

# Brightness Falls Short Guide

## Brightness Falls by Jay McInerney

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# Characters

Although Russell and Corrinne Calloway occupy the center of the solar system which is Brightness Falls, a number of other characters recur, and even minor characters carry thematic value.

Jeff Pierce, for example, serves both as an exemplar of artistic brilliance and of the ravages that overindulgence can wreak on it. Similarly indulgent is Washington Lee, a black editor at Russell's firm who squanders his talents, parties too much, and refuses to admit that he has any responsibility to help black writers publish their work.

One of the novel's most interesting characters is Victor Propp, an obscure but famous novelist who is famous precisely because he has never published his second novel. In the world chronicled by McInerney, fame does not necessarily rest on solid accomplishments. Bernie Melman, for example, is famous for buying companies he disassembles to pay for his expense in buying them — in other words, for destroying businesses under the guise of being a big businessman — while Glenda Banes, photographer to the rich and famous, is a recurring minor character whose appearances serve to point out the fickleness and irrationality of fame.



## Social Concerns

With *Brightness Falls*, McInerney brings full circle the frenetic story of the 1980s he began in *Bright Lights, Big City*. The unbridled drug use, sexuality, greed, and evasion of personal responsibility depicted in his other books receive their logical rewards in this novel, which shows the disillusion with which many in the 1990s now regard the 1980s, a decade founded on illusory good times and high living.

Personal vices pervade the novel. Jeff Pierce, a young writer who (like McInerney) achieves early success, escapes the responsibility of further literary genius by losing himself in heroin use and sex, and he is far from the only character indulging in escape through those or similar means. But as always in McInerney's work, actions have consequences, and this is particularly true in the closing days of the 1980s, when the novel is set. The novel opens, in fact, with Jeff visiting a drug rehabilitation center, where his actions have ultimately landed him. In addition, with the specter of AIDS looming over sexual encounters and intravenous drug use, those recreational pastimes related in earlier McInerney novels now assume greater risk.

McInerney is interested in more than just the purely personal in *Brightness Falls*, however. This book makes a more conscious effort than any of his previous works to chronicle not just the lives and lifestyles of a small group of characters but also the essence of the society in which they live. These personal vices are related to the societal vices of greed (evidenced by leveraged buyouts and stock speculation, as well as the contrast between the moneyed Manhattanites and the homeless they encounter daily), attaching too much importance to appearances (as seen by surgically-altered models and by characters with eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia), and living for today with no concern for where one's actions may lead one (the assumption of huge debts to purchase corporations as well as the accumulation of large personal debts to preserve the illusion of living the high life). In *Brightness Falls*, the romantic unreality of the 1980s gives way to the dawning awareness of the personal and societal costs of the behavior in which Americans have indulged.

## Techniques

Brightness Falls is a large, sprawling social novel told from a third person omniscient viewpoint. This point of view allows McInerney to enter the thoughts and perceptions of all of his characters and has more in common with the approach of many nineteenth-century novelists than with McInerney's previous work. While the strengths of McInerney's writing remain — his wit, skill of observation, clear prose, and ear for dialogue — this more ambitious approach to the novel moves his love for literary realism from the personal to the social and bespeaks his growth both as writer and as social critic.

## Themes

Brightness Falls is centered on two young married professionals in Manhattan, Corrinne and Russell Calloway, who together exemplify the temptations facing many in the 1980s. Corrinne is a broker, which involves her in pursuit of the "fast money" said to be almost tangibly humming in the air of New York City, while Russell is an editor at a small but prestigious publishing house. Although their friends consider them to be a haven from the maelstrom of modern city life, a truly stable couple, the events of the novel show them to be as fallible and as gullible as their fellows. Russell, especially, who after some reversals at the publishing house decides to spearhead an unfriendly takeover bid by a corporate raider, succumbs to the lure of easy credit and 1980s opportunism, with tragic consequences.

The characters in *Brightness Falls*, older than many of those in earlier McInerney novels, nonetheless are similar to them in their quest for meaning in their lives. The alternatives that are presented to them are varied: art, love, night life, fame, and financial power (or at least, the illusion of it).

Russell and Corrinne separate after indulging in most of the temptations that Manhattan has to offer at that moment in history, but the end of the novel finds them back together, if with scaled-down expectations. The message McInerney seems to be leaving us with in *Brightness Falls* is that if some things seem to be too good to be true, they probably are.



## Key Questions

1. Does McInerney's depiction of the strife-torn and amoral America of the 1980s accord with your view of it? In what ways is it different?

2. What comments does McInerney seem to be making about relationships in the modern world?

3. Why does the gag line "Paint my house," recur throughout the novel?

What thematic purpose does it serve?

4. What role do minor characters like photographer Glenda Banes and gossip writer Juan Baptiste serve in *Brightness Falls*?

5. As a work of literary realism, *Brightness Falls* may be read as a cultural document as well as a literary work. What significant details do we learn about the world McInerney writes about?

6. Many of the characters in the novel seem to be dysfunctional in some way or another. Does McInerney suggest that all people are scarred psychologically, or does he present some models of sanity?

7. In what ways can Jeff Pierce be read as the central character of the novel, even though he does not appear as often as the Calloways?

8. When Jeff is in rehabilitation, he experiences a moment of revelation when he cuts himself with a shard of glass a fellow patient has hidden, perhaps to commit suicide. What do you think he realizes in this moment?

9. Does McInerney's depiction of women and their thoughts and feelings in this book seem realistic? Why or why not?

10. What do you think happens to those characters left alive at the end of the novel?

## Literary Precedents

McInerney has often been compared with F. Scott Fitzgerald, both for his unofficial title as chronicler of a highliving decade and for his personal good looks and lifestyle, and McInerney has sometimes encouraged that comparison, both through references to *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and through evocation of that novel's ending in this work. Other writers who have mined New York society for works of literary realism, including Edith Wharton, Thomas Wolfe, and John Cheever, might also be seen as literary forebears for McInerney, with Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), another novel about the disintegration of society in the 1980s, providing a significant point of comparison.

This novel may also be read as a roman à clef, a work of fiction which is based on actual people and events.

(Harold Propp, for example, is generally conceded to be based on real-life author Harold Brodkey.) As such, *Brightness Falls* is related to novels such as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.



## Related Titles

Brightness Falls is McInerney's most strongly developed response to the culture he has depicted throughout his body of work. While he has often written about characters searching for meaning in a fast-paced world, most successfully in *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Story of My Life*, this novel, because of its multitude of point-of-view characters and the variety of plots and subplots, most strongly draws the conclusions that getting caught in the surging current of everyday life can pull one to disaster and that it is important to have something — or someone — to cling to.



# Copyright Information

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