and feels at this point in his life that no one has known him better than Cody. Paul looks up to Cody and his brooding, artistic persona. Paul soon begins to fall for Cody, but his feelings are unrequited once more. Paul finds himself slipping into jealousy of Cody's girlfriend. The two room together for most of their time at Harvard and before Paul leaves for Cambridge, they spent a day together. Paul knows that when he returns, things won't be the same again. Paul strokes Cody's hair after Cody passes out from drinking and Paul vows to himself never to hold a man who will not hold him back.

Bill

One of Paul's brothers at Elihu, Bill is this first man Paul loves without any sexual feelings. Paul looks up to Bill and the two become very close friends. Bill encourages Paul in his writings and the two become close. When they are together the night after graduation, Paul decides to come out to Bill, his first coming out ever. The two sit up talking that night, but Paul is unable to come out in person. Paul promises himself to



come out to Bill in a letter. Before Paul writes the letter, upon arriving at Yale the following fall, Paul learns of Bill's death.

Star

Bill's girlfriend. From the time they first meet, they hit it off and become friends. She is one of the biggest fans of Paul's writing. After Bill's death, they grow closer and help one another with their grief. They stay in contact when Star travels to Asia for six years. Before she leaves, she tells Paul to keep writing. When she returns, they attempt a sexual encounter but decide they make better friends than lovers.

Greg

One of Paul's students at Sutton Hill. Greg elicits sexual favors from Paul and the two begin a kind of relationship. Greg remains dominant in the relationship, always initiating their encounters himself. Paul attempts to put a stop to the encounters but gets caught up again when Greg asks him for tutoring sessions to help bring up his falling grades. One day, Greg reports to the school administrators that Paul has been taking advantage of him. The dean does not believe Greg's claims and expels him. Afterward Paul goes to Canton, leaving no contact information for fear that his new school will find out about the accusations. Greg somehow finds Paul's information and drunkenly calls him one night while he is sick in bed with the flu. This is the last Paul ever heard from Greg.

Alida

Paul's closest female friend. The two start an interior decorating business together. Their friends and colleagues all assume that they are a couple. During their relationship, Alida develops feelings for Paul, but denies them, saying that she is content to remain friends. Unfortunately, she is untrue to herself when she says this and truly believes she will be able to change Paul's feelings for her. In the end, she realizes that Paul is gay and sees that she cannot be the one for him. Having had enough of his depression, Alida leaves their business and goes on with her life. She gets back in contact with Paul later in the story and admits that she never stopped loving him. Paul suggests an unattached affair, which proves unsatisfying for both and the two become involved in a dysfunctional circle of affairs, none of which end happily.

Roger

Paul's "laughing man." With Roger's help, Paul is able to escape life in the closet, overcome his intimacy problems and lead his first healthy, successful, loving relationship. Paul mentions Roger briefly throughout the story, but Roger does not truly enter the narrative until the very last few pages. Having longed for a man he could laugh with and be himself with and share everything with for his entire life, Paul is overwhelmed to find Roger. Their first night alone together is full of relaxed laughter and



Paul knows he has found the "laughing man" he has envisioned in his mind for so many long years. In the book's conclusion, Paul admits that for all he suffered through in his life, everything was worthwhile if it meant finding Roger. He believes in fate enough to say that if any part of his life had played out differently, he may never have met Roger.



Objects/Places

The closet

Paul speaks of the closet as if it were a real place, a place where he remained for much of his life. Paul continues to refer to the closet throughout his story, describing it as a place that is dark and lonely and he remains there because of his secret. In the introduction to his book, Paul explains that those who are reading his words and are still in the closet will not fully understand his meaning. He explains that being in the closet is painful and that this pain that cannot go away until one is able to leave the closet completely. Paul struggles with his homosexual identity and the pain that he associates with being in the closet throughout his childhood and into his adult life. He attempts to deny his sexuality and convince himself that he is truly straight. Paul compares life in the closet to life in a coffin, so dark and lonely that it is impossible to fully live. Paul learns the lesson of the closet the hard way, by living through it.

Andover

Paul's hometown of Andover, where he lives from birth through high school, is populated with primarily middle to upper class Catholic families. Paul soon realizes that being gay is not an acceptable thing as he witnesses the jokes, teasing and bullying that are associated with the words "homo" and "queer." . Paul's opinion of his town changes as an adult. In his adulthood, Andover is simply the location where his confusing and lonely childhood took place. As a child, he experiments sexually with his grade school classmates in Andover. Andover is also home to the preparatory school Paul attends after grade school, where he feels like an outcast from the first day. Paul continues his struggle to hide his sexuality there. The school further emphasizes the male ideal that Paul doesn't fit and will never attain. Nick's, the store at which Paul works, he describes as the town's "magnetic center." Paul considers Nick's a sanctuary because as he works there, the townspeople come to associate him with the store, diverting attention from Paul's sexuality.

Yale

Paul attends Yale directly after graduating from Andover's preparatory school and finds himself rooming with the same unattainable male models he felt so insignificant beside in prep school. The only difference in college is that, unlike in Andover, Paul is able to make friends with his roommates. He hungrily strives for his roommates' friendship, desperate for their attention and approval. Paul is inducted into a Yale society, Elihu and he finds close friends in his society brothers. His brothers accept him and encourage him with his writing. In a job on the university campus, Paul finds a poet mentor who teaches him about poetry and encourages him to continue writing. With her help, Paul advances his already budding interest in writing, which will continue to grow into a



successful career. Paul forms and loses friendships during his years at Yale, experiencing unrequited love and hiding his sexual identity under the mask of heterosexuality. During his years in college, Paul also begins work on his novel, which strengthens his interest in writing and allows him an outlet for his tormented feelings. Yale provides not only a formal education, but more importantly a place where Paul learns about himself and advances his writing. Though he remains petrified of coming out, Paul forms close friendships that allow him to be more open.



Themes

Hiding Homosexuality/"Courtier's Role"

Paul becomes afraid of his classmates learning that he is gay after witnessing vicious bullying of "queers" and "homos." He throws himself into the role he refers to as the "courtier." He takes on a charming, outgoing personality in an attempt to divert attention from his sexuality. Although he eventually falls out of this "courtier's role," Paul never allows his true self to come out, continuing to take on different personas throughout his life. In Yale, he takes on the persona of a heterosexual male. Wanting desperately to fit in with his athletic, attractive roommates, he does anything to please them, including making fun of the gay men on campus. In order to be one of the guys, he is also required to date women, which he does. He makes up stories of his conquests with women, drawing from details he has heard other men tell in their stories.

During Paul's trip to Europe, after a disappointing first sexual encounter with a man, he falls into the role of the quiet, brooding writer/poet, a role in which he remains for some time. Paul becomes content simply writing his novel, happily taking on the persona of "writer." After returning to Yale, Paul remains in this role, discarding his prior heterosexual act. Paul remains in the "writer" role and continues to identify himself by his chosen profession. As he progresses to teach at other schools, his role becomes that of simply "writer/not gay." He portrays himself as a writer, so absorbed in his work that he doesn't have time for true romance. Paul uses each of these roles to divert attention from his homosexuality. Paul remains in one role or another throughout the book, even reverting to the role of a heterosexual as he begins therapy and tries to convince himself he is truly straight. Finally, however, he discards all of his roles as he is able to successfully come out with the help of his true love, Roger.

Unrequited Love

Paul's first experience with unrequited love is during one of his childhood sexual experimentations with his playmate, Richie. Although he has experimented sexually before, this is the first time he has tender feelings toward a friend. Rather than simply wanting sex, he feels the urge to kiss Richie, but he knows this would be unacceptable and fears it would scare Richie away. When he reaches Yale, Paul becomes particularly fond of his roommate, Sean. Sean is the same type of man Paul looked up to so much in prep school. He has athletic prowess and he is popular. Paul befriends Sean, something he was never able to do with the boys in prep school. In this friendship, Paul does everything to please Sean. Paul knows Sean dislikes gays, but Paul soon begins to develop feelings for his friend. His crush is entirely unrequited and leads Paul to nothing but frustration. Paul finds himself becoming jealous of the time Sean spends with his girlfriend and in the end, Paul grows tired of the constant unrequited feelings. He begins to dislike Sean and the two grow apart.



Paul also develops feelings for another roommate named Cody. Cody is an artist and this draws Paul to him even more, seeing the two of them as muses joining together. Paul even teaches himself to smoke because Cody smokes and the two become very close friends. Paul feels that no one has known him as well as Cody does at that point in his life. However, Cody has a girlfriend and Paul begins feeling frustrated again. He continues his crush on Cody until their last moments together before Paul leaves for England. Cody passes out in a drunken sleep on Paul's lap and Paul takes this opportunity to stroke Cody's hair, knowing that Cody won't wake up and be scared off. Paul swears to himself, having had enough of his unrequited feelings, that he will never again hold a man who won't hold him back. The theme of unrequited feelings continues throughout the story, however and at one point, one of Paul's good friends, Alida, falls in love with him. Her feelings are unrequited. Paul endures a lot of unrequited feelings and failed relationships before he finally ends up happy.

The "Laughing Man"

Paul's central conflict throughout his life has been with himself and his sexuality. He puts up the façade of being heterosexual, dating women and trying to fit in with the men around him, but he is never able to achieve true happiness. Only after many dysfunctional relationships with men and women, Paul realizes that he really wants a man with whom he can be himself and share laughter and a fulfilling relationship. He keeps this ideal in his mind throughout his life, referring to it periodically as his "laughing man." Sometimes Paul doubts that he will ever find this ideal. After dealing with unrequited love, failed relationships, guilty feelings after random sexual encounters, complete unhappiness, despair and depression, Paul is more than ready. He is hungry to find true love.

In the end, when Paul meets Roger, he knows that he has found his "laughing man." Paul can be himself around Roger, tell him his life story, feel comfortable with him and most of all, laugh with him. This meeting is the end of Paul's story, a story of the long, dark years that precede love. With Roger's help, Paul escapes the world of the closet, the struggle he had been fighting since childhood. In the end, Paul has a successful, fulfilling relationship with Roger. As a result, he is able to finally resolve the conflict and turmoil of his lonely and painful life in the closet.

Manhood

Throughout the work, Paul tries to "become a man." As he grows, he sees the qualities of manhood as athleticism and prowess with women. His homosexuality prevents him from achieving manhood. This leads to the question: what is a man? Is a gay man less than a man? In the end, a relationship that combines physical love, laughter and understanding defines Paul's manhood.



Prejudice

Paul's early experiences with prejudice, bullies calling boys "queer" and "homo," lead him to the closet. While his inner life pulls him toward men, he sees that society aggressively disapproves of gay men. Paul's struggles with his homosexuality are set beside descriptions of Bobby's struggles with his physical handicap. While Bobby deals with overt discrimination from the school system, the bullies who protect him call his brother "queer."

Style

Point of View

The story is told in first person by the author, Paul Monette. It is written primarily as an autobiography, but this book is not solely the story of Paul Monette's life. Paul writes about his family and childhood, but interjects insights from his adult life, allowing the reader to see not only Paul's view of life as a child, but also how Paul sees these memories in retrospect. As he shares in the start of the first chapter, Paul's purpose in writing this book is not only to share his autobiography with the world but also to provide gay men a kind of guide. Rather than allow his trials and tribulations to die with him, Paul feels that documenting his life may make the road out of the closet a little bit easier for those who find themselves struggling with the same issues.

Setting

The book begins around the year 1950 and continues through Paul's childhood, adolescence and adulthood, into the seventies. The story begins in Paul's hometown of Andover, Massachusetts and moves from his family's first home on High Street to their next home on Stratford Road. The setting moves as Paul's life progresses, to Paul's prep school in Andover, to his college years in Yale, through a trip to Cambridge and then back to Yale. After graduation, Paul takes a variety of teaching positions in the northeast and in Cambridge. The story is infused with references to political events of the time, including the Red Scare, Kennedy's assassination, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War and Nixon's presidency. Each of these references gives the story a historical significance by tying it to pivotal American events.

Language and Meaning

Paul tells his story in a colloquial, conversational tone that adds believability and frankness to his words, making them more real to the reader. The events he writes about are real to him and he makes them more so by relating them in vivid detail and using a variety of analogies to make his point. Paul uses his insight as an adult to infuse the tale of his life with his opinions on the events that happened to him as he sees them in retrospect. This not only provides the reader with a clearer picture of the events but also with a clearer perception of Paul himself: both as he grows up and as he is now, as an adult, having learned from all of his mistakes. The story is written as a first-person narrative. Paul gives us two points of view of the events that happen: his point of view at the time and his point of view in retrospect. The language itself is clear and yet painted with poetic descriptions, literary devices, original analogies and words that could only come from a poet.

Structure

The book is divided into eight chapters, each telling a section of Paul's life. The first chapter is primarily an introduction and begins with Paul's childhood in Andover, Massachusetts in his family's first home. At the end of the first chapter, the family moves and Paul's childhood progresses in Chapter 2 in a new home, ending with the summer before he moves on to a new school. Chapter 3 tells of his trials and tribulations at an all-boys prep school. Chapter 4 begins the summer before Paul leaves to attend Yale University and continues through his junior year. Chapter 5 begins with his trip to Cambridge and describes his senior year at Yale. Chapter 6 tells of his teaching experience at Sutton Hill and Chapter 7 describes his new teaching job at Canton. The final chapter tells of his life after Canton, his quest to find his true sexuality through a series of unsatisfying relationships and finally finding the man he had been searching for.



Quotes

"And every year they leaped further ahead, leaving me in the dust with all my doors closed and each with a new and better deadbolt. Until I was twenty-five, I was the only man I knew who had no story at all. I'd long since accepted the fact that nothing had ever happened to me and nothing ever would. That's how the closet feels, once you've made your nest in it and learned to call it home. Self-pity becomes your oxygen."

Chapter 1, page 1

"Our stories have died with us long enough. We mean to leave behind some map, some key, for the gay and lesbian people to follow-that they may not drown in the lies, in the hate that pools and foams like pus on the carcass of America."

Chapter 1, page 2

"We are creatures of the cruelties we witness."

Chapter 2, page 37

"My failure to achieve the school's idea of manhood proved to me I was no man at all. For there was no other kind."

Chapter 3, page 64

"I was already too far gone in being different, the hiding of which was turning into a full-time job."

Chapter 3, page 71

"...I took solace in beautiful things. At least I could feel for art what the laws of desire and my own self-hatred prevented me from feeling for another man."

Chapter 3, page 87

"And that is how I left the place-gay in every respect except my dick, thrown to the sharks by my classmates. But with one tiny victory on my side. For once in my life, pushed to the wall, no matter how much I was no one myself, I'd moved to take the bullet for a brother."

Chapter 3, page 100

"I realize college provides a classic ground for reinvention of self, but self had nothing to do with this. The very opposite: all I wanted to be was the two of them, burying every trace of Paul Monette."

Chapter 4, page 106



"In those years of wrongheaded crushes, I used to ache for someone to know me all the way through, till the terrified boy in the closet was finally laid to rest. I realize now that I can't entirely shake him. His sorrows and his wasted time still ambush me, the old scars bleeding again, sometimes even when I'm laughing in my lover's arms. Or at least that's how it's felt as I've written these pages."

Chapter 6, page 172

"That would be the theme, I thought: once I came out, the world was all windows. Suddenly night became day and I could love like everyone else."

Chapter 6, page 173

"If we learned to drive as badly as we learn to make love, the roads would be nothing but wrecks. The erotic can be a window into the deepest core of feeling, but more and more doesn't get you there. It's a patch of ground that has to be reclaimed over and over, as much of a struggle for a ten years' marriage as the fumbling grope of a second date. And with all that, you still have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find a prince."

Chapter 6, page 175

"All I had to do was not exist below the waist and the future was mine."

Chapter 6, page 208

"That much fate I believe in, the torturous journey that brings you to love, all the twists and near misses. Somehow it's all had a purpose, once you're finally real."

Chapter 8, page 277-278



Topics for Discussion

As a young child, Paul doesn't see his homosexual inclinations as wrong. However, after he witnesses the vicious bullying of his classmate, he changes his mind. How does this incident change Paul's life and his point of view about being gay and coming out?

Throughout the book, Paul continues to bring up the incident when his mom walks in on him playing naked with Kite. How does the incident and its aftermath affect Paul and his relationship with his mom? How do his feelings afterwards arise later on in his life?

What historical events occur throughout the story and give reference to the time period in which it took place?

Describe the evolution of Paul's relationship with his parents. How does his opinion of them change as he reaches adulthood from how he sees them as he grows up?

As an adult, Paul's therapist urges him to try being straight, which leads him to a series of relationships with women. Afterwards, although he remains gay, he says he doesn't consider his time with women a waste. Why? How did these relationships affect him?

How does Bobby's handicap affect Paul's life and his relationship with him? How does it change as they mature? How does Paul's view of his brother change as they grow up?

What role does Paul's writing play in his life?

How does Paul's invitation to join Elihu affect his years at Yale?

Throughout school, Paul is petrified of people discovering that he is gay. To compensate, he plays different roles. Describe these roles, from grade school through college. How is Paul viewed by his classmates and friends?

Paul has many relationships throughout his life-some are romantic, some are purely sexual, some are simply friendly and some involve unrequited feelings. Which of his relationships affects him the most? How and why?

Would Paul's story have been different if it had taken place in a different time period (earlier or later)? If so, how and why?