

# **The Beach Study Guide**

## **The Beach by Alex Garland**

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# Plot Summary

The Beach by Alex Garland is the story of a young British man who escapes his life through travel, largely funded by his family. The story is related by Richard through first person. Richard lands in Thailand and receives a map to a beach paradise through the kindness of a stranger, who soon thereafter commits suicide. Richard pairs up with a French couple and the three manage to follow the map and join the beach commune. Paradise turns out to be a sunlit prison run by a kind but stern woman who was one of the founders. Richard tries to blend in to the commune but is soon bored. His indiscretion in sharing the map with some Americans and then not telling anyone about it leads to the ultimate downfall of the commune. After escaping death several times, causing bodily injury and death to almost everyone he meets, and serving as the catalyst to end the dream of the beach commune, Richard arrives relatively unharmed back in England.

The story begins with Richard's arrival in Thailand. His stay at the shoddy guest-house in Bangkok is cut short when he is given a map and when the map creator subsequently commits suicide. Richard meets Etienne and Francoise and the three decide to find the island. They travel to the coast of Thailand and hire a boat to take them to a nearby island, then they swim to the beach paradise. Once arriving at the island, they try to assimilate into the spirit of the place, but there are several factors preventing this; mainly that Richard has shared the map with some Americans who are on their way to the beach, and that the other half of paradise is occupied by gun carrying guards who are protecting an illegal crop of marijuana.

Richard makes friends and enemies in the commune, and for a time is happy to be on the fishing detail and to admire Francoise from afar. During a mission to acquire rice, one of the commune members, Jed, learns that Richard has given someone a map. Soon after, Jed discovers that the Americans are on the next island and coming to the island. Richard is bored with paradise by now, and sees the possibility of the Americans' arrival as an interesting development. Since the death of Daffy, the man who gave him the map, Richard has been dreaming of Daffy, and begins to see him when he is awake as well.

While Jed and Richard are waiting for the Americans to attempt to get to the beach commune, the entire commune gets food poisoning. A rift begins between Bugs' group and Richard's group during this time, and Sal, the leader, is frantic to restore order. Before this can be resolved, three of the commune members, the Swedes, are attacked by a shark. One Swede is killed, one is seriously injured, and one goes mad. Sal decides that a festival is the key to reuniting the commune and restoring peace, so she concentrates on assigning tasks and getting the remaining commune members involved in that activity. Sal assigns Richard to eliminate the deranged Swede so all of the loose ends will be tied up and they can return to normal. It almost works, but as the group is preparing to have their festival, the Americans come ashore and are tortured and killed by the Thai guards. Richard plans to escape the island, and will take Etienne, Francoise, Jed and Keaty with him.



The night of the Tet Festival arrives, and this is the night Richard's group plans to leave the island, using the Americans' homemade raft to escape. To make it easier to get away, Richard's group puts marijuana into the evening stew. The commune also indulges in coconut beer, and soon everyone, including some of Richard's friends, are drunk and hallucinating. Richard slips into the tent where Jed has been caring for one of the injured Swedes and finds Jed asleep. Richard knows Jed will not leave so he smothers the ailing Swede.

Just before Richard and his group attempt their escape, the Thai guards arrive, beat up Richard, and deposit the dead bodies of the Americans in front of the commune. The guards say no more visitors or additions to the commune, and leave. The residents attack the dead bodies in a bizarre display of primitive behavior, and when they discover that the Americans were sent to their island by Richard, they turn on him. Richard's group has wisely armed themselves with spears and defend him, then rush to the rafts and escape the island.

Richard is in England at the end of the book, working at a mundane job, admiring his scars.



# Boom-Boom, Bangkok

## Boom-Boom, Bangkok Summary

The Beach is an adventure novel set in Thailand about a young backpacking traveler named Richard. Richard is in search of new adventures and excitement and finds more than he can handle when he encounters a beach commune on a remote island off the coast of Thailand.

In the section entitled "Boom-Boom", the novel begins with a scene from the Vietnam war zone, and ends with the introduction of the main character, Richard, who was born in 1974, after the close of the Vietnam war.

As the section entitled "Bangkok" begins, Richard is in Bangkok, Thailand, and he remembers where he first heard of the beach, the subject of this novel. Richard begins his memories of a trip to Thailand in 1995, when he was a very young man who spent his time traveling as backpacker. The story starts with his arrival in Bangkok.

Richard finds a guest-house, recommended to him by a aging hippie at the eating area next to it. He notices an attractive French couple nearby, and other backpackers. When Richard checks into the guest-house he finds it to be very spare, with flimsy walls, and above the walls that connect with the other rooms, there is a wire mesh that allows no privacy from conversations and sounds in the adjacent rooms. While Richard is trying to sleep, he can hear a man in the next room, speaking in a Scottish accent, mumbling and cursing about a bitch. It is only a few moments later that Richard realizes the man is saying "beach". The man flips a lit marijuana cigarette into Richard's room and tries to get Richard into an argument. Richard refuses and goes back to sleep, only to be woken a little later with the sound of the French couple having sex in the room on the other side of his room.

The next morning, Richard is surrounded by Thai sounds and other tourists, some from Germany, some from America. As Richard returns from eating to get some cash from his room, he has an interaction with the cleaning lady, who tells him there is a letter on his door. Richard finds a bit of paper attached to his door, and realizes it is a map to the beach the man mentioned last night. Richard goes to the man's room and finds the strange man has committed suicide, opening his veins with a knife.

The police officer investigating the death is determined, through his broken English and lack of concern regarding the dead man, to accuse Richard of murder, but Richard has no motive and his alibi is strong. The dead man had registered at the guest-house as "Daffy Duck" and the police man does not understand that this is a fake name, after a cartoon character popular in the USA. As Richard leaves the police station, he finds Etienne, the French man, waiting on the steps. Richard and Etienne talk about Daffy, about what brought the two of them to Thailand and their expectations. Richard recognizes a kindred soul in Etienne; another traveler bored with traveling and looking



for adventure. Richard decides to share the map with Etienne. As the two men make their way through the crowded streets to get back to the guest-house, a strange Thai man touches Richard intimately and the encounter puzzles and confuses him.

Francoise joins Etienne and Richard after her time at the police station, and they begin discussing how to get to the beach indicated on the map. They realize the beach is the subject of an urban legend they have been hearing for some time, referring to an ideal, unspoiled paradise where tourists are not allowed. These three do not consider themselves tourists but as travelers, an elite set of backpacking young people who are on the road for the experiences, and not for photos or tours. They decide to begin their trip to the beach by way of Ko Sumai, an island off the coast of Thailand.

On the train from Bangkok to Surat Thani, Richard falls asleep and dreams of the dead man, Mr. Duck. In the dream, Mr. Duck is trying to roll a joint but cannot because his hands are useless from the slit wrists. Richard is dreaming about being on the train and Mr. Duck is sitting beside him, and blood is still pouring from the dead man's wounds as the two men sit on the bunk, smoking marijuana and talking about nothing that makes any sense.

## **Boom-Boom, Bangkok Analysis**

Richard's reaction to the tourists and his surroundings show not only a character who has experience in traveling other countries, but a character who no longer considers himself a tourist, even to locales he has never been before. Richard feels a disdain for tourists, considering himself very worldly and street smart. He is in Thailand, along the very road that backpackers all consider a mandatory destination. The brief encounter with a Thai man who gropes Richard is symbolic of the low regard the natives have for these travelers, and of Richard's true vulnerability. Daffy has become a part of Richard, visiting him in dreams, sharing the fascination Richard has for all things regarding the Vietnam War. There is an underlying sexual current between Richard and the young French woman Francoise, but Richard's loose ethics still hold him to an honor of friendship with Etienne.

Examples of foreshadowing and Richard's character development appears in the brief introduction using Vietnam war movie scenes and numerous mentions of Richard's marijuana use and risk-taking attitude. Richard's inability to truly understand the natives of the country hints at further misguided actions and at a population that is very savvy about their international visitors. The death of Daffy and his subsequent appearance as a vision to Richard indicates that Richard is not as jaded and worldly as he would like to believe.



# Ko-Samui

## Ko-Samui Summary

Richard, Francoise and Etienne plan to take traditional traveling methods to the coast, then employ a fishing boat to take them to one of the islands that is off-limits to tourists, an island that is very close to the one where the Beach is located. They then plan to swim to the Beach.

As the jeep is taking them to the beachfront where they plan to connect with a fishing boat, Richard imagines he is on patrol with a Vietnam platoon. Once arriving, Francoise and Etienne get a beach hut, and Richard gets one nearby. The three play swimming games in the ocean, practicing for the long swim they have planned in the near future. Etienne is alarmed about being stung by jellyfish but Richard shows him a trick he learned on another trip, how to pick up the jellyfish without being stung. When Francoise joins them, they practice swimming further from the beach. They play a game where they swim, then dive down deep to bring up a handful of ocean bottom sand. Richard does not like moving from the warm top water to the cold sea below.

That afternoon, Richard is alone on the porch of his hut when two American young men, Sammy and Zeph, who are in neighboring huts, stop by during the rainstorm. Sammy and Zeph have marijuana and share it with Richard as they get to know each other. The three men get stoned and laugh about their travels. Sammy and Zeph are especially proud of the acts they play in front of the natives and tourists.

Richard feels very comfortable with Zeph and Sammy, seeing they are like him, backpackers with no travel agenda, just looking for a good time. He realizes Francoise and Etienne are watching him talk to the two men.

The next day, Francoise and Etienne are worried that Richard has included Sammy and Zeph in their plans to find the beach paradise, but he assures them he will not do so. The three split up, with Richard on his own, to search the town of Ko Samui for an unscrupulous fishing boat captain who will take them to one of the islands near their ultimate destination.

Richard wanders about town on the pretense of looking for a captain, but he is easily distracted by a local transvestite, the town, and indulging himself in just walking about watching people.

When he rejoins Francoise and Etienne, they have been much more productive with their time. Richard and the couple meet with the fishing boat captain and make arrangements to depart the next morning. Etienne has an idea about how to protect their backpacks in the swim by encasing them in plastic garbage bags.

That evening, Sammy and Zeph join up with the three on the beach, smoke a joint, and start talking. Richard watches as Sammy and Zeph play their dumb tourist/crazy



American roles with Etienne. At one point, Sammy behaves very erratically concerning a childhood memory and even about one of Etienne's childhood memories. Zeph changes the subject. He mentions urban legends and includes the paradise beach. Etienne and Francoise now think for sure that Richard has told the two Americans about their destination, and Francoise leaves the group abruptly, taking Richard and Etienne with her. There is an uncomfortable time between the three new friends, when they are wondering who can be trusted. After dinner, Francoise realizes she has overreacted and apologizes to Richard.

Richard goes to bed feeling uneasy from the sexual tension between himself and Francoise, and feeling badly about the abrupt end of his conversation with the two Americans.

He dreams of Mr. Duck, and this time they are near the American embassy in Saigon, knowing they will be evacuated by the helicopter on the roof. The helicopter is far away, like an insect, but Mr. Duck assures Richard they will be evacuated.

The next morning, before he departs for the Beach with Etienne and Francoise, Richard makes a rough copy of the beach map Daffy gave him and slides it under the door to Sammy and Zeph's room. He does not tell Francoise and Etienne that he has done this.

## **Ko-Samui Analysis**

Richard's alliance with Etienne and Francoise is threatened by the entrance of Zeph and Sammy, and Richard's easygoing nature sees no reason not to exclude these two in the plans. He fails to see the irony of planning a trip to an exclusive and select beach combined with him giving a map away. Richard's inherent laziness is shown here, as he wanders about town being distracted while Etienne and Francoise are earnestly seeking, and finding, the next step in their journey.

The American boys are stereotypical, and even make fun of their own characters. The author is showing the reader big blond American law students, and who could be more trustworthy of Richard's secret than these two? However, when Sammy overreacts angrily to a simple childhood memory of a total stranger, the author's theme of people not being what they seem is accentuated.

At this stage of Richard's character development in the story he is portrayed as a daydreaming doper who has a misguided trust in his own abilities to assess risks.

Foreshadowing of extreme danger to come is the dream sequence of Richard and Mr. Duck in Saigon on the last day of the American occupation.





# Getting There

## Getting There Summary

Richard refers to the boat captain as a "spiv", which is a British term for a petty thief. Richard keeps his head over the side of the boat the entire trip, mesmerized by the fish and the water. When they reach the island and are dropped off the boat, Richard feels the need to explore the island and be on his own for a while. He sits down for a cigarette, and at this point, the present day Richard talks about how he wants to always remember this point in his story while Thailand was still a good memory and the adventure was still exciting and fun.

When he returns to the French couple, Etienne is preparing dinner and Francoise is down on the beach gauging how long their swim will be to the destination island. The next morning as they begin their swim, they realize that Etienne's idea will not work, and they have to bury the rucksacks on this island. The swim to the other island is longer and more difficult than any of them had estimated, and when they arrive they are so exhausted they sleep. Richard and Francoise awaken in the middle of the night, look at the stars and talk about parallel universes.

The next morning, the three attempt to walk along the beachfront but are stopped by physical barriers, so they head inland. The path is not easy, barred by trees and razor-like bushes, but eventually they emerge on a plateau filled with plants. Suddenly they realize these are marijuana plants, and the field is immense. At the same moment, they realize they are in danger of being caught by the criminals who have planted and maintain these illegal fields. Francoise sees people coming so they all hide. They manage to find a place to hide while the Thai guards, armed with automatic weapons, pass close by but do not discover them. When the guards are gone, Francoise and Etienne begin crying and Richard is unsure what to do next. His thoughts that the well organized Etienne will help him get them out of trouble are dashed when he realizes Etienne and Francoise are looking to him for rescue. They make their way down from the mountain, and after several hours they reach a waterfall. Richard decides to jump and lands in the lagoon. As he emerges from the water and shouts for his friends to jump, a Caucasian man walks out of the jungle and speaks to him.

Francoise and Etienne jump into the lagoon, and the stranger introduces himself as Jed. Jed leads them to the beach community. When they arrive, they are met by Sal, Cassie and Bugs. Richard begins to talk, then faints. When he awakens a few hours later, he expects to find Mr. Duck in a dream, but discovers that he is awake and the blood is not from Mr. Duck but from his own head where he hit it on his jump into the lagoon. Francoise is nearby, talks to him, and kisses him gently on the cheek. When Richard drifts back to sleep, Mr. Duck is hanging above him on the rafters of the longhouse. Mr. Duck alludes to the attention Francoise is giving Richard.



The next morning, Sal is caring for Richard, making sure he eats. As he tries to eat, he tells Sal about how they arrived, using Daffy Duck's map. Mr. Duck was a previous resident of the beach commune and a good friend of Sal's. Richard tells her everything about their journey, but keeps the part about sharing the map with Sammy and Zeph a secret. He is told that the guards and the commune have a live and let live agreement, and they keep to their separate sides of the island. Sal leaves and Richard sleeps again. When he awakens, he explores the area, then heads to the lagoon where he finds people spear fishing. He finds Etienne and Francoise who are laughing and working with the others, and Richard feels like an outsider. When they notice him, Richard is introduced to Moshe, Gregorio and two haughty Yugoslavian girls.

As they walk back to the camp, Richard begins wondering if he had said something stupid to Francoise when he was in and out of consciousness from his head injury. She assures him he did not. As Richard meets the rest of the camp, he feels like a schoolboy on the first day of school. He sees a black man playing a Nintendo game and begins a conversation with him. Richard thinks his favorite part of playing video games is the split second before the game tells him "Game Over".

## Getting There Analysis

This chapter is heavy with symbolism, with the beach commune representing paradise and the journey to it being full of danger and the wrong paths. The boat they are transported in has blood-like grooves in its worn surface. Richard's entire boat ride is spent with his head down looking at fish in the water instead of gazing towards their destination. His moment of clarity in the glade, smoking a cigarette is so significant he deviates from telling the story in present tense to a reflection from another time, in the future, where he is looking back on his time in Thailand. The last leg of the trip to the beach commune island involves sacrifice of their worldly goods, and a long arduous swim. The sustained immersion in water represents rebirth, and as the three emerge from the swim, they face more obstacles, tests of their determination to find paradise. Once the commune is found, Richard seems disappointed and alienated. Richard's addiction to cigarettes and video games show his lack of maturity, and his fascination with excitement shows a detachment from reality.



# Beach Life

## Beach Life Summary

Richard remembers breaking up with his first serious girlfriend, and of talking his father into giving him the money to leave the country. He remembers that as soon as he boarded the airplane, he forgot about his problems, and even that England existed.

Richard soon assimilates into the beach commune in a similar fashion, and he feels he has always lived there. He accepts everything he is given and everything he is told. Richard, Etienne and Francoise all settle into the routines of life in the commune, and are assigned to the fishing detail. Richard's friend who has the Nintendo is Keaty, and he is an unhappy worker in the garden detail. Richard describes the leaders of the various details, and states that Sal is the defined leader of the commune, the one who makes sure everyone else is working according to plan. Jed works by himself, at unknown assignments, disappearing for hours on end. Richard is assigned to sleep in the longhouse with twenty other people, and before they all go to sleep, they have a ritual taken from the Waltons TV show. Someone will say "Night John-Boy", then others will take up the call, naming each of the occupants.

On Sundays, everyone stops working and spend the day swimming, playing football and resting. One Sunday, Richard and Keaty are swimming and trying to see the coral reef without scuba gear. They begin talking about their past travels. Keaty has been there for over two years. Richard asks about Daffy, and Keaty says he barely knew him; however there is a tree that serves as a memorial for past residents, and Keaty offers to show it to Richard some day. That evening the three new arrivals are offered a symbolic shell necklace, and Richard is pleased that they have been so accepted. Richard continues to find Bugs irritating for a number of reasons.

Keaty takes Richard to see the tree. On it are three names, Bugs, Sylvester and Daffy. Richard realizes Sylvester is Sal. Keaty says these three were the first to find the beach, in 1989. There are four zeros on the tree as well, and Keaty explains that means the day they arrived on the island was day zero. Richard reflects on how logical it was that these three travelers grew tired of Indonesia, Bali, etc., and struck out to find a place to call their own. Richard is so happy to be there, and he wishes he could shake Mr. Duck's hand in gratitude for sending him here.

Returning from the tree, Richard runs into Gregorio from the lagoon fishing detail and says he might go back to the lagoon to look at the coral reef. Gregorio suggests he wait for an hour or so because Etienne and Francois are making love. Richard goes to the camp and occupies his time playing Nintendo. It helps distract him from being jealous of Etienne, but the game runs out of batteries and there are no more on the island. As he is sorting out what to do about the game, the head cook, Unhygienix interrupts everyone with the announcement that the roof has leaked into the rice sacks and all their rice is



ruined. This means a trip to civilization to get more rice. Sal asks for volunteers and immediately gets Jed. The group is surprised to see Richard as the second volunteer.

Richard has a vision or dream about Mr. Duck. The dead man has finally stopped the bleeding on his wrists, and says he did it in order to be able to shake Richard's hand, as Richard wanted to do. But when Richard shakes his hand, the wrists explode and blood goes everywhere. As Mr. Duck is leaving Richard's dream, he asks who Richard is planning to bring back from the rice run.

## **Beach Life Analysis**

Richard has the acceptance he wants from the commune, but is still troubled by his feelings about Francoise. He loves being in paradise, but is irritated when his modern toy is out of batteries. He is happy not to question anything, but is the first to volunteer to leave. Richard admires Bugs, Sal and Daffy for creating this exotic escape from reality, but he resents Bugs on several different levels.

Daffy's cryptic question about who Richard is going to bring back from the rice run is designed to create tension about the trip, and reminds the reader that Richard is not to be trusted with secrets.



# The Rice Run

## The Rice Run Summary

Richard and Jed head to another part of the island, which involves a long swim in a cave. Richard loses Jed and almost drowns in the process. He emerges from the water and is surprised to find out the commune has a working boat hidden in a cove. Jed is unable to make the motor work, but Richard finds an on/off button, starts the boat and does not tell Jed how he fixed the motor. Jed and Richard realize they both use a lot of military terms, ETA, FNG, military time, and it is a commonality with them leading to a friendship.

Richard learns that this boat is what the Swedes use for fishing, and it has good equipment in it. He likes the boat because it reminds him of other trips he has taken. He thinks of his travels, and how he never takes photographs or keeps a travel journal, just storing all the memories in his mind. His travel goals are not like a tourist's goals, and the top of his list is getting caught in the middle of a riot.

Richard feels that going on this rice run is important and meaningful for the beach, and is looking forward to seeing Hat Rin and Ko Pha-Ngan, famous places for backpackers and dopers. Jed guides the boat to a remote part of the beach when they land so they can be less inconspicuous. On their walk into town they pass a couple headed in the other direction, but the couple does not even notice them. The two men go to a café and eat cheeseburgers and Thai noodles. Richard decides to wait for Jed while he goes to negotiate for the rice, and occupies himself by wandering around the town. He does not enjoy what he sees, and thinks that the serious travelers, like himself, have moved on and this place is just crowded with ugly tourists. He compares this area with his precious beach and feels very superior and special.

When Richard rejoins Jed at the boat, Jed is angry. Jed has overheard Zeph and Sammy talking about the beach and the Americans mentioned Richard by name. Richard tries to explain that he gave them a map as a backup plan in case Richard, Etienne and Françoise got into trouble. Jed and Richard decide it is not a problem unless Zeph and Sammy go the next step and try to reach the island adjacent to the commune. Jed and Richard fall into a troubled sleep near the boat.

Daffy visits Richard in his dreams, and Daffy is back in his guest-house room, crying. It is the moment before he starts cutting his wrists and he talks to Richard about Korea and Vietnam. Richard tries to make him stop cutting, but he cannot.

The next morning, Richard takes an early morning walk down the beach and finds the couple they passed. The woman is in a drug-induced sleep and the man has overdosed and died. Richard decides to pull the man into the jungle and cover him up to save the woman from distress. He doesn't tell Jed about it until the boat ride home is almost



complete. Jed is very upset, and Richard is strangely happy about the reaction, thinking he is getting to know Jed very well.

## **The Rice Run Analysis**

This return to the world for Richard is upsetting and laced with misunderstandings, unmet expectations, and even another dead body. He finds a kindred soul in Jed, another disturbed young man who is obsessed with secret missions and content to be considered odd by the commune. Richard's removal of the body from the beach appears to have been done just to elicit an expected reaction from Jed.

The comparison of the real world with the beach paradise reinforces Richard's belief that he has found the perfect place for himself. It also adds to his continued feeling of superiority over those travelers who stay on the main road, follow the guided tours and play it safe.



# Prisoners of the Sun

## Prisoners of the Sun Summary

Richard and Jed return to the beach and Richard is disappointed by the lack of interest generated by their trip and by the lack of gratitude for his little gifts. Soon though, he loses interest in the trip himself, and settles back into the daily routine and trance-like state of living in paradise.

A few days later it rains heavily, and the group is hesitant about venturing out to do their chores. Sal confronts them and sends them all to work. Fishing is very difficult with the pouring rain, but Richard manages to kill a shark and is the hero of the hour. Bugs manages to irritate Richard by claiming that he killed a twelve-foot tiger shark once. He starts to tell the story, but Richard and his friends begin laughing and Bugs leaves.

Richard and Francoise are sunning on the beach and begin talking about their families, who seem distant and hard to remember. Richard realizes he knows nothing about the past lives of the people on the beach, only about their past travels. After an unsettling moment on the beach with Francoise, Richard decides to explore another part of the jungle where he finds an orchard of papaya and is surrounded by monkeys who eat the fruit from his hand. Richard is a little disoriented, and ends up at the waterfall, where he interrupts Sal and Bugs making love. Embarrassed, he tells them about the papaya orchard, and Sal asks if she can walk back to camp with him. On the way back, she asks Richard if he will give up his spot on the fishing detail to the unhappy Keaty so Keaty can leave the garden detail. Richard's new job will be to join Jed on his excursions. Richard is thrilled. He chooses, however, to act very disappointed to be leaving the fishing detail, and this makes Keaty feel badly about the entire situation.

Richard is surprised that night that the thoughts that are keeping him from sleeping are those of home. That night in his dreams of Mr. Duck, Daffy is a small chubby boy who wants to show off his room. The little boy is alarmed at Richard's cursing and is concerned that his mother will hear and punish them. At the end of the dream Richard has cursed again, and Mr. Duck threatens dire consequences.

## Prisoners of the Sun Analysis

Richard is making a reputation for himself at the beach, but he continues to be unsatisfied with his life there. His irritation with Bugs is growing, and his unrequited desire for Francoise is a disturbing undercurrent. He takes his usual route to escape reality and finds a papaya orchard that will make life on the beach even better. When offered the chance to join Jed on his missions and excursions, Richard uses this opportunity to manipulate the feelings of some of his companions, just to get their reaction and affirmation of his worth. Richard's unsettled mind takes him back to his

childhood in his dreams, via Mr. Duck, and the author once again employs this dead man's appearance in dreams to foreshadow trouble for Richard.





# In Country

## In Country Summary

It soon becomes obvious to Richard why an additional person is needed to assist Jed: a group of people have arrived on the island next to the beach. Richard is horrified to realize the group is led by Zeph and Sammy, following the map he gave them. Jed knows this, and has asked for Richard specifically. Sal and the others still do not know about the existence of the map. Richard learns that there had been three other groups in the past, and that two gave up before finding the beach. The third group was the Swedes. Jed tells the story of his arrival at the beach and says it was based on a conversation between Sal and Jean that he had overheard on one of their rice runs. Jed says that Daffy was so angry about Jed's arrival that he never spoke to Jed, not once in the thirteen months that they lived on the island together before Daffy left.

Jed and Richard spend all of their time watching the five people on the other island and planning what to do if they group starts towards the beach. They end up doing nothing. One night while returning to the camp from the lookout point, they encounter a sleeping guard on their path. Jed and Richard use knowledge gained from TV shows and movies about guerilla warfare to get past the guard without getting caught and begin to think of themselves as clever warriors.

When they return to camp, Richard is exhilarated about the close encounter and wants to tell everyone, but when he gets his food he finds out it is flavored with papaya and Bugs has claimed to find the orchard that Richard himself originally discovered. Richard is unhappy, and returns to his cot to find a note from Keaty asking him to come to the lagoon. On the way, Richard fantasizes about beating up Bugs in front of the entire camp. When Richard arrives at the lagoon, Etienne and Francoise are there as well, and there are phosphorescent algae in the water and it makes for an other worldly sea.

The next day as Jed and Richard are back at the lookout point, they talk about the Gulf War and the days leading up to it. Richard says he felt excited about the prospect and had wanted to see what would happen. Jed says Richard is bored and needs some excitement. They decide to go steal some marijuana from the big field, and mount a military-like excursion. Richard is disappointed because they don't run into any guards during the mission.

When Richard and Jed return that night to camp, they discover that most of the people are deathly ill because of a dead squid that Keaty accidentally put into the fishing bucket and everyone ate it. Keaty has run off to the beach to get away from everyone's anger, and Richard goes to talk to him before checking on his friends Etienne and Francoise. The scene is horrible, with people vomiting and having diarrhea and passing in and out of consciousness. As Richard is going to the kitchen tent to get water for Francoise, he encounters Bugs, who demands Richard assist him in getting to the toilet. Bugs is humiliated and angry because Richard is healthy, but Richard purposefully ignores



Bugs' demands and goes to Francoise. One of the other women notices this and is angry with Richard for ignoring Bugs. Finally Richard helps but leaves immediately afterwards. Francoise and Etienne are very sick, but not as bad as the others. As Francoise drifts back to sleep, Richard remembers the gentle kiss she gave him when his head was cut, and decides to kiss her; however, his kiss is more passionate even though it is on her cheek. Etienne awakens during the kiss and is immediately angry. He tells Richard that perhaps others in the camp need his assistance and he will care for Francoise.

The next morning, Sal is better and looking for Keaty. Jed finds Richard and sends him to the lookout point because Jed needs to stay and help people. Before he heads to the lookout point, Richard runs into Sal and Bugs and it is obvious Bugs has told Sal about Richard's hesitation to help him, and Sal is angry. Sal sends Richard to find Keaty and the Swedes and send them out to catch fish.

Richard thinks about the Swedes, and speaking from the future, reveals that two of them die soon but that he never got to know them. He goes to the lookout point but is quickly bored, even though he pretends he is on a patrol in Vietnam. He wants to go back to the DMZ, the term he and Jed made up for the dope fields, and wants to see a dope guard. He maneuvers himself within a few yards of the one guard that reminds him of a kick boxer, and this experience thrills him so much he is angry at Jed for having all this freedom and excitement for so long.

When Richard returns to the camp, he finds some people recovering, but the Swedes have not returned from fishing. As Richard goes to the longhouse, he realizes that something else has happened, and the people who live in the longhouse have split into two distinct sections. Keaty reveals that Bugs has struck him. Feelings are raw and tense, and they are all distracted from the fact the Swedes have been gone far too long.

Karl returns carrying Sten, and reports that the Swedes have been attacked by a shark. Sten is dead, and Karl is losing his mind. Richard tries to think of how to help, but he is at a loss so backs away from the people trying to help Karl. Richard's first thought is for a cigarette, and the second one is to find Christo, the third Swede. He goes to the lagoon and looks for him. He swims to where the boat is kept, and finds it untied and adrift. Christo finally appears in the lagoon and he is badly injured. Richard brings him out of the lagoon and on the beach. Suddenly Mr. Duck is there with them.

## **In Country Analysis**

This section of the novel is appropriately named "In Country". Reality is making a stark appearance in Richard's life, as the Americans show up on the adjacent island, the entire camp is devastated by violent illness, and the star fishing team has been decimated by a shark attack. Richard is beginning to have difficulty separating fantasy from reality, and for the first time, Mr. Duck appears not in a dream, but while Richard is wide awake. Richard has considerable power when he is one of the few healthy people

in camp, and uses it to degrade Bugs and to indulge in a Vietnam war fantasy. As predicted by Mr. Duck in the dream of the previous chapter, his behavior is costing him.



# Incoming

## Incoming Summary

Tensions in the camp, temporarily distracted by the shark attack, are still high. Factions are separating out, with one group on the side of Bugs, and the others drifting apart. Sal is trying to keep everyone together, to return to the paradise like state. Jed is spending all of his time caring for Christo, who is suffering from internal bleeding. Sten is dead, and the funeral is scheduled for the next day, near the waterfall. Karl has gone to the beach, dug a hole where he stands all day, and won't be persuaded to return to the camp. Etienne is campaigning for the group to take Karl to the mainland for help. Francoise and Richard talk about the kiss, and she says to forget about it.

Sal finds Richard, accuses him of evading her, and instructs him to tell everyone she will be calling a truce between the divided parties when she conducts the funeral for Sten.

At the funeral, Sal announces that three days from now they will celebrate the Tet Festival, an annual event on the beach. She decides to send Bugs and Keaty to the mainland for party supplies. She announces that Etienne's request to take Karl to the mainland has been denied.

Richard goes to the lookout post and has a conversation with Mr. Duck, who has been appearing there daily since the shark attack. Mr. Duck and Richard converse about everything, including the camp situation. They talk about Mr. Duck's relationship with Sal, and about model airplanes. Then Richard notices that the Americans have built a raft and are ready to launch it towards the beach island.

Richard returns to the camp to tell Jed and Sal about the raft. He is surprised to see that the tension has relaxed considerably in the commune. Richard finds Jed at Christo's side and learns that Christo has only a couple of days to live. Jed learns about the raft and announces that when the Americans arrive, everything will fall apart at the beach. Richard tells Sal the Americans and their group will be on the island by the next day.

Richard thinks about Karl, and how he is now the symbolic albatross around the neck of the commune. He goes to see Karl, standing in his hole on the beach. Richard tells him to get over it because Christo is dying. Richard returns to the camp and goes to see Jed and Christo. Christo looks bad, and Richard tells him Karl is sleeping next to him.

## Incoming Analysis

Sal temporarily distracts the group by delivering a stirring speech at Sten's funeral, but it is not enough for Richard. His discovery that the Americans have built a raft and will arrive the next day shakes Sal to the core, and Richard searches for a way to help bring the commune back together. He confronts Karl and thinks about the burden of Christo. This section is titled "Incoming", which is a term used in warfare to alert your

companions that missiles or gunfire is on its way to this location. It is the author's way to alert the reader that the next chapters will be filled with attacks from without and within for the commune. Sal is losing her control over the people on the island, and the impending fall of the hierarchy creates tension and foreshadowing of the downfall of the commune.



# FNG, KIA

## FNG, KIA Summary

Bugs and Keaty leave to get the party supplies, and Richard meets up with Jed and Sal who are deciding at which point Richard should encounter the Americans when they land on the island.

Mister Duck is not waiting for Richard at the lookout point, but instead is waiting for him on the path from camp. He is armed with a gun and is wearing camo paint. On the path, Mister Duck is wheezing and slowing down Richard's progress and even accidentally fires off a round from the M-16. They decide to leave it buried along the way. Richard decides that Mister Duck cannot accompany him to the beach where the rafters will land. When Richard sees the group, they have made it to the plateau and do not realize they are on a dope farm. Richard is close enough to hear what is being said, and watches as the guards find the Americans and begin beating them up. Another group of guards arrive, with a man who appears to be the leader, and when questioned, Zeph and Sammy tell the leader about the map. Mister Duck tries to get Richard to go help them, but Richard stays where he is and the American group is dragged away by the guards.

Richard heads back to camp, furious with Mister Duck. Mister Duck wants to know why he did not intercept the group before they made it to the field, that this might have saved them. Richard screams that he did not do that because he did not want to, he wanted to see what would happen. Suddenly they hear gunfire and know that the Americans and their companions have been shot. When Richard turns around, Mister Duck is gone.

Richard has thrown up, but he continues to see himself as staying alert and calm. He returns to the camp, and Sal is waiting for him by the waterfall. He tells her what happened, then he walks around and around the pool, trying to regain his sanity. He decides to go see Karl. The two men fight, with Richard trying to force feed Karl. Karl jumps up and runs away. Richard chases him but trips over a tent guy line. When the others come to see about the noise, Richard claims Karl attacked him. Etienne reacts in disbelief, saying only this morning he had been sane and clear. Sal backs up Richard, saying Karl had tried to attack her that morning. Richard knows this is a lie. Later, Richard goes to tell Jed about the rafters. Jed is far more concerned about Christo, and this irritates Richard. Jed seems to be losing his mind.

That night, as Richard is sleeping, Mister Duck returns, and this time he is in the camp, talking about how they built it back in 1990. Mister Duck talks about why they built it, to escape the cancer of tourists and decay they found everywhere they traveled during the eleven years he and Bugs and Sal were together. Mister Duck says he knew the end to their paradise was coming when Jed arrived, and he knew it could not be stopped. Mister Duck says it is okay, it all works out.



## FNG, KIA Analysis

Richard's other self has almost completely separated from him. Mister Duck represents another side of Richard, the one who faces reality. No longer in dreams alone, Mister Duck wisely arms himself and appeals to Richard to meet the Americans before they enter the dangerous plateau. Richard is having a full blown psychotic episode as he prolongs his encounter with the Americans just so he can see what happens, and the worst possible outcome ensues. The Americans and their friends are killed because Richard gave them the map and then failed to warn them about the dangers awaiting them on the island. When Richard returns to camp, he takes out his frustration on the already demented Karl. Richard is destroying paradise with every move he makes.



# Beaucoup Bad Shit, Game Over

## Beaucoup Bad Shit, Game Over Summary

Sal is back in charge of the group, organizing them for the festival. Richard stays inside the longhouse, and tries to figure out what Mister Duck is up to. Sal finds Richard there a few hours later, and tells him it is his responsibility to kill Karl. At first he says no, then agrees that he will do it. Sal leaves, happy to return to her Tet Festival preparations. Sal believes that eliminating Karl will eliminate all of their problems, but Richard knows that the Thai guards know about the map and that is still a problem.

Richard soon discovers that Karl has taken the boat and fled the island. While looking for Karl, Richard is approached by Etienne, who wants to restore their friendship. Etienne is behaving strangely, and Richard realizes that everyone in the commune believes Richard is Sal's hit man. Everyone has implicitly agreed that these are the right things to do: eliminate Karl, handle the intruders, eliminate Christo. Richard is shocked.

Richard and Etienne decide to go home, off the island. They convince Francoise of the danger of staying and make their plans to depart the night of the Tet Festival. They decide to invite Keaty and Jed to go along, and the plan is to use the raft the Americans brought. Each person is motivated to leave by fear of what will happen if they stay, and no one but Richard has all the facts. Richard allows Sal to think he has eliminated Karl, and she happily returns to her Tet Festival plans. Richard visits Jed and tells him they are leaving that night; Jed says he will not leave as long as Christo is alive.

The festival begins, and the commune is very relaxed. This is due to Richard's group spiking the stew with marijuana, a relieving of the perceived tensions, and some fermented coconut juice. All of these factors lead the commune to let down their guard and their inhibitions. At the party increases, Richard goes to see Jed to prepare him for leaving, and Jed is asleep. Dismayed to see that Christo is still alive, Richard smothers the Swede to death. When he returns to the party, Etienne and Francoise are drunk, He causes both of them to vomit and become sober. They decide to wait an hour before leaving. It is too late.

Richard encounters Mister Duck and asks why he is there; Mister Duck replies cryptically, "for the horror".

The Thai guards crash the party and display the map to the shocked commune. Richard is dismayed to be the first one with a gun pointed to his head. His concern is that he will be shot first and miss everything. He lets the Thai guards know that he has been spying on them, and they reveal they have known it all along, and have been making fun of him among themselves.

The leader of the Thai guards bring out the map that they found on the Americans and tell the commune there can be no more visitors or arrivals on the beach. While Richard





faints from the beating the guards give him, the other guards dump the bodies of the Americans and their friends into the longhouse and shoot up the building.

The commune's reaction to the appearance of the bodies is bizarre. They attack the dead people with knives and tear them apart. Richard's map is discovered and when they realize what has happened, the commune attacks him next, stabbing him several times. While he is being attacked, Richard is talking to Daffy, again about the evacuation in the helicopter on the roof. Richard sees Jed and Keaty with fishing spears, keeping the others from hurting Richard further. Jed stabs Sal, and they escape to the raft. Etienne, Keaty, Jed, Richard and Francoise leave the island.

As the section entitled "Game Over" begins, the group reach safety and call their parents, who send money for plane fare home. Richard resumes a normal life in England, and stays in touch with Keaty and Jed. Richard reflects on the group and what happened. He does not see Mister Duck anymore, but Richard still smokes dope and plays video games. He describes himself as carrying lots of scars, and he likes that image of himself.

## **Beaucoup Bad Shit, Game Over Analysis**

Paradise is truly lost, just when Sal and the others believe all has been resolved and the beach is safe for them again. The violence and insanity of the ending scenes are meant to bring the reader out of any peaceful feelings they had about the beach commune and show how wrong everyone was to think paradise could exist. Richard is the killer of paradise. His selfishness knows no bounds and he resents being the first one shot because he might miss something gory happening. Safe in England months later, he views the entire experience as a further tribute to him as an experienced traveler. Richard shows only a mild curiosity about the lives he ruined, and no remorse about killing Christo, or through his neglect, causing the deaths of Zeph, Sammy and their friends.



# Characters

## Richard

Richard is a young British man in his early twenties who has developed a habit of using travel to exotic destinations his version of escaping reality. He feels comfortable enough in foreign countries to purchase dope, stay in guest-houses that are off the tourist trail, and speak to strangers.

In this novel, Richard lands in Thailand without a specific agenda, and chooses to find a hidden beach reported to be a exotic paradise. He joins forces with a young French couple, and with the help of a map given to him, locates the beach and begins living in the commune. Dissatisfied with paradise, Richard manipulates the occupants, plays out his Vietnam war fantasies, and eventually ruins the paradise for everyone through his behavior and selfish attitude.

Richard lusts after Francoise, clumsily spies on the Thai guards, craves excitement, obsesses about video games, is a chain smoker and a marijuana addict, tortures a deranged man, murders Christo and causes the downfall of the beach commune.

Richard has a need to blend in and to belong to the country he is in, but that need does not extend to learning the language or the needs of the people. Richard goes through life as a curious observer without regard to anyone's feelings but his own. His purpose in life is to satisfy his own urges to smoke cigarettes, marijuana, play video games and see interesting and exciting things. He does not want to assume responsibility for anything that he does.

Richard's character lacks depth and emotion. He causes events to happen just to see what the reactions of the people around him. When reality arrives, he escapes, and when he cannot escape physically, he escapes by dividing part of himself into the apparition of the dead stranger, Mister Duck. His psychosis is so deep he has conversations and physical fights with Mister Duck, and at no point does Richard realize Mister Duck is him, and not just some ghost haunting him.

As he sits safely at his English job, months after his trip to Thailand, he shows no remorse for his actions and is proud of the scars he carries.

## Etienne

Etienne is Francoise's boyfriend and traveling companion. He is French, in his early twenties, and an experienced traveler. He has short hair, a slim build, and is attractive. He is the organizer for the three friends getting to the island, with plans and ideas, but once they arrive and danger is present, Etienne looks to Richard for rescue. Etienne blends in well at the commune, but when Karl becomes deranged, Etienne is angry to see that the commune puts the survival of their secrecy above helping Karl and taking



him to the mainland. Etienne is afraid of Richard, but joins with him in plans to escape. At the end, it is Etienne who, along with Jed Keaty, saves Richard and escapes.

Etienne and Richard meet formally on the steps of the police station, although they had seen each other at the guest-house previously. In Etienne, Richard recognizes a kindred soul, a traveler with no agenda, a seeker of the good life. The difference is that Etienne has a beautiful girlfriend and Richard does not. Etienne sometimes seems to take the beauty of Francoise and his great luck in finding her love for granted. While at the commune, Etienne awakes one night to see Richard kissing Francoise on the cheek, and becomes jealous. This causes friction between Etienne and Richard for much of the time they are at the commune, until Etienne realizes he might be at risk of expulsion or worse from the commune if he does not regain Richard's good favor.

It is Etienne who organizes the plan to find the beach at the beginning of the book, and motivates Richard until they reach the commune's island and plunge into the dope fields. At that point, he loses all nerve and turns to Richard for direction and protection. As the novel develops, Etienne's character fades into the scenery for a bit, playing only the role of Francoise's object of affection. As conditions on the island deteriorate, he begins to take a more serious role, first by demanding Karl be taken for help, then by leading the party that rescues Richard and escapes from the island.

## Francoise

Francoise is Etienne's girlfriend and traveling companion. She is French, in her late teens or early twenties, and is attractive enough to turn heads as she walks past people. She has a tiny dolphin tattoo on her wrist. Francoise is a seasoned traveler, and believes the beach to be perfect in every way. She flirts with Richard but loves Etienne. In the novel she serves mainly as the unattainable love interest for Richard, but he is too stoned to pursue her in reality. She becomes a languid figure in the background, only joining in the escape plans because Etienne is leaving.

## Daffy Duck

Daffy Duck is not his real name, but Richard never finds out the man's true identity. Daffy is a Scottish traveler who commits suicide in the first part of the novel, but returns regularly to speak to Richard in dreams and drug-induced visions. Daffy is the one who carefully drew a map to the beach, and who inspired Richard to seek out the alleged paradise, in spite of the many disparaging remarks about the place, overheard by Richard before actually meeting Daffy. Daffy has a boxer's face, with the lower jaw being too large for the rest of his face. His nose appears to have been busted many times. The man is thin and has difficulty carrying on a conversation. His method of suicide is slitting his wrists, which creates a tremendous amount of blood, and when he appears to Richard in the rest of the novel, he is always bleeding, and the wrists dangle helplessly. Mister Duck, as Richard calls him, is actually Richard's other self, the one



that faces reality rather than escaping it. This concept of facing reality is so foreign to Richard's behavior that the only way he can deal with it is through this ghostly figure.

## Sal

Sal is a woman who is the undisputed leader of the beach commune. Her name is short for "Sylvester". No one knows her real name. Bugs is her lover, and the two of them, along with Daffy, discovered the beach and created the commune in 1989. She is chubby, has long hair, a round face and heavy breasts. Sal has a way of making people feel comfortable, do their work and listen to her. She is considered fair and just. Sal steps over the line when she tells Richard to kill Karl. Her obsession with keeping the peace at all costs is one of the downfalls of the paradise she, Bugs and Daffy created. At the end of the novel, she has succumbed to the insanity of ripping apart the dead, and is speared by Jed.

## Bugs

Bugs Bunny is not his real name, but he, Daffy and Sal founded the community and have devoted their lives to maintaining it since that time. Bugs and Sal are lovers. Richard and Bugs do not get along, and Bugs is one of the protagonists in the story. Bugs tries to lord over Richard at the beginning, but Richard gets his revenge when Bugs is very sick and Richard refuses to help him.

## Jed

This is the first member of the commune that Richard, Etienne and Francoise meet after their run from the Thai guards. Jed is British, deeply tanned and has a heavy beard. He wears a tattered pair of blue shorts and a shell necklace. Jed is about Richard's age. Jed has been a part of the commune for some time, but is reserved and not part of any of the work details. Sal has assigned him to protect the commune from intruders and from the guards, but this mission is secret. Jed is the first to learn of Richard's map being in the hands of Zeph and Sammy, and Jed is the first to discover that the Americans are on the adjacent island. Jed's true character is revealed as he begins to care for Christo, and he becomes obsessive about Christo's recovery. When danger arises, though, he returns to reality and helps rescue Richard and get to safety.

## Zeph and Sammy

Zeph and Sammy are two tall blond, athletic American young men who Richard meets on the beachfront at Ko Samui. The two friends are Harvard law students, and seasoned travelers who have various games they play with the people they meet along the way. One game is pretending to be stupid surfers like a famous character in an American movie, and the other game is to pretend they are referring to residents of Niger, Africa, when they use the offensive term of "nigger". Richard makes a copy of the



map and slides it under their door before leaving for the beach, never dreaming of the consequences of that action. Zeph and Sammy follow the map and, with some other companions, are beaten and shot by the Thai guards at the dope field.

## Keaty

Keaty has been on the beach for two years, hates being on the garden detail, and spends hours playing a Nintendo game. Richard and Keaty strike up a friendship over the game, and Keaty plays the part of the guy who does everything wrong. Keaty's most serious blunder was throwing a dead squid into the fishing pot, making everyone sick. Keaty is not a strong character, but serves as a foil to Richard, making him seem less shallow and selfish in comparison to Keaty. Keaty is one who escapes with Richard and his group and ends up in England, working at the same company as Jed.

## The Swedes

There are three characters who are often referred to as "the Swedes" because they are unnamed in the novel until their boat is attacked by sharks. Karl becomes deranged from the loss of Sten during the attack, and refuses to leave a hole in the lagoon beach until Richard frightens him away. Christo is mortally injured but takes a long time to die, and Richard eventually smothers him.



## Objects/Places

### Backpack/rucksack

This is a piece of luggage carried on the back by the use of straps. Whereas traditional tourists carry their belongings from location to location in large cumbersome suitcases, the backpack traveler carries everything they need in a backpack, with the idea of making them more mobile and flexible in their travel

### Thailand

This country is located in Southeast Asia and has long been known for the availability of marijuana and other mood enhancing drugs. It is the setting for the entire story.

### Vietnam War Movies

There is a genre of war movies set during the Vietnam conflict. These movies generally feature a special lingo laced with references to drugs and supported by a soundtrack of 60s rock music and the heavy beat of helicopter blades.

### Daffy's Hand Drawn Map to the Island

The map is homemade but intricately drawn by Daffy who used colored pencils. It is well marked. The map is symbolic as it is the plot driver for the entire excursion by Richard, Etienne and Françoise, because without it, the beach would have remained a rumor.

### Marijuana

This is a plant grown under tropical conditions that when dried can be smoked or steamed to create a mood enhancing smoke. Richard, as well as most of the beach commune and the visitors to Thailand, are addicted to marijuana.

### Boats and Rafts

As the paradise beach and the route to the beach is remote, boats are the only way to travel. They represent rescue and transition in this novel.

### The Longhouse

The longhouse was one of the first structures on the beach and represents the solidity of the commune. It is where the bulk of the occupants sleep, and the cohesiveness of



this group represents the stability of the commune. When Bugs strikes Keaty, the house is divided and it is the beginning of the end of peace on the beach.

## **The Commune**

This beach paradise represents the longing of seasoned travelers to find an unspoiled paradise that has all the amenities of Thailand without common tourists, and actually, without the Thai people.

## **Handmade Shell Necklaces**

These necklaces are worn by all residents of the commune and serve as a symbol of acceptance to the community when a new person is given one.

## **Richard's Map to the Island**

The map was drawn crudely by Richard, who copies the one he was given by Daffy. It plays a critical role in the demise of the commune because it is the reason Zeph and Sammy come to the island and get killed.

## **The Rice Run**

The regular trips to civilization to obtain a very basic food supply item represents the commune's dependence on the real world. The group tends to ignore the trip and the trip takers because it is a reminder to them that they do not truly have the freedom they believe they have there on the beach.



# Themes

## Paradise vs Reality

Paradise means different things to different people, but to backpackers such as Richard, Etienne, Françoise, and most of the residents of the beach commune, paradise is defined as the ultimate travel destination. Paradise is a place where these seasoned travelers can swim, sun, smoke marijuana and talk about themselves forever, with few outside distractions. They are amenable to performing menial jobs as a part of being allowed to stay, but they reserve the right to veto the inclusion of any new members to the island. This paradise is soon revealed to be a place where the occupants are not free or safe, as they are limited to one side of the island only, and there is a band of armed dope dealers in close proximity.

The author's message is that paradise is unattainable, and for Richard, it is boring. Richard's languid and elitist approach to travel as a form of escapism is abruptly shaken with the discovery of Daffy's suicide.

Throughout the novel the characters diligently attempt to reach paradise, and once there, try to bask in the sun and forget about the real world.

The commune sees itself as the ideal existence, but their vision is only possible if they ignore the reality of their situation. They consider themselves to be independent, but they require regular trips to civilization to get rice. They think they are pilgrims and natives, but they are not indigenous to Thailand, and one of them regularly uses a modern game for entertainment. The commune relies heavily on marijuana for their leisure, but this product is stolen from a group of ruthless dope dealers who choose to look the other way. Sal believes she is the benevolent leader of a peaceful community, but when chaos arrives, she loses control of not only the group, but of herself.

Richard sees paradise as not living up to his expectations. At first he is enthralled with it, then he becomes bored and irritated when the batteries for the Nintendo game run out. While living in paradise, Richard begins fantasizing about war.

This theme is present in every chapter of the novel, in every dialogue, in every movement of the plot. The author creates the picture of paradise, lulling the reader into thinking these characters have truly found heaven on earth, and then he begins pounding reality into the characters through betrayal, deadly secrets, murder and violence.

## Self View versus Reality

For a person who sees himself as cool under pressure, Richard fails every test of his character and integrity when danger arises. Richard is proud of his reactions to travel dangers in the past, and sees this experience on the island as honing those to the point





of being applicable to a Vietnam soldier in the field. As Richard sneaks up on the drug guards, he believes himself to be stealthy and secretive, but the guards later reveal they have known he was there all along.

Richard considers himself to be desirable to Francoise, but in reality the woman has only mildly flirted with him, being devoted to Etienne, and only considering Richard a friend. He sees himself as helping the drugged woman on the beach by moving her dead boyfriend into the jungle, but in reality he did nothing to help anyone. Richard smothers Christo, thinking it will allow Jed to escape, but it is simply an act of murder. Richard sees himself as immensely talented with video games, but in reality, this is a useless skill.

Sal believes herself to be a strong leader with the respect of the group, but instead they talk about her behind her back, and when the true crises erupts, she is the same as everyone else and no leader at all.

Bugs considers himself the strong, silent Clint Eastwood stoic character, but when beset with illness, he is a weak man who rides on Sal's shirrtails.

Jed sees himself as a stealthy watchdog, guarding the commune and responsible for their safety, but he loses his control and hides in the sick tent under the pretense of nursing Christo when the arrival of the Americans is imminent.

All of the characters are revealed to be very different from the reader's initial understanding of them.

## Coming of Age

When Richard begins his journeys in Thailand, he is becoming jaded about travel, and finding that it is no longer proving to be the immersible escape he is searching for. He is proud of his travel experiences, but wants more danger. His goal in traveling, now that he has checked the sight of abject poverty from his list, is to be caught in a riot with bullets screaming around him.

What happens to Richard in the ensuing months, as the story goes on, should be taken by this young man as a valuable learning experience. He faces death several times, by almost drowning, by injuries, by being attacked by soldiers and by his fellow commune residents, and by exposing himself to the numerous hazards of traveling and swimming in exotic locales.

Yet, at the end of the novel, Richard seems to be his same selfish character. The fact he has ruined lives, caused great bodily injury, murdered an innocent person, and made some serious errors of judgment, has not made Richard a better person, just more smug about himself.



Richard seems destined never to come of age, no matter what befalls him. He comes away from this life changing experience in Thailand proud only of the new scars on his body.

## **Tourists versus Indigenous People**

Richard and his fellow travelers think they are superior to the people in the lands they visit. They have no respect for their rituals, traditions, history or language. The Americans have a standard joke between them as they meet people from other countries, and Richard himself spends no time learning the language or anything regarding the people whose land he wanders about freely. The author tells us of the danger in underestimating the natives throughout the novel. Richard is fondled by a Thai man as Richard is walking through a crowded Bangkok street, as if Richard is just an animal to be petted and ignored. Richard's encounter with the Thai cleaning lady is a parody of his belief he is helping and her belief that he is a stupid tourist trying to tell her how to do her job. The Thai guards are ignored by the commune, although the commune's lives depend on the men allowing them to live. Richard sees the guards as laughable and dopey, part of his Vietnam fantasy, but not real people. He is reminded painfully of how wrong he was in that assumption when he is beaten by them on the night of the Tet Festival.

None of the natives in the novel are what they seem to be, and the author warns against stereotyping people, as Richard and the other travelers trample through the countryside, looking for their own paradise while being disrespectful of the owners.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told in entirety through the eyes of Richard. All of the action is in his presence or provided to the reader through a conversation with Richard. His actions and reactions propel the plot.

This point of view provides the reader with intimate knowledge of Richard and how he thinks of himself and those around him. When Richard creates the ghost of Daffy in order to handle the complex feelings he is experiencing, the author begins building the character of Daffy to converse with Richard about what to do next. However, the character of Daffy is an extension of Richard.

The story is told as if Richard is somewhere safe and is speaking of this adventure to a friend. He mentions once that the telling of the story may help him find meaning and purpose. Richard relays what happened in chronological order, only interrupting occasionally to remark on the circumstances as a narrator who knows how the story will end.

The plot is moved forward through conversations with others, but mostly as a narration from Richard and his actions.

## Setting

The action and story of the novel is set in Thailand, a country in Southeast Asia, that reminds Richard of the many war movies he has seen involving Vietnam. The country is crowded and a mecca to the backpacking type of traveler like Richard, Etienne and Francoise. The people of Thailand grudgingly accept the tourists because of the boost in economy, but it is clear the Thais do not like the way tourists treat them or their land.

Thailand's islands are unbelievably beautiful and exotic, but the travelers are already tired of them, communicating to each other through guide books and conversations that some of the once pristine beaches are ruined. An urban legend of a still perfect beach rises from these rumors.

Richard and the French couple begin their journey in Bangkok, but as soon as the possibility of an untouched beach is presented, they begin a search for it. Travelling by standard methods, then by unorthodox ones, and finally swimming a long distance, the three arrive at the beach commune, which becomes the dominant setting for the remaining action of the novel.

Scenes are also played out in the dope field on the other side of the island, on the adjacent island facing the commune's island, and the civilized island where the group



purchases their rice, but the majority of the plot is revealed at the beach commune longhouse, kitchen and lagoon beach.

Choosing a beach setting is in keeping with the title of the work, and plays into the usual vision of a paradise that includes white sandy beaches, palm trees, unblocked views of large expanses of blue water, and the feeling of leisure and safety.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is direct, with a simple vocabulary. There are three basic sources for some of the less common terms: Drug user nomenclature such as "joint" and "spark one up", catch phrases from Vietnam war movies such as "KIA"(Killed In Action) and "FNG" (Fucking New Guy) and Nintendo game terms, such as "game over" and "bosses" are used by Richard in relaying the story. The story is told in a conversational tone with sparse descriptions of surroundings or characters, leaving the character development to be revealed in actions and dialogue.

Sentences and conversations are short, and sometimes do not move the plot forward but instead serve to show the reader how shallow and jaded these characters have become in their travels. Most conversations between Richard and the other characters involve a one-upmanship concerning how many countries and how many off the beaten track experiences they have had so far.

The most intense conversations are between Richard and his other self, Daffy. Richard is passionately arguing with himself regarding how he should deal with situations, and Richard's selfishness invariably wins.

The author allows some sexual tension to build between Francoise and Richard, but Richard never acts on his feelings towards her.

The author uses the descriptions and conversations at the beginning of the novel to create a desire in the characters and even the reader to find paradise. When found, the beach is presented as a sunlit haven for free souls, where the travelers find peace and tranquility. As this paradise unravels, Richard's language changes to harsh references to Vietnam, visions of death and physical violence. The final scene at the commune is filled with gore and bizarre behavior, a direct contrast to the peaceful setting when the three friends arrive at the commune in the beginning.

## Structure

The novel consists of 439 pages, grouped into twelve major sections, with each section having three to six chapters. Each chapter and section is titled, and the titles encapsulate the chapter with a pithy saying or a sarcastic remark about the contents of that chapter. The main twelve sections have titles that are fairly simple, perhaps describing a location of the plot, but as the action accelerates, the titles become more indicative of battle terms.



The plot is a simple tale of what happened to Richard, and the only subplots are Richard's continuing descent into madness as he cannot separate his fantasies from reality, and the feelings he has for Françoise.

The action moves quickly through the chapters, and the section breaks are logical. At the end of each section there is major plot movement and that movement is punctuated by a dream or vision that Richard has of Daffy.

The novel begins with Richard arriving in Thailand and ends with him sitting in England telling the story. Richard begins the story by saying he is a jaded traveler whose wish list of traveling experiences is topped with the desire to be in a riot. At the end of the tale, he is proud of his physical scars, and content to believe he has had an excellent adventure that did not dissuade him from traveling in the future.



## Quotes

"The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok, on the Khao San Road. Khao San Road was backpacker land." Bangkok, Bitch, p. 5, Richard

"Sometimes it feels to me like I walked into the glade and lit the cigarette, and someone else came along and finished it." Getting There, Littering, p. 67, Richard

"Pretty quick, for an FNG. You did the jump in twenty-three minutes. It took me over an hour, but I was alone so it was harder." Getting There, Falling Down, p. 85, Jed

"After a little while, you'll see that this is a wonderful place, as long as you appreciate it for what it is." Getting There, Talk, p. 96, Sal

"Escape through travel works." Beach Life, Assimilation, Rice, p. 115, Richard

"If I'd learnt one thing from traveling, it was that the way to get things done was to go ahead and do them. Don't talk about going to Borneo. Book a ticket, get a visa, pack a bag, and it just happens." Beach Life, Revelations, p. 139, Richard

"Normally small talk is enough for me to form an opinion on someone. I make quick judgments, often completely wrong, and then stick by them rigidly." The Rice Run, Jed, p. 153, Richard

"The thing about secrets is you can't keep them unless you tell at least one other person. It's too much pressure." Incoming, Secrets, p. 337, Sal

"You could have broken the fucking orders!"

"I didn't want to fucking break them!" FNG, KIA, Cheap Shots, p. 360, Daffy, then Richard

"I wish you could have been with us, Rich. I wish you could have been with us from the very beginning." FNG, KIA, Same-Same, But Different, p. 377, Daffy

"I could not have been more wrong, but that was the way I was thinking. Full of hasty schemes and plans, and the fucked-up optimism that comes from desperation." Beaucoup Bad Shit, Efforts, p. 393, Richard

"First! If I had to get shot, then tenth, eleventh, twelfth - fine. But first. I couldn't believe it. I'd miss out on everything." *Beaucoup Bad Shit, Apocalypse*, p. 422, Richard.

"I'm fine. I have bad dreams but I never saw Mister Duck again. I play video games, I smoke a little dope. I got my thousand-yard stare. I carry a lot of scars." *Game Over, Strange but True*, p. 439, Richard.

## Topics for Discussion

Why is a pristine beach in a remote, exotic location so desirable to the jaded backpack travelers? Why do they require someplace so exclusive, and from where do they get their feelings of superiority over the tourists and even the natives?

Why does Richard, who was born the year after the Vietnam War ended, so fascinated with the terminology and scenes of this war? How does the author weave this obsession into the fabric of the character and the plot?

Why does Sal emerge as the leader of this paradise commune? Discuss the role of women in this novel. Compare the characters of Francoise and Sal.

There are more than twenty residents of the commune, but the author only focuses on the actions and conversations of less than ten of them. Why is this? Why these specific characters, and what role do they play in the unfolding of the plot?

When Sal, Bugs and Daffy begin the commune, Daffy puts zeros on the tree, indicating that the first year is Year One. What is the symbolism of this? Is it truly the beginning of life in paradise?

How different would the beach commune have been if marijuana was not so available and prevalent for the residents? Do you think it would have ended in the same manner?

What is the symbolism of the physical barriers to the remote beach? Why isn't it more accessible? Why are the residents worried about newcomers?

Discuss the irony of the commune buying their rice from a neighboring island and of Keaty's obsession with video games while living in paradise.

Discuss the character of Richard. Is he likable? Does he deserve to escape relatively unscathed from this adventure?

Is paradise on earth attainable? Describe your version of heaven on earth and discuss how this could be achieved.