

Bleeding Edge Study Guide

Bleeding Edge by Thomas Pynchon

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Plot Summary

“Bleeding Edge” is an alternative historical fiction mystery novel by Thomas Pynchon which follows the efforts of private fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow to look into the secretive computer security company hashslingrz before the terrorist attacks of September 11. Maxine, a divorcee and mother of two, is first alerted to hashslingrz by her old friend Reg Despard, a documentary filmmaker. Reg reveals he has been hired by hashslingrz to make a documentary on the company, but they have withheld tremendous amounts of information on even basic financial transactions from him.

Maxine delves into studying hashslingrz and its geek-turned-CEO, Gabriel Ice. Gabriel Ice and his company are known for aggressively recruiting new talent, and are believed to have dealings with the federal government as well. As Maxine studies the basic records of the companies, she notices serious discrepancies and issues, such as payments being made to other companies that no longer exist. Likewise, one of Maxine’s closest friends, Vyrva, reports her husband’s company and Deep Web program “DeepArcher” is being courted by Ice and hashslingrz. As Maxine continues her investigation, she comes into contact with March Kelleher, mother of Gabriel’s wife, Tallis. March hates her son-in-law, and suspects that Gabriel is up to no good.

Maxine’s investigations also bring her into contact with Nicholas Windust, a federal government operative whose work has also brought him into contact with hashslingrz. He and Maxine have long had a pseudo-relationship based on personal antagonism and casual sex. Maxine later comes into contact with Lester Traipse, CEO of a business bought out by Ice and hashslingrz. Lester worries his life is in danger, and reveals that Gabriel Ice is personally always anxious and angry. A short time later, Lester turns up dead. A scent identified as 9:30 Club cologne is discovered at the scene of the crime.

Reg soon reveals to Maxine that he has accidentally stumbled into the wrong room at hashslingrz, where a group of Arabs is working on a strange device. He also has film delivered to Maxine which shows a Stinger missile crew of white men on the rooftop of a building doing a practice run targeting a Boeing 767. Maxine sends the tape along to March who instantly contends that President Bush is up to something big and is working with hashslingrz to do it. Maxine isn’t totally convinced, but is worried about the direction the investigation is now heading.

Maxine comes to learn that 9:30 Club cologne stopped being produced years ago, and that Nicholas Windust wears it. She realizes Nicholas must have had a hand in Lester’s death somehow. As Maxine continues to dig into not only hashslingrz but the murder of Lester, she is warned to stay away. Maxine is undeterred. She contacts a Russian friend of March’s named Igor, who works with two hacker associates named Misha and Grisha. She asks them to identify the weapons in Reg’s videos. They confirm the missile launchers being used are Stingers, and the unknown device in the room of Arabs is a Vircator, which launches an electromagnetic pulse and disrupts and destroys electronic devices. March publishes the video on her blog.



When the terrorist attacks on September 11 happen, Maxine is stunned. March immediately blames the American government, arguing that it is clear that the government knew the attacks were coming and wanted to ensure that they would happen no matter what so that President Bush could seize unlimited power and become a dictator. Maxine does not believe this, though evidence seems to be to the contrary. Maxine arranges to meet with Nicholas Windust once more, only to discover he has been killed. She is warned once again to back off.

As Maxine learns from the Russians, Gabriel Ice is indeed working for the federal government, but that neither are working with the terrorists. Lester was killed because he was diverting funds to terrorist groups in the Middle East. However, other mysteries still remain – such as the true purpose Ice has in working with the government, who the men in the Stinger missile crew were, and why Nicholas was killed. As the novel ends, Maxine does her best to return to normalcy by allowing her kids to walk to school alone for the first time.



Chapters 1 – 9

Summary

Chapter 1 – It is Spring 2001 in New York. Divorcee and private fraud-investigating agent Maxine Tarnow walks her two sons, Ziggy and Otis, to school even though they are old enough to do it themselves because she enjoys it. Out front, she sees Vyrva McElmo, who with her husband Jason, are California transplants. Maxine heads to her agency, Tail ‘Em and Nail ‘Em on Columbus Street, where agent Daytona Lorrain argues with her husband on the phone about divorce papers. Maxine studies an inventory fraud report on Dwayne Z. “Uncle Dizzy” Cubitts, a TV gizmo salesperson, until a man named Reg arrives at the agency.

Chapter 2 – Maxine has not seen Reg Despard in a few years. They first met on a cruise. Reg is a film bootlegger-turned documentary filmmaker who has been working a documentary for an computer security company called “hashslingrz” that has severely restricted his access to simple things like daybooks, ledgers, and tax sheets. The company is headed up by CEO Gabriel Ice, a young and wealthy man. Reg suspects something sinister is going on.

Chapter 3 – Maxine converses with her best friend since high school, now a professor of pop culture, Heidi Czornak. Back in the day, the girls liked to use binoculars to watch people through the windows of their buildings.

Chapter 4 – Maxine has an appointment with her emotherapist, Shawn, who has been angrily following news of Islamic thugs destroying ancient Buddhist statues in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Ziggy, Otis, and Fiona (daughter of Jason and Vyrva) test out a prototype for a video game her father’s company is designing. Maxine tries out the game, in which the player must assassinate designated characters. Vyrva arrives to pick up Fiona. She explains the video game is a side project to their main program, DeepArcher, a play-on words for “Departure”, a Deep Web guide. Vyrva reveals they have received an offer for DeepArcher from Gabriel Ice. With the dotcom crash, security companies – like hashslingrz – are making out as nervous dotcom companies buy the services of security companies. After she leaves, Ziggy says Vyrva is crazy because she collects Beanie Babies, believing they’ll be worth something someday.

Chapter 5 – Maxine begins researching hashslingrz, realizing there are discrepancies in the books, and wondering what Reg has gotten himself, and Maxine, into. Payments, for example, are being made to ghost companies. She decides to investigate one such company, hwgaagwgh.com, standing for “Hey, We’ve Got Awesome and Hip Web Graphix, Here”. There, she finds a young woman named Driscoll Padgett in the abandoned offices using the internet. They get drinks at a nearby bar. Driscoll, a freelance web designer, explains she did some temp work for hwgaagwgh.com back in the day, but that the people didn’t seem very passionate about their work. She reveals that she also knows of Gabriel Ice, and that Ice’s company trawls for hackers with virtual



companies, catches them hacking, and blackmails them for work. Maxine notices two men watching them. When Maxine leaves, she knows the men are following her, and probably know where she lives.

Chapter 6 – After school, Ziggy reveals there was a guest speaker named March Kelleher, mother of Tallis, the wife of Gabriel Ice. Maxine first met March during a protest against high rent prices. Reg meets with Maxine, revealing his IT investigator, Eric Outfield, has been looking into hashslingerz and has discovered the company has a number of Altman-Zs, workups of companies predicted to go broke. Ice is doing everything he can to keep these and other pieces of information encrypted and protected. Maxine tells Reg to caution Eric his ability to hack into hashslingerz might be part of their recruitment process. Maxine goes on to investigate investors in hwgaagwgh.com, such as venture capitalist group Streetlight People and their CEO, Rockwell “Rocky” Slagiatt. Rocky reveals Ice uses companies about to fail to move around funds. Rocky further reveals that the original investor in hashslingerz is unknown.

Chapter 7 – Jason and his business partner, Lucas, show Maxine the beta of their program DeepArcher. It resembles a video game, but functions like a search engine. It is “bleeding-edge technology”, Lucas explains, something with no proven use and high risk. DeepArcher, they explain further, erases a person’s movements immediately and permanently through self-recoding.

Chapter 8 – Maxine and Reg meet for lunch. Reg explains he is being followed. He also reveals Eric has discovered the hiding of transaction history by way of a modified Furby at hashslingerz. The transactions are with a company in Dubai, and are written in Arabic Leet. Reg believes that something more than fraud may be going on, and that it must be stopped.

Chapter 9 – Maxine meets with Axel Quigley, who oversees a network of whistleblowers, and who first met Maxine at a Disgruntled Employee Workshop meeting, headed by Professor Lavoof. Lavoof has developed Disgruntlement Theory, and has developed DESPAIR: the Disgruntled Employee Simulation Program for Audit Information and Review. Axel explains that someone at the restaurant Muffins and Unicorns has been using phantomware to falsify cash register receipts, a sales suppression device. It is believed Phipps “Vip” Epperdew, a member of management. Maxine meets up with Reg late that night. Reg explains he has accidentally walked into what he thought was a bathroom at hashlgrz, only to discover the room to be a lab full of Arabs who stop speaking when he entered. Reg goes on to explain that Ice demanded any film of the lab Reg may have gotten, but that he lied and said he had no such footage. The next day, Maxine’s ex-husband Horst shows up unexpectedly to visit with his sons. Maxine kindly allows the visit.

Analysis

“Bleeding Edge” is an alternative historical fiction mystery novel by Thomas Pynchon which follows the efforts of private fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow to look into the



secretive computer security company hashslingrz before the terrorist attacks of September 11. When the novel begins, Maxine is dealing with low-level fraud cases as a private investigator while trying to balance being a single mom. Maxine's desire to make it on her own without support from her ex-husband is an example of courage on Maxine's part, especially given the high cost of living in New York. Courage will become a major and important theme through the course of the novel.

Maxine's friend, Reg, also exhibits tremendous courage in coming to Maxine with unnerving information about hashslingrz. The company is massive, wealthy, and very powerful, and even though they have hired Reg to do a documentary on the company, have refused to allow him unlimited access to the company. This strikes Reg as mysterious, and herein begins the central mystery that will propel the entire plot – the mystery of what hashslingrz is hiding, and what they are truly up to. A series of questions and mysteries spill out from this central mystery. First, why would a company hire someone to do a documentary on the company, and then severely limit access? Second, as Maxine gets into the financial records of the company, she wonders why payments are being made to companies that no longer exist.

Perhaps the most unnerving mystery in the novel so far is Reg's decision to walk into a room at hashslingrz labeled "bathroom". There, Reg finds a room full of Arabs working on an unknown device. Reg learns through his own investigator, Eric, that many transactions relating to hashslingrz are being done in Arabic Leet. This startles Reg – especially when Gabriel Ice demands any footage Reg may have recorded of the incident. Reg courageously tells Gabriel no such footage has been recorded, but it is likely that Gabriel simply does not believe Reg.

This courage is notable since hashslingrz seems to be reaching out wherever it can to gain more power unto itself. Maxine is stunned to learn that Vyrva's husband's company and program, DeepArcher, is being solicited by hashslingrz. DeepArcher's ability to allow users to crack into secure computer networks and systems and retrieve encrypted and highly protected information makes it an enticing prospect for hashslingrz.

Additionally, the theme of complex characters also becomes apparent very early on in the novel. It is clear to the reader that no one so far appears to be wholly good or without fault, though it does appear as if others – such as Gabriel Ice – seem to be sinister. Maxine's efforts at fraud investigation are complicated and given depth by her utilitarian sense of self. She is willing to work with less-than-reputable people in order to get the job done. Likewise, the reader should consider a character like Reg, a bootleg movie man-turned-legitimate documentarian.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Reg want Maxine to take on an investigation of hashslingrz? What evidence does he provide that she needs to do so? Why does Maxine agree to begin an investigation?



Discussion Question 2

What mysteries arise in conjunction with Maxine's investigation into hashslingrz so far in the novel? What theories do Maxine, Reg, or any other characters develop about these mysteries? What evidence do they have to support their conclusions?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Gabriel Ice and hashslingrz seem to be so interested in DeepArcher? Why has DeepArcher refused to sell itself to hashslingrz?

Vocabulary

recapitulation, executive, kvell, nonchalant, fatality, sublegal, brusque, solemn, evasive, embezzlers, plotzng, alexithymic, erogenous, literalism, Benford's Law, nimbus, ingénue, idyll, discombobulation, truculent, serendipities, nascent



Chapters 10 – 18

Summary

Chapter 10 – Ernie and Elaine, Maxine’s parents, attend a school show with her and Horst in which the students all act. Horst leaves from the school to attend to business. Meanwhile, Nicholas Windust, Special Case Officer, asks Maxine to get in touch with him. Nicholas reveals the security community has become nervous about software called Promis, meant to share data among district courts but leaves a back door open to release the information. The person to whom this information is being released is suspected of being an Israeli. Nicholas also reveals he and the Feds are interested in Maxine’s investigation into hashslingrz, and want information. Maxine doesn’t want to help. She dislikes Nicholas’s conservatism and his secret work in other countries in the past. A flash drive is later given to Maxine by a runner named Marvin.

Chapter 11 – Maxine meets up with March at the old Piraeus Diner. March has asked Maxine to look into her son-in-law, Gabriel Ice. Maxine explains she has uncovered a lot of government contracts. March encourages Maxine to try to learn more about Gabriel through Tallis.

Chapter 12 – Maxine meets up with Tallis. Tallis reveals she met Gabriel in college, and that she and her mother hate one another. She explains that hashslingrz uses D. S. Mills on Pearl Street for auditing. Tallis also reveals she has concerns about her husband and the company, but refuses to take action on her suspicions until she has real evidence to do so. She refuses Maxine’s suggestion to carry out an audit. Maxine relates all this to March as March picks up her granddaughter, Kennedy, from school. That evening, Marvin delivers a video cassette labeled “Scream, Blacula, Scream”.

Chapter 13 – Now the summer, Ziggy and Otis are headed off with Horst to visit relatives in the West. Maxine takes a call from Gabriel Ice, who wants to know why his mother-in-law blasts his company on a daily basis on her weblog. Gabriel goes on to tell Maxine to stay away from his wife. A man named Igor Dashkov visits Maxine with questions about investing in Madoff Securities. Maxine cautions Igor that it looks like Madoff Securities is a Ponzi scheme. Reg comes to see Maxine, revealing he has been fired from the firm, had his apartment broken into and trashed, has had his un-hidden film stolen, and has followed one of the lab Arabs.

Chapter 14 – Among the things Maxine finds disturbing about Eric’s discovered records is that hashslingrz is hiding legitimate payments for fiber bandwidth to Darklinear Solutions. Maxine goes to visit Darklinear. She sees Tallis emerge from the business, where she gets into a Lincoln car with an unidentified man. Maxine is later invited by Rocky and his wife to a soiree. She learns that anti-zapper software is being developed to phantomware. She speaks with Lester Traipse, who formerly worked for hwgaagwgh.com and is now doing HTML programming for Ice. Lester says Gabriel Ice is anxious and angry.



Chapter 15 – Maxine finds Igor Dashkov and March in conversation in Igor’s car. Igor thanks Maxine for her tip on Madoff Securities. He and his friends have put together a massive cash payment of gratitude for her. March’s ex-husband, Sid, is involved in black market deliveries by boat. March brings Maxine to speak with Sid. Sid reveals that the Gabriel Ice of the present day is no longer the geeky, friendly Gabriel Ice of college.

Chapter 16 – Maxine arranges to meet up with Lester. Lester’s own business was bought up by hashslingrz in the past. Maxine knows Lester wants to tell her something else, but Lester worries his life is in danger and so does not tell her. Maxine watches the video tape Marvin gave her. It is an amateur porn film starring a young man named Bruno, a young woman named Shae, and Vip Epperdrew. Vip admits to not being too happy. The videotape also includes brief shots of road signs. Maxine wonders who is filming the encounter. She recognizes the accent as being French-Canadian, specifically Quebequois. She reaches out to one of her contacts in Quebec, Felix Boingueaux, and secures contact information for Vip. She then heads out to the Eastern End of Long Island.

Chapter 17 – Maxine uses the road signs from the video tape to find Junior’s Ooh-La-Lounge where she inquires about Shae and Bruno. There, a contractor named Randy explains that Bruno and Shae’s place has burned to the ground. Randy thinks Gabriel Ice is somehow responsible, because nobody seems to like Gabriel Ice out on the end of the Island. Randy brings Maxine out to Gabriel’s summer house, where numerous other contractors are working on the home. Randy seeks to steal expensive wine. Maxine explores the house, coming to a secret passage. It leads to more secret passages. Knowing that she could be discovered, Maxine decides to leave when she encounters what seems to be another person, though Maxine doesn’t stick around to find out.

Chapter 18 – The news reports Lester Traipse as being dead, apparently a suicide though police are not ruling out murder yet. Maxine is stunned, and realizes how dangerous things are fast becoming. Yet that night, Maxine is sure she sees Lester and a blonde girl go into the subway at Broadway and 79th. She meets up with a man named Conkling, who has an incredibly astute sense of smell, and works as a private investigator in this way. He has detected traces of 9:30 cologne, last sold in the 1980s from the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C.

Analysis

As the novel continues, the mysteries continue to deepen. Hashslingrz, which is suspected of having government ties due to the strikingly large number of government contracts it has, is apparently also being investigated by the government itself. Nicholas Windust reveals as much to Maxine. Why the government would be investigating a company it is already working with is disturbing to Maxine. The government presumably trusted hashslingrz enough to begin working with the company, but now either for routine security or new concern, is investigating its own partner. At the same time, Windust also reveals another mystery – that of Israeli espionage.



Likewise, not only does Gabriel's mother-in-law have concerns about the company, but Gabriel's own wife has concerns about the company as well. What is interesting about Tallis is that she refuses to vocalize these concerns. What those concerns are, and why she refuses to speak about them is a mystery. It is possible that this may have to do with Gabriel's personality, which Lester describes as anxious and angry. Lester himself deepens the mystery as he explains that he actually fears for his life after being involved at hashslingrz.

The mysteries surrounding hashslingrz only deepen as the chapters continue. The person that Maxine seems to encounter down in the depths of Ice's Montauk Point house is not only startling, but chilling because the identity of the person is never revealed. It adds an almost surreal nature to the novel. Likewise, the reader should note that Maxine's entering of Ice's house and going into the underground hidden levels, only to find an even more confusing network of tunnels and rooms is metaphorically symbolic for Maxine diving beneath the surface of hashslingrz and becoming more and more lost with each and every clue and turn. The unknown person encountered in the tunnels is metaphorically symbolic of Gabriel Ice, who Maxine can't seem to put a finger on.

Other mysteries abound. It is baffling to Maxine, Reg, and Eric why hashslingrz would be hiding legitimate payments to a company for fiber for bandwidth to a legitimate company like Darklinear Solutions. Things become utterly and decidedly dangerous when Lester turns up dead in his apartment. (The reader should also note the smell of 9:30 Cologne found at Lester's apartment. This will have tremendous significance and bearing on the novel in later chapters.) This makes Maxine realize that whatever she is involved in now is a threat to her life. Yet, she demonstrates true courage by refusing to back down.

Maxine's desire to bring justice to whatever situation is unfolding is a demonstration of her moral goals, but her unorthodox means of attaining them. Here, the theme of complex characterization continues as Maxine is willing to associate with Russian mafia and criminal figures. This is also true of Maxine willing to associate with, and speak with, Sid. Sid reveals that Gabriel Ice, who has assumed an abjectly sinister nature by this point in the novel, was once a warm, friendly, and geeky college kid.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Maxine decide to sneak into Ice's Montauk Point house? What does she find there? How does this relate to her investigation into hashslingrz?

Discussion Question 2

What leads Maxine to realize that the investigation into hashslingrz is not just dangerous, but absolutely deadly? Why does she determine to continue her investigation?



Discussion Question 3

What does Lester have to say about Ice's personality? Do you believe this affects his concern for his life, and Tallis's refusal to confront her husband about any suspected wrongdoing? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

inertia, sonorous, belatedly, dilapidated, oedipal, labyrinthine, ponderous, reconfigured, staccato, amiable, reluctant, nimbus, chypre



Chapters 19 – 29

Summary

Chapter 19 – Maxine and Heidi meet up. Heidi puts Maxine in touch with her current fling, a detective named Carmine Nozzoli. Carmine allows Maxine access to the federal crime database to do research on Tallis and Darklinear. There, she finds a private number for Darklinear. Maxine places a call to Darklinear, pretending to be from hashslngorz on behalf of Mrs. Ice. The man who answers refuses to talk, saying that hashslngorz does not have that particular number. Maxine begins to wonder if Tallis is merely a front for Gabriel.

Chapter 20 – Maxine meets up with Stu Gotz, owner and operator of Joie de Beavre, a strip joint frequented by Eric Outfield. She dresses up like a stripper and gets Eric to bring her back to Manhattan. Eric has a foot fetish, which Maxine exploits in exchange for information on the Deep Web. She seeks to hire Eric, and says Reg will vouch for her.

Chapter 21 – Maxine and Heidi go to see Driscoll perform with a nerdcore band called Pringle Chip Equation. They run into Conkling Speedwell, who along with his invention the Naser, is working with the police to do a sting operation. Conkling mentions that he is curious about the kind of cologne that Hitler wore, and believes it to be 4711. Maxine learns from Axel that Vip, arrested and released, has jumped bail and fled the jurisdiction.

Chapter 22 – Eric calls Maxine at three in the morning, saying he hasn't been able to get in touch with Reg for a week. Eric lets Maxine know he still has all the passwords for hashslngorz, and is willing to walk her through getting into the company's files. As they descend into the Deep Web, Maxine is exposed to various things, such as a conspiracy theory about the government kidnapping children to brainwash them and turn them into agents who can time travel.

Chapter 23 – Avram and Brooke Deschler, the brother and sister-in-law of Maxine, return from a trip to Israel. Avram explains to Maxine that he has been hired by hashslngorz, while Maxine reveals the federal government has an interest in Avram through Windust. Maxine also questions Avram about Promis and data transmission chips. Avram confirms that Promis has been changed and customized so much it is unrecognizable, and that transmission chips are made by the company Elbit. Maxine then meets up with Nicholas Windust. Windust contends that Avram may be a Mossad sleeper, a spy for Israel, and is interested to know that Avram has been hired by hashslngorz. Maxine goes to meet with Conkling. Conkling can smell 9:30 cologne on Maxine from Windust. Maxine considers the idea that Windust was either involved in Lester's death, or was there at the time.



Chapter 24 – Maxine travels to Hell’s Kitchen where she sleeps with Nicholas Windust. She reads through a folder that he gives her that evening. It includes attempts made to follow money at hashslingrz. Speaking on the phone with Nicholas, she learns that Gabriel Ice is Jewish, that the feds know where the money is going, but that everything has to be tied together and understood in context. Nicholas needs Maxine to do this. He notes that Maxine’s friends, Misha and Grisha, who work for Igor, are graduates of the Civil Hackers’ School in Moscow. The school, begun by the KGB, still holds destroying America as its main mission. Nicholas warns Maxine about the company she keeps.

Chapter 25 – Maxine receives a DVD from Reg, which when played, shows men on West Side rooftops with Stinger missiles and one man with a rifle aimed at the Stinger crew practicing honing in on a Boeing 767. Maxine is disturbed by the video, so she brings it to March. March believes the men might be private military contractors hired by President Bush and the Republicans for an unknown reason. Maxine and March determine the building on which the men are operating is the Deseret. Maxine and March meet with Igor about the video. Igor explains that Stingers are not exactly rare, especially with so many Chinese knock-offs in existence. Igor asks to watch the video.

Chapter 26 – Maxine runs into Randy who explains he was fired from working on Ice’s house for wine theft. Randy explains all sorts of weird things have been happening out at Ice’s Montauk house - from paranormal TV show crews arriving to strange lights to police pulling overtime in the area. Maxine meets with Chandler Platt, a financial fixer, about the DVD. Through his many connections, Chandler reveals that “they” already know “it” is going to happen, and that “they” are not going to do anything about “it”. This disturbs Maxine deeply.

Chapter 27 – Ziggy and Otis return home from vacation with their father. Maxine is thrilled to see them. The next morning, Maxine does back-to-school shopping. Driscoll delivers an invitation to Maxine for a Gabriel Ice-hosted party, the First Annual Grand Rentree Ball and Geeks’ Cotillion on Saturday, September 8, 2001 for Tworkeffx.com, a recent acquirement of Ice. Maxine is stunned because no one has thought to investigate this account.

Chapter 28 – Maxine attends the party with Horst. She runs into Eric, who explains Felix is looking for her, is paranoid, and has been partying nonstop. They find Felix at the party. As they begin to talk, they see Gabriel Ice a short distance away, talking to a group of admirers.

Chapter 29 – Horst points out to Maxine on Sunday that trading volume is up for American Airlines and United Airlines. On Monday night, Myra calls Maxine to reveal that a random-number source her husband and his partner have been hacking into has suddenly gone nonrandom. The next morning, the World Trade Center is struck by planes. March believes it is a pretext for Bush to seize more power, but Maxine isn’t so sure Bush is responsible because everyone has been caught by surprise. She and March then realize they must have been “snookered” by Reg’s DVD. March uses her blog to blame Bush and call the 9/11 attacks “staged”. March, Heidi, and Maxine meet for lunch a week later. March thinks Bush wants to be dictator for life. Heidi agrees.



Maxine is still doubtful. March argues the Stinger crews were insurance to ensure the planes went down one way or another. Horst later reveals that in addition to the stocks on planes, there was increased volume on Morgan Stanley, Merrill Lynch, and other companies – all tenants of the World Trade Center. Brooke, however, rejects the idea that America had anything to do with the attacks.

Analysis

The complexity of characterization continues thematically in this section of the novel. Maxine is willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, including going out of her way to meet with Eric by way of a strip club. Likewise, despite her hatred of Windust's conservatism and his work in South American countries years before, Maxine is sexually attracted to him and sleeps with him. She has slept with him before, and knows she will sleep with him again. Nicholas Windust, likewise, appears to be willing to do whatever is necessary for his country to achieve a moral end, even if the ways he goes about his work are immoral. Married, Nicholas has no compunction about sleeping with Maxine and using her to glean information about Ice and hashslingrz.

Interestingly enough, it is Nicholas himself who warns Maxine about the company she is keeping with the Russians. Misha and Grisha, graduates of Russian hacking school, have vowed to destroy America. For Maxine, however, working with the enemy of an enemy is a way to get the job done, while for Nicholas, this is a bridge too far. Why this should matter years after the Cold War ended is unknown to Maxine, but it forms another mystery in the novel. Equally disconcerting to Maxine is the evidence, by way of smell, that Nicholas Windust was present at Lester's killing. Windust's role in things is another mystery. The knowledge that Windust works for the government, as does hashslingrz, makes it appear as if Lester truly knew too much – but the truth of this is yet unknown.

The events of September 11 also become central to the novel at this point. They bring to light the themes of mystery, truth, and potential explanations. The events, information, and situations that Maxine encounters in the days leading up to 9/11 are a myriad of mysteries. The heavy volume of airline stock dumping just before the terrorist attacks, in addition to Platt's assertions that "they" know "it" is coming and will not do anything about it, are chilling for Maxine. Perhaps most chilling of all is the DVD showing a Stinger crew doing a dry run training sights on a Boeing 767. The men are all white, and do not appear to be foreign.

Only when the attacks of 9/11 hit do things at least appear to add up. Here, the theme of truth emerges as central to the novel. Cutting through the mysteries, rumors, and conspiracies for the truth itself becomes crucial to Maxine and her investigation not only in hashslingrz, but now peripherally, 9/11. All evidence seems to suggest government involvement, but Maxine is doubtful. She is especially doubtful of March's assertion that the attacks are staged by Bush in order to assume total power and make himself dictator for life. However, the evidence surrounding 9/11 is troubling at best. Maxine's



sister roundly rejects the idea that the United States had anything to do with the attacks at all.

However, any attempts at discerning the truth are impossible at this point, making potential explanations all the more plausible. The two chief explanations for 9/11 are noted by March in that the attacks were stage, or by Brooke, that the government had nothing to do with 9/11 at all. This becomes confusing to the reader as pre-attack sell-offs and the DVD video seem to conflict with the evidence that the government's response to the attack is one of surprise, meaning that the government had nothing to do with it. Equally confusing is the notion that both Maxine and March have been "snookered" by the video – but how they have been "snookered" is not actually explained. It may be potentially explained that the video was designed to throw Maxine and March off the trail of the terrorists, or off the trail of the government by placing blame elsewhere.

Discussion Question 1

Why does March believe Bush is involved in 9/11? Why does Brooke believe Bush had nothing to do with 9/11? Why is Maxine unconvinced of March's position?

Discussion Question 2

What mysteries surrounding 9/11 are tied into Maxine's investigation into hashslingrz? What does this lead Maxine to conclude based on what she knows so far?

Discussion Question 3

Although Windust is willing to do almost anything to serve his country, he refuses to have anything to do with the Russians and cautions Maxine about the company she is keeping. Why? Why does Maxine have no compunctions about who she is working with?

Vocabulary

lewdly, quizzically, implacable, jurisdiction, indolic, caustic, sporadically, redemption, plaintively, haphazardly, credulity, perennially, imperative, solicitous



Chapters 30 – 36

Summary

Chapter 30 – Maxine learns the internet is alive with conspiracy theories about the September 11 terrorist attacks. Igor reveals that there is a hidden track on the DVD, in which Reg walks in on the room full of Arabs. They are working on a Vircator, a virtual-cathode-oscillator, an electromagnetic pulse that disables electronics. Maxine and Igor both worry it has something to do with 9/11. Driscoll shows up at Maxine's apartment that night. Driscoll has shaved her head, explaining it is easier to manage a wig than real hair. Eric arrives a short time later. Both spend the night, having been evicted. Sometime later, Heidi reveals her detective boyfriend has broken up with her because she hasn't been respectful enough about 9/11. Heidi comments that 9/11 has infantilized America, causing adults to pretend to be teenaged versions of themselves.

Chapter 31 – Maxine goes to see Shawn about seeing people she thinks have died in the streets. Shawn says New York is full of too many faces, and that people miss them horribly so they see them in others. Shawn believes America has brought the attacks on itself, has lived on borrowed time and lived too well at the expense of too many others. Eric and Driscoll move in permanently to Maxine's house, and begin seeing one another. Eric has been unable to sleep, unable to let it go that hashslingrz has funneled money to Dubai. Eric wonders if Gabriel helped to fund the attacks, and is a traitor to his country. Eric reveals he has been preparing to take down Ice's system. Maxine worries about this, and about Eric's safety.

Chapter 32 – Reg calls Maxine. He is now living in Seattle, temping at Microsoft. Reg, like March and Eric, believes the Stinger crew and the Arabs in the secret room are all in on September 11 together. Reg gives his permission for the video to be posted on March's blog. Maxine later brings a copy of Nicholas Windust's file for Rocky to see how his money is being used at hashslingrz. Rocky's wife, Cornelia, puts her cousin Lloyd, a CIA operative, to look into everything.

Chapter 33 - Maxine learns that DeepArcher has been behaving strangely, and has been unrecognizable since 9/11 as many new users have suddenly tapped into the system. Meanwhile, Ice has stepped up pressure to purchase DeepArcher. Vyrva confesses she has been having an affair with Gabriel Ice in hopes it would help her husband.

Chapter 34 – Otis and Ziggy attend a Halloween party thrown by a friend at the Deseret. It gives Maxine an excuse to get into the building to check up on her kids. Misha and Grisha are also present, and explain they have been able to hack into DeepArcher. They instruct Maxine to call Igor, which Maxine does. Igor reveals that Lester knew too much, and confirms that Ice was actually funneling money to anti-terrorists, not the terrorists. Igor also reveals that Lester told him that DeepArcher was his "last chance".



Maxine meets up with Windust. Windust, deeply embedded in the government, scoffs at the idea that the government had a hand in 9/11. He says that no one is that good.

Chapter 35 – Around Thanksgiving, Avi brings word of a job offer from Gabriel Ice for Maxine. Ice believes he is being ripped off from someone in his own company, says Avi. Maxine counters that Ice himself is embezzling. Avi counters that someone has been stalking the company, hacking into the system, and social-engineering them at bars. Driscoll and Eric move out of Maxine's apartment for the East Side. Maxine soon after learns that March has posted the video, all of Windust's assets have been frozen, and Maxine comes to believe that Windust must have been in charge of security for the rooftop operation. Maxine meets him in Chinatown to give him enough cash to take a bus to D.C. Lloyd later calls Maxine to tell her he can no longer investigate Windust, that he has been ordered off the trail, and that Windust has been the subject of several memos. Another voice picks up an extension and tells Maxine that Windust doesn't know everything, and that Maxine should be concerned for her personal safety.

Chapter 36 – The holidays come on. Maxine is unable to get in touch with March. March has come to the attention of law enforcement, according to her blog, and is now sleeping somewhere new each night. Windust has also seemingly disappeared. Vyrva reveals that Ice has broken up with her, which makes Vyrva happy. Maxine establishes contact with Windust on DeepArcher. He explains he has been cut loose, and all of his family and friends are being monitored. He seeks a meeting in person with Maxine.

Analysis

Truth and potential explanations for 9/11 continue to abound in the weeks and months after the terrorist attacks. Most people correctly hold the position that the United States had nothing to do with the attacks – information passed along to Maxine by Windust. Windust has intimate and deep knowledge of government activities, so if anyone would truly know whether or not the United States was responsible, it would be him. Windust reveals the government truly had nothing to do with 9/11. Whether or not hashslingrz and Gabriel Ice did on their own, however, is another story. This is also to be taken with Platt's assertion that "they" knew "it" was coming.

Mysteriously, however, Windust is cut loose from the government and whatever function he has been serving. Why is a mystery not only to Maxine, but to Windust as well. Windust, showing courage, simply accepts things as they are. This evidence seems to contradict Windust's statement that the government had nothing to do with 9/11. Maxine receives word from a mysterious voice that Windust doesn't know everything, and that Maxine should be concerned with her own safety. It is the first time Maxine has received a direct, personal threat to her wellbeing. However, Maxine learns that Gabriel Ice has been funneling money to anti-terrorists, not the terrorists as has been suspected.

Truth is utterly obfuscated here, as evidence both for and against government and hashslingrz involvement in 9/11 comes to light. Maxine doesn't know what to truly believe, but is inclined to trust Windust because Windust has never lied to her about



anything, and because Windust would have at least gotten some hint of government involvement if that truly was the case. Nevertheless, this in and of itself presents yet another mystery.

Lloyd's contention that Windust has been the subject of several memos and has been ordered off the case relating to hashslingrz is deeply troubling to Maxine. However, this in turn is countered by the idea that Windust – who has personally had a hand in toppling governments and staging such attacks – says the 9/11 attack is of such a complex level that not even the United States is that good. Windust would know because of his experience. The discerning reader can see that the best explanation for Windust being cut out of the loop is his association with Maxine and the company she keeps – Windust's own warning to Maxine about the company she keeps being ignored by Windust himself. Windust must have also been blamed for failing to suppress the Stinger video, with the idea that perhaps Windust himself has gone rogue. Things do not look good for Windust.

Discussion Question 1

Why is March so difficult to get in touch with? Do you believe that March is simply paranoid, or does she have real reason to fear for her safety?

Discussion Question 2

What further evidence in this section of the novel points to government involvement and non-involvement in 9/11? Where does Maxine come down on the evidence at this point? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What potential explanations could there be for Windust being cut loose? How does Windust handle what has happened to him? Why do you believe this is?

Vocabulary

righteous, anarchism, self-resonant, folklore, dismal, abjectly, cantilevered, reverberated, atrocities, reverberates, lachrymosity, melismas



Chapters 37 – 41

Summary

Chapter 37 – Maxine goes to meet Nick Windust in his Hell’s Kitchen safehouse apartment, but discovers he has been killed. He has no ID, wallet, phone, or anything personal on him. The phone rings and goes to the answering machine. A voice tells Maxine “they” know she is there, that it is a school night, and that she’ll never know when her kids might need her. Maxine hopes it isn’t an actual promise or threat, but that she is merely being warned. At home, Horst realizes something has deeply troubled Maxine. Maxine tells him nothing is wrong. Maxine has a conversation with her father, where her father relates the internet was originally a military network designed to ensure survival and communication in the event of nuclear war. Although opened up to civilians, Maxine’s father contends the internet is still about control, about keeping tabs on people. Cell phones are another such way this occurs. Maxine’s father says she is one of the rare people who cares too much. Maxine ultimately decides to reunite with Horst.

Chapter 38 – Maxine visits Shawn for the last time. He tells her to take on the Wisdom of “it is what it is”. Maxine tries to accept the world the way that it is, but simply can’t do it. She does her best to return to normalcy, but constantly worries about her children. DeepArcher has gone open source, and Maxine spends much of her time prowling through it. Eric tells Maxine that the internet is going to be destroyed because there is too much freedom in it, that those like hashslingrz who are calling for internet freedom are surrendering it to the government. Eric contends only good hackers can stop this. Eric reveals he and Driscoll have since broken up. Marvin arrives later with a new DVD for Maxine. The video is of Eric and Reg driving in the mountains. Their truck is a rolling server, equipped with computer and internet equipment.

Chapter 39 – Maxine receives an envelope full of cash, a repayment from Windust’s wife, delivered by a Guatemalan woman named Xiomara. Windust’s wife was also his espionage partner. Xiomara was a woman he saved, escaping Huehuetenango with him when the country’s regime was toppled and chaos broke out instead of order.

Chapter 40 – March and Maxine finally meet up at a fitness club. March is worried about Tallis. Tallis and Gabriel have split up. March worries Tallis is being set up for something, and believes Tallis is innocent of any wrongdoing. Maxine goes to check up on Tallis, who has been drinking nonstop since the separation. Tallis explains she was slowly frozen out of everything, including the business. She suspects Gabriel is up to something, citing an unknown joint project between Gabriel and a mystery partner. Maxine reveals from her research that Tallis’s lover, Chazz Larday, is a hired hand of Gabriel’s. Tallis is stunned. Misha and Grisha suddenly arrive and kidnap Tallis and Maxine. They are heading upstate to a secret server farm in Camp Tewattsirokawas, owned by hashslingrz. Tallis helps direct them. There, they use the Vircator to fry the servers. Misha and Grisha reveal that Lester was killed for diverting money to Islamic terrorists, and that Ice and his company, an arm of the federal government, put a stop to



it. Misha and Grisha are sworn enemies of the American government, but are also enemies of Islamists.

Chapter 41 – When Tallis and Maxine return to Tallis’s apartment, Chazz is there. He explains he has quit working for Gabriel Ice. When Maxine returns home, Horst is waiting up for her. He worries she is cheating on him, but she says there will never be anyone else but him. Gabriel pays Tallis a visit, and tells her that he will never let her have Kennedy. Maxine knows now he is fully protected by the government, and is very powerful. She also knows that Ice has no real interest in her anymore. However, she also knows it is only a matter of time before Gabriel outlives his usefulness, and his company is cut loose. As the novel ends, Maxine allows Ziggy and Otis to walk to school alone.

Analysis

Maxine is horrified to learn that Nicholas Windust has been killed. Her life is threatened for a second time while in the Hell’s Kitchen apartment with Windust’s body. Why Windust has been killed is a mystery – as is the second person who threatens Maxine’s life. Here, the reader realizes that the killing of Windust probably wasn’t the government, since as the first threatening voice contended, Windust didn’t know everything. For whatever reason Windust was cut loose, the government had no reason to kill him – assuming the first voice was the government. Likewise, it is possible the first and second voices did not belong to the government, but were from individuals who believed the government was involved on 9/11, and so took it upon themselves to eliminate Windust, a government agent.

Interestingly enough, Maxine learns through her Russian contacts that Lester was killed for diverting money to terrorist groups. Therefore, Maxine reasons, Windust was clearly acting in defense of America by killing, or being present at, Lester’s killing. It doesn’t make sense for Maxine why the government would kill a man who killed an anti-terrorist, only to be involved in 9/11 itself. The truth behind everything remains obscured, without any real indication of what is true or not. While the reader can see that some evidence stacks up on either side of the equation, the absolute truth cannot be actually discerned. All that Maxine can seemingly do is to take the advice of her guru-yoga instructor, Shawn, and let things be as they are. Maxine, however, isn’t content with letting things be. She still wants the truth.

As it turns out, a handful of other mysteries are solved. The Arabs working on the Vircator had nothing to do with 9/11. The Vircator itself, stolen, sold, or smuggled, is now being used by the Russians to fry one of hashslingrz’s servers in upstate New York. The Russians, while no friends of the terrorists, are no friends of the Americans, either. It causes Maxine to finally rethink the company she is keeping as Windust originally cautioned, but does not have any serious or lasting impact on her because she dislikes Gabriel Ice so much.



As the novel comes to a close, the theme of complex characters returns. The reader learns that Windust was a good but deeply flawed man devoted to his country. While he engineered chaos and toppled dictatorships in South America, Windust went out of his way to save the life of Xiomara. Likewise, Gabriel Ice, for all of his cruelty and secrecy, was not about to let Lester get away with channeling money to terrorist operations. Working with the government through Windust in some capacity, Ice had Lester eliminated. Misha and Grisha, no friends to the United States, hate Muslim terrorists even worse, and so are willing to work with their enemies whenever they can to defeat even greater enemies.

Discussion Question 1

Based on all of the evidence in the novel, what conclusion does Maxine come to about 9/11? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Can characters like Windust, Gabriel Ice, and the Russians be classified as good or evil? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Maxine ultimately decide to attempt to return to life as normal at the very end of the novel rather than continuing to look into hashslinrz and 9/11? What would you have done if you had been a character in Pynchon's version of New York? Would you have continued the investigation or stopped? Why?

Vocabulary

extrasensory, euphoric, intermittent, premonitory, metaphor, ephemeral, amiably



Characters

Maxine

Maxine Tarnow is a fraud investigator and divorced mother of two. While her age is not given, it is believed she is somewhere in her mid-to-late thirties. Maxine is raising her two sons, Otis and Ziggy, without any real financial help from her ex-husband, Horst. Maxine owns and operates her own fraud investigation agency, and agrees to look into the activities of hashslingrz at the request of old friend Reg Despard.

Of the Jewish faith, Maxine is a courageous and headstrong woman who spends the length of the novel seeking moral and just outcomes to her work, even if she must do immoral and unjust things to get there. This includes acceding to sex with Windust and playing on Eric's foot fetish. Maxine never truly gets to the truth behind what hashslingrz is up to, though evidence noting that the company is working with the U.S. government is found. Whether this is for good or evil is not known, but Maxine decides at the very end of the novel to try to get back to normal in her life.

Reg

Reginald "Reg" Despard is an old friend of Maxine's, having met her on a cruise. As a younger man, Reg bootlegged films and later became a legitimate and noted documentary filmmaker. Reg is hired by the company hashslingrz to do a documentary about the company, but finds a veil of secrecy when he expects to find openness. Reg brings this information to Maxine's attention, and is the reason she decides to investigate hashslingrz at all. Reg is ultimately fired from the documentary, comes to fear for his life, and flees to Seattle.

Eric

Eric Outfield is a Stuyvesant, New York native, who is a genius at hacking and who has a foot fetish. Eric is hired by Reg to hack further into hashslingrz's system, where Eric uncovers strange discrepancies and destinations for funds. Eric comes to work with Maxine to uncover the truth behind hashslingrz's operations. Eric believes the company may be channeling funds to terrorist operations, but is later proved to be wrong when evidence surfaces that Ice was channeling money to anti-terrorists, and that Lester was killed for diverting money to actual terrorist groups.

Jason and Vyrva McElmo

Jason and Vyrva McElmo are a married couple from California who have a daughter named Fiona. Vyrva is good friends with Maxine, while Jason and his business partner Lucas have developed a Deep Web program called DeepArcher which Gabriel Ice



wants to buy. Jason ultimately decides to make DeepArcher open source rather than selling it, undercutting Gabriel and making the Deep Web accessible to millions more people.

Gabriel Ice

Gabriel Ice is the mysterious and secretive CEO of hashslingrz. Gabriel is the husband of Tallis, and the father of Kennedy. Gabriel originally met Tallis in college, where he was geeky and friendly. But as his company grew in power, fame, and wealth, Gabriel became controlling, cruel, and condescending. At some point, he entered into cooperation with the government. His true motives and intentions are left unclear at the end of the novel. However, it is known that Gabriel Ice had Lester Traipse killed for funneling money to terrorist groups, while Ice himself funneled money to anti-terrorist groups.

Tallis Ice

Tallis Ice is the wife of Gabriel Ice. Having first met Gabriel in college, the beautiful Tallis was instantly attracted to Gabriel's friendliness. However, as Gabriel and his company grew in power, Gabriel changed, and Tallis became disenchanted with him. She went on to have affairs, placing more interest in the business than in her husband. Tallis, like many, suspects Gabriel is up to something, but at first refuses to allow an audit. Tallis ultimately comes to confide in Maxine, and to help Maxine in her efforts to find out the truth.

March

March Kelleher is the mother of Tallis Ice, and the mother-in-law of Gabriel Ice. March becomes good friends with Maxine over the course of the novel. March is a passionate liberal who is prone to conspiracy theories and suspecting the worst in all Republicans. March equally hates her son-in-law. When 9/11 occurs, she contends it is an inside job designed to allow President Bush to seize unlimited power to become dictator for life.

Nicholas Windust

Nicholas Windust is a very conservative, very pro-American government agent who works for unknown groups and supervisors in the government. Windust is investigating not only Israeli espionage, but is investigating hashslingrz as well. Though he is a married man, Windust has carried on a purely sexual affair with Maxine. He entreats Maxine to assist in the investigation of hashslingrz, and is later at least in part responsible for the death of Lester Traipse after Lester gives money to terrorists. For unknown reasons, Windust is ultimately cut loose from the government, and later killed by unknown parties.



Misha and Grisha

Misha and Grisha are two Russian hackers who work for Igor Dashkov. Graduates of the Civil Hackers' School in Moscow, Misha and Grisha are sworn enemies of the United States, but even more so, sworn enemies of Islamic terrorists. Misha and Grisha reveal important information to Maxine about Lester and Windust later in the novel. Misha and Grisha take it upon themselves to use a Vircator – obtained under unknown means – to fry one of the massive server networks of hashslingrz in upstate New York.

Igor Dashkov

Igor Dashkov, a Russian crime syndicate operator, is a friend of March and an acquaintance of Maxine. Igor is consulted about the Stinger missiles seen in the DVD sent to Maxine. It is also Igor who later confirms the high-tech weapon the Arabs are working on in the video is the Vircator. Igor's knowledge and experience deepen the mystery that Maxine is trying to solve.

Symbols and Symbolism

Bleeding edge technology

Bleeding edge technology is technology with no proven use and high risk. It is from this kind of technology that the novel takes its name. Examples of bleeding edge technology in the novel include DeepArcher, which allows for exploration of the Deep Web. Gabriel Ice at hashlingrz has a penchant for bleeding edge technology, always recognizing either its potential or a chance to build on it. It is from bleeding edge technology that the novel draws its name.

DeepArcher

DeepArcher is a type of bleeding edge technology in the novel. “DeepArcher” is play on words for “departure” as in a departure from the mainstream internet and the norm. It is developed by Jason McElmo and his business partner, Lucas, as a way to explore the Deep Web. DeepArcher resembles a video game, in that people assume the role of first-person avatars who navigate through different settings, scenes, and place to obtain important information and converse with other people. This sort of program would allow for the obtainment of heavily classified, protected, or encrypted information. Gabriel Ice is a huge fan of DeepArcher, and aspires to buy it, but is undercut when Jason allows DeepArcher to go public.

Deep Web

The Deep Web includes areas of the internet and computer networks not readily accessible or even available to the regular mainstream internet user. The Deep Web is a hacker’s paradise, and is where important information can be stored, protected, found, shared, stolen, manipulated, and so on. DeepArcher is a program that allows regular users to access the Deep Web.

hashlingrz

Hashlingrz is an internet and computer security company run by CEO Gabriel Ice. Hashlingrz has rapidly emerged as the most powerful, famous, and wealthy of its kind of company, and is known for buying up competition. Reg is hired to do a documentary film on hashlingrz by hashlingrz, but his access to even simple records is severely restricted. This leads him to get Maxine and Eric to investigate the company, where it is discovered hashlingrz has dealings with the federal government. It is also discovered that Lester Traipse, former worker at hwgaagwgh.com, has been diverting funds to terrorists, and is killed for it. Gabriel, meanwhile, has been diverting funds to anti-terrorist operations, perhaps at the behest of the American government.



hwgaagwgh.com

hwgaagwgh.com (“Hey, We’ve Got Awesome and Hip Web Graphix, Here”) is an internet design company purchased by hashslingrz some years before the beginning of the novel. The company employed Lester Traipse, who now works for hashslingrz. It is because funds are being paid to hwgaagwgh.com – now a non-existent company – that Maxine decides to ratchet up her investigation.

Furby

A Furby is a type of electronic children’s toy resembling an owl that is popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Furbys are reverse engineered by Eric so that they serve as recording and data gathering devices. Eric plants a Furby in the offices of hashslingrz to learn more about them.

9:30 Cologne

9:30 Cologne for Men is a kind of cologne produced and sold by the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C. It is a cologne that has been out of production for at least a decade, and is a distinct scent worn only by Nicholas Windust. The cologne puts him at the scene of Lester’s killing, and tips Maxine off to the knowledge that he has had something to do with Lester’s death.

DVD

A DVD is delivered to Maxine, presumably from Reg. The DVD contains two film chapters – one that plays automatically, and one that is hidden. The automatic film on the DVD is a video of a Stinger missile crew rehearsing an apparent Boeing 767 attack. The hidden film on the DVD is of Reg’s entry into the secret room at hashslingrz where a group of Arabs are working on a Vircator.

Underground labyrinth

The underground labyrinth of tunnels, rooms, and halls, exists beneath Gabriel Ice’s house on Montauk Point, Long Island, and is explored by Maxine. Maxine’s entering of Ice’s house and going into the underground hidden levels, only to find an even more confusing network of tunnels and rooms is therein metaphorically symbolic for Maxine diving beneath the surface of hashslingrz and becoming more and more lost with each and every turn she takes. The unknown person encountered in the tunnels beneath Ice’s home is metaphorically symbolic of Gabriel Ice himself, who Maxine can’t seem to put a finger on.

Vircator

A Vircator, a virtual-cathode-oscillator, is a weapon that fires an electromagnetic pulse that disables and destroys electronics. A Vircator is being worked on by a group of Arabs at hashslingrz, discovered and filmed accidentally by Reg. Igor confirms to Maxine what the Vircator is. Presumably through theft, Misha and Grisha gain possession of the Vircator, and use it to destroy one of the servers of hashslingrz located in upstate New York.



Settings

New York City

New York City is the main setting for “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. New York City is the massive port city in New York State where Maxine lives and works, and where the vast majority of the characters in the novel live and work in some capacity or another. New York is home to Silicon Alley, the counterpart of California’s Silicon Valley, and is where hashslingrz is operated by Gabriel Ice. New York is also the area of operation for Nicholas Windust, the Russian mafia, and is targeted by Islamic terrorists on September 11, 2001. New York is also the subject of countless conspiracy theories and explanations for the terrorist attacks in the novel. Some, like March, believe the government is to blame, while others, like Brooke, argue the government had nothing at all to do with the attacks.

Upstate New York

Upstate New York is the geographic upper area of New York State. According to locals, upstate New York consists of every part of the state beyond Long Island and New York City. Upstate New York is the home of Camp Tewattsirokawas, an old summer camp now owned by hashslingrz and a server facility for the company. The place is the target of an EMP attack by way of a Vircator through Misha and Grisha at the end of the novel.

Deep Web

The Deep Web is a part of the internet that includes areas of the internet and computer networks not readily accessible or even available to the regular mainstream internet user. The Deep Web is a hacker’s paradise, and is where important information can be stored, protected, found, shared, stolen, manipulated, and so on. It is also home to communities of hackers and Deep Web users. Because much of the novel consists of time spent in the Deep Web researching hashslingrz and other companies, the Deep Web becomes a setting in its own right. It is only by venturing into the Deep Web through DeepArcher that Maxine is able to learn much more about hashslingrz and their operations.

Gabriel Ice's home

Gabriel Ice’s house is located on Montauk Point on the Eastern End of Long Island’s North Fork. Hoping to uncover more about Ice and hashslingrz, Maxine and a wine-thieving contractor break into the home. There, Maxine discovers a beautifully-decorated home and a massive, sprawling underground web of tunnels and secret rooms. Maxine’s entering of Ice’s house and heading into the hidden underground levels only to find an ever increasing and ever confusing network of tunnels and rooms is



metaphorically symbolic for Maxine diving beneath the surface of hashslingrz, and becoming more and more lost with each and every clue and turn. The unknown person encountered in the tunnels is metaphorically symbolic of Gabriel Ice, who Maxine likewise can't seem to truly figure out.

Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em Agency

Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em Agency is the fraud investigation agency owned and operated by Maxine. Located on Columbus Street in New York, Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em is just down the block from where Maxine's children attend school, employs several people, and is where Maxine does much of her work. It is at Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em that Reg first comes to see Maxine about hashslingrz. There, Maxine agrees to look into the potential fraud that Reg has uncovered.

Themes and Motifs

Mystery

Mystery is an important theme in the novel “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. In the novel, mystery involves that which is unknown, and that which may never be revealed. There are multiple instances of mystery in the novel, with each one of them adding to, or fueling the plot in some way. Additionally, mystery shrouds the truth (see the theme “Truth” and “Potential Explanations”).

Maxine’s life as a fraud investigator is built around mystery, uncovering hidden wrongdoings and bringing the offending people to justice by exposing them. Reg brings the first part of a multifaceted mystery to Maxine very early in the novel, when he asks her to look into hashslingrz. It is strange Maxine and to Reg why hashslingrz should restrict access to the person they have hired to make a documentary about themselves. As Maxine begins digging into hashslingrz’s finances, she uncovers one mystery after another. These include why hashslingrz is making payments to phantom companies, companies that no longer exist, and why legitimate payments are being hidden and falsified.

As Maxine continues to probe hashslingrz, a number of other mysteries come to light. Among them are why, according to evidence, hashslingrz is working with the government, only to have the government through Nicholas Windust investigating hashslingrz at the same time. The secrecy of the company increases by way of the mystery of Reg accidentally going into a room in which Arabs are working on a mysterious device that later turns out to be a Viricator. Reg’s subsequent filming of Stinger crews doing a dry run on a rooftop further complicates things since it occurs only a short time before 9/11.

The more and more that Maxine digs into hashslingrz and whatever connections and activities the company may have, the more and more difficult things become for Maxine to understand. This is symbolized through Maxine’s nearly getting lost in the tunnel complex beneath Ice’s Montauk home. The mystery surrounding hashslingrz only deepens when Lester is killed by, or with, Windust present. As Maxine later learns, this is because Lester was funneling money to terrorists.

However, Windust’s own death is a mystery that is never solved. Indeed, most of the mysteries raised in the novel are never truly solved. Only guesses, conspiracies, and potential explanations can be provided (see the themes “Truth” and “Potential Explanations”). Only a handful of mysteries – such as why Lester was killed, and what some of Ice’s fraudulent accounts were intended for (funding anti-terrorist groups) – are ever revealed.



Truth

Truth is an important theme in the novel “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. Truth in the novel is very difficult to discern as evidence and information supporting any number of potential explanations (see the themes “Potential Explanations” and “Mystery”) and any number of truths is presented. For Maxine, who works in finding the truth for a living, this is enormously frustrating and difficult to figure out.

When the novel begins, Reg presents the mystery of hashslingrz to Maxine. Maxine doesn't think the case of getting to the truth behind hashslingrz's secrecy will be that difficult. She accepts the case with a casual air as though it was simply a run-of-the-mill, routine job. However, as is metaphorically symbolized by Maxine getting lost in the underground labyrinth at Gabriel Ice's Montauk Point home, Maxine's journey to find the truth is quickly complicated. Each clue she uncovers leads to more questions and precious few answers. Indeed, there is essentially a web of confusion that has surrounded hashslingrz, deliberately generated by the company, its associates, and its activities.

What Maxine initially considers to be a simple open-and-shut case of fraudulent financial activity goes much deeper. Maxine uncovers evidence that hashslingrz has dealings with the government, and that money is being funneled to companies that no longer exist. The truth behind at least these financial activities is that Lester is funneling money to terrorist groups, while Gabriel Ice is funneling money to anti-terrorist groups. Lester is killed for his treachery, either by Windust or in Windust's presence.

However, Windust's death complicates the truth surrounding 9/11. The presence of Arabs working on an unknown weapon, a Stinger crew doing a dry run on a Boeing 767, stock sell-offs just before the terrorist attacks, and Windust's insistence that the American government had nothing to do with 9/11 just before Windust himself is cut loose and killed by unknown assailants only further makes the truth difficult to find. The greatest unexplored truth of the novel is who is responsible for 9/11 and why. It is something that Maxine grudgingly comes to ultimately accept, that the truth here is something she will never know.

Potential Explanations

Potential explanations is an important theme in the novel “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. Potential explanations are essentially educated guesses or conclusions based on available evidence. Given the presence of so much mystery, confusion (see the theme “Mystery”), and the difficulty of discerning truth (see the theme “Truth”), only potential explanations can be offered in their stead. The two major mysteries where only potential explanations can be made concern hashslingrz, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The first major mystery in the novel has to do with the secret and fraudulent financial activities of hashslingrz and their association with Washington. It would only make sense for a company like hashslingrz – whose principal product is technological security



– to be secretive. However, the dealings that the company has with the federal government make secrecy essential. Whether or not the company and the government have anything to do with 9/11 can only be guessed at, but in all likelihood, have nothing to do with 9/11. This is because Lester is killed for funneling money to terrorist groups while Gabriel Ice funneled money to anti-terrorist groups.

The mystery surrounding 9/11 in the novel can also only be explained potentially. Evidence for and against foreknowledge, abetting, and ignorance and innocence of the attacks is presented. March wholeheartedly believes that President Bush and the government are responsible for 9/11, citing the Stinger missile crew doing a practice run, the massive sell-offs of stock, and rumors that “they” know “it” is coming and are doing nothing to stop “it”. This is because March contends Bush wants to be dictator for life, and a disaster would allow him to seize power. In the real world, such conspiracy theories about President Bush using 9/11 to make himself a dictator have simply been demolished by facts and history. The fictional historical world of the novel is another story.

On the other hand, the vast majority of people like Brooke and Windust argue that President Bush and the government had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11. Brooke cites the surprise and desperate scramble to deal with the attacks, while Windust – who has very intimate insider knowledge of the workings of the government’s secret operations – reveals the government had nothing to do with the attacks, especially because no one can be that good. People like Maxine are caught in the middle and don’t know what to believe. Even in the alternative historical environment that Pynchon has created, government involvement seems unlikely – but other third parties, such as Lester, are clearing in the business of financing terrorism while people like Windust are in the business of killing them. It doesn’t make sense for the government to kill a person working for a government associated company funding terrorists if the government itself is funding terrorists.

Complexity of Characters

Complexity of Characters is an important theme in the novel “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. The dimensionality of the characters in the novel transcends simple characterizations, creating complex, and sometimes complicated characters. In the novel, the complex and complicated nature of characters helps to drive the plot and increases the depth of the novel.

Maxine is one such complex character. A fraud investigator and divorced mother of two, Maxine struggles to balance work and home life. Maxine is a courageous woman, driven by a desire to find the truth and achieve a morally just end to whatever mysteries she is confronted with. However, though Maxine is clearly on the side of good, she emerges as something of an antihero, willing to do whatever is necessary to get the job done. This includes sleeping with the married Nicholas Windust, entreating with Russian mobsters and hackers determined to ruin the United States, and willingness to oblige Eric’s sexual fetishes to manipulate him into talking to her. Even when Maxine’s life is



threatened, she still seeks to carry on in her work to finding the truth. Maxine's incessant need to find the truth is troubling when her children are threatened, and still Maxine involves herself in a dangerous situation. Her desire for the truth is admirable, but not when it could come at the expense of the safety of her children. In the end, Maxine backs off, worried more for the safety of her family than the truth.

Nicholas Windust is another such complex character. Deeply conservative and utterly patriotic, Nicholas Windust puts his country ahead of all other aspects of his life, including his wife and family. He is willing to travel anywhere and do almost anything to ensure his country benefits. This includes carrying on a sexual relationship with Maxine – cheating on his wife and corroding his conservative beliefs – in order to glean more information about hashslingrz, and to pass information along as well. Nicholas is utterly courageous, willing to risk his own life to topple horrific regimes in South America and to rescue Xiomara, yet he has no concerns about killing, or being a part of killing Lester after it is learned that Lester is diverting company funds to terrorists. Despite these streaks of ruthlessness, there is a line that even Windust will not cross – and that is working with any enemy, for whatever reason, of the United States.

Perhaps the most complex and complicated character of all is Gabriel Ice. Maxine is continually frustrated in her attempts to understand and figure Gabriel Ice out. As a college kid, Gabriel was geeky, friendly, and well-liked. As a CEO, he is feared, admired, and brutal. He does not hesitate to crush or buy out his competition, to work with the government as it benefits himself and his company, or to control those around him such as his wife and child. The change from friendly geek to vicious CEO is difficult to explain, perhaps owing to fame, power, and wealth. Gabriel appears to be utterly cruel and corrupt, until it is learned that Gabriel is somehow a part of the killing of Lester after it is learned that Lester is sending company money to terrorists. This is simply unacceptable to Gabriel. Likewise, it is later learned that Gabriel is diverting company money to anti-terrorist forces and operations overseas.

Courage

Courage is an important theme in the novel “Bleeding Edge” by Thomas Pynchon. Courage, which involves doing the brave or morally right thing even when the odds are stacked against someone, or doing the right thing even when one's very safety and life are in danger, is crucial to the plot of the novel. Courage is a chief trait of several characters, and courage is exhibited by many more in their attempts to get to the bottom of hashslingrz and the truth behind 9/11.

Maxine herself is courageous on a daily basis as even the regular companies and organizations she investigations – let alone powerhouses like hashslingrz – have the capacity to retaliate against her. When Maxine decides to take on hashslingrz, it is a moment of tremendous courage given the company's wealth, power, and prestige. Reg himself demonstrates great courage in even inaugurating the investigation in the first place by coming to Maxine with the request to investigate the company. Reg takes his courage one step further by hiring his own hacker, Eric, to look into hashslingrz further.



Eric himself demonstrates great courage by hacking into hashslingrz, especially given the deadly nature of events that surround the company.

Nicholas Windust is another character who demonstrates tremendous courage, both in the past and in the present. In the past, Nicholas helped to overthrow despotic regimes in South America, risking his own life to do so. He even went so far as to help Xiomara escape to the United States, risking his own life once more to help her find freedom. Windust later shows great courage in assisting Maxine in her investigation into hashslingrz, and when he goes on the run when he is cut loose. He continues to do what he can to assist Maxine, even though his own life hangs in the balance. In the end, Windust is killed.

Courage can be a curse as well as a blessing. In such a situation, courage becomes foolhardiness and rash behavior. Maxine demonstrates rash courage when, even after her life is threatened and the lives of her children are threatened, Maxine refuses to give up the investigation. Only when the threat increases does she finally back off. The combative way that March insists on government conspiracy theories brings the attention of law enforcement to her. She flees her home, and lives on the move, never staying in the same place for more than a single night. While her life is not in danger, March believes her freedom is – and so continues to antagonize law enforcement. While in some ways this may be seen as courageous, in other ways, it can be seen as foolish. It can be argued that promoting a theory is one thing, but to be deliberately antagonistic is another.



Styles

Point of View

Thomas Pynchon tells his novel “Bleeding Edge” in the third-person limited-omniscient point of view with Pynchon serving as the narrative voice. This is done for at least three reasons. The first is that Pynchon is able to tell the story of Maxine and her investigation into hashslingrz and 9/11. The second is that Pynchon takes sections of the novel aside from the actual story to provide contextual information, to address the reader directly, or to include personal considerations or observations of events. For example, in Chapter 30, Pynchon directly addresses the reader while also providing contextual information about the reaction to the events of September 11. This creates a sense of depth as Pynchon breaks the fourth wall and provides important and relevant information to what is going on. Third, the limited-omniscient aspect of the novel allows the reader to learn about things only as Maxine learns about them, creating a sense of mystery and suspense.

Language and Meaning

Thomas Pynchon tells his novel “Bleeding Edge” in language that is both causal and educated. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that the novel is written in the contemporary era, so the language used in the actual construction of the book is reflective of the times, and of the target audience. The educated aspect of the language comes through the well-rounded education that Maxine has received. For example, euphoric and ponderous are used in place of happy and thoughtful. Likewise, a large number of words from Hebrew are sprinkled throughout the novel, such as kvell and plotzing –all owing to Maxine’s Jewish faith and upbringing.

Structure

Thomas Pynchon divides his novel “Bleeding Edge” into 41 consecutive, linear, chronological, and numbered chapters. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel’s structure allows the reader to more easily follow the plot of the novel itself. This is important due to the fact that the level of mystery is so great, and the obscuring of truth in the plot is well-developed. The simple and straightforward structure of the novel is also important given the vast array of characters and subplots within the novel, making reading and following the plot easier to do.



Quotes

As a paid-up member of the Yentas With Attitude local, Maxine has been snooping diligently into hashslingrz, before long finding herself wondering what Reg has gotten himself into, and worse, what he's dragging her uncomfortably toward.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, the narrator reveals how Maxine comes to first investigate hasslingrz, and her concern about the company and Reg's involvement with them. Maxine realizes there is much more than meets the eye to hashslingrz as she discovers discrepancies in the books. Maxine also realizes that she herself is going to be drawn into things whether she likes it or not – and that it is indeed going to be dangerous.

I'm on it, Reg. Just not too comfortable.

-- Maxine (Chapter 6 paragraph 44)

Importance: Maxine learns from Reg that hashslingrz has a number of Altman-Z markups. Reg is insistent that Maxine continue looking into hashslingrz. Maxine counters that she is indeed looking into things, but that she is also very uncomfortable doing so since the corporation is so large and reputedly dangerous.

Something today strikes her as odd. One of those nagging patterns that's not always welcome because it means uncompensated overtime, but what else is new.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 2)

Importance: As Maxine continues her investigation, she uncovers more and more disturbing things about hashslingrz and their operations. She also continues to learn about Gabriel Ice himself. Maxine knows that something is obviously wrong with the hashslingrz operation, but her sense of things personally is also thrown off. Intuitively, she feels as if something is wrong and has a strong idea it has to do with Lester's company being purchased by hashslingrz, and Lester's life being in danger.

A body found today in a deluxe upper West Side apartment building has been identified as Lester Traipse, well-known Silicon Alley entrepreneur... an apparent suicide, though police say murder isn't being ruled out.

-- WYUP Newscaster (Chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: Maxine's feeling that something is wrong turns out to be accurate as Lester ends up dead. Maxine immediately knows that Lester did not commit suicide, but was murdered. Maxine realizes now how dangerous things truly are, and knows her own life will be in peril as events continue to move forward. However, this also forms a resolve in her that she has to get to the bottom of things. It demonstrates a remarkable sense of purpose and character in Maxine.

Turns out at the moment Elaine and Brooke are down at the World Trade Center eyeballing the unexplored shopping potential of Century 21.



-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 2)

Importance: Upon her return from Israel, Brooke and her mother go to investigate real estate at the World Trade Center. This is important for two reasons. First, it signals that Brooke and her husband have returned from Israel and are of interest to Nicholas Windust for purposes of spying. Second, it is a reminder to the reader that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are not far off. How those will affect the plot has yet to be seen.

Is living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring about who's paying for it, who's starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs... planetwide, more every day, the payback keeps gathering.

-- Shawn (Chapter 31 paragraph 19)

Importance: Maxine meets with Shawn about seeing the dead in the streets after they have died. Shawn believes it is because Maxine misses them so much. He also goes on to claim that the September 11 attacks were brought on America by itself, though Maxine does not accept this. What does stand out is Shawn's general idea – that people are living on borrowed time, that sooner or later, things will come undone. This is certainly the case when it comes to Maxine's investigation into hashslingrz.

Does anybody get extra lives? Does anybody even get this one?

-- Narrator (Chapter 36 paragraph 79)

Importance: While prowling DeepArcher, which resembles a video game, Maxine begins to wonder about everything she has experienced so far. She wonders if in DeepArcher, people get extra lives, or if once they are cut out of the system, they are cut out forever. She compares DeepArcher to real life, and then wonders if people even get one life of their own in the real world. Given the strangeness she has experienced surrounding 9/11, threats made against her personal safety, and the idea of traitors to the country, Maxine wonders how much of one's life is truly his or her own, and if life is ever truly someone's at all.

Suppose it's all about losing, not finding. What has she lost?

-- Narrator (Chapter 36 paragraph 80)

Importance: As Maxine probes the depths of DeepArcher and the Deep Web, she begins to wonder about life in general. She realizes the world after the beginning of her investigation into hashslingrz, let alone September 11, is no longer the same. She wonders if life is not about the things one finds, but the things one loses – such as their sense of safety and surety.

We know you're there. You don't have to pick up. This is just a reminder that it's a school night, and you never know when your kids might need you with them.

-- Unidentified Man (Chapter 37 paragraph 17)

Importance: Having arranged to meet Nicholas Windust at his secret apartment, Maxine is horrified to find him dead. While she is there, the phone rings and goes to an



answering machine. The voice on the machine tells Maxine that “they” know she is there, and levels a threat against her life. Maxine is terrified, and hopes that it is only a warning to her rather than a promise of death.

It is what it is.

-- Shawn (Chapter 38 paragraph 10)

Importance: On her last visit to Shawn, Maxine is told by Shawn that things are what they are. Shawn contends the world must be dealt with as it is, and changed where it can be changed. Maxine accepts this, but only to a point. She doesn't like the way the world is, and doesn't want to fold for most of it the way so many other people do. This demonstrates Maxine's strength of character and her defiant nature.

He's protected.

-- Maxine (Chapter 41 paragraph 136)

Importance: While the truth of Gabriel's role in the government, and whether or not the government had anything to do with 9/11 in the novel is left unclear, what is known is that Gabriel is indeed in bed with the government. Evidence reveals that they had Lester killed for diverting money to terrorists, which in turn suggests Gabriel and the government had nothing at all to do with 9/11.

He'll keep keep running cost-benefit workups and find that there's too many people coming at him from too many different directions, the SEC, the IRS, the Justice Department, he can't buy them all off. Plus competitors friendly and otherwise, hacker guerrillas...

-- Maxine (Chapter 41 paragraph 138)

Importance: Here, Maxine explains to Tallis the ultimate fate of Gabriel's operations. Gabriel will be protected only so long as he is useful. Eventually, he'll have to buy people off to stay in business, but that will last only so long as there will be too many people coming at him. Gabriel Ice will not retain his current level of power forever.