

Coming Through Slaughter Study Guide

Coming Through Slaughter by Michael Ondaatje

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Plot Summary

Coming Through Slaughter by Michael Ondaatje examines the life of Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, pioneer jazz performer, barber, journalist, family man, and "infamous man about town," who goes insane and dies institutionalized.

Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, pioneer jazz performer, barber, journalist, family man, and "infamous man about town," suddenly disappears from New Orleans after slashing and fighting with a customer he is barbering in Joseph's Shaving Parlor. Buddy has learned that Tom Pickett is having an affair with his common-law wife, Nora Bass. After he has been missing 5-6 months, Nora contacts Detective Webb, Buddy's friend since adolescence, who worries about Buddy surviving on his own. Through interviews Webb learns that Buddy is in Shell Beach, living with Jaelin and Robin Brewitt and making love with Robin.

Webb visits photographer E. J. Bellocq and obtains a photograph of Buddy. He learns that Buddy convinces whores to pose for Bellocq. Bellocq burns down his room around himself. Buddy, meanwhile talks to Robin about Bellocq's influence in getting him to think beyond music. Other witnesses confirm Bellocq's strong influence. After two years, Webb visits Shell Beach and convinces Buddy to come home. Buddy decompresses between worlds for a time in Webb's cabin, philosophizing about music, and desperately missing Robin. He returns home to find his old band mate, Willy Cornish moved in with Nora and joins them. Buddy reestablishes relations with his children and after an attempt at platonic love, has sex with Nora. She tells him that she hates Bellocq for changing his personality.

On his fifth day home, Buddy joins the Henry Allen Sr. Brass Band for a parade. Everyone turns out to see and hear him. During the march, Buddy imagines a woman dancing to his notes, anticipating him constantly, and then feels blood spurting from broken throat vessels as he blows his coronet too hard. Buddy is patched up but then institutionalized for 24 years as a schizophrenic. Life is brutal and sterile, broken only occasionally by a few incidents of high drama. For a while Buddy barbers fellow inmates but then turns within and stops communicating. He dies and is buried in a unmarked grave. Searching for information about his life and career, the anonymous narrator finds that Buddy is forgotten. One photograph survives but no music, for he refuses to be recorded or to accept any fame.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

One can still drive through Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's neighborhoods and hear stories of notorious prostitutes, gamblers, and piano players. Buddy cuts hair in Joseph's Shaving Parlor, where liquor arrives at intervals and is shared around. Buddy is usually drunk by noon and cuts more flamboyantly, so smart customers come early. His day is organized: walking the children to school by 8 AM, cutting hair until 4 PM, sleeping with Nora Bass until 8 PM, and taking the stage with Cornish, Lewis, and Mumford. Buddy also published the gossipy newspaper, *The Cricket*. Nora is the only person he trusts with his fears but often breaks into fury with her.

Some 5-6 months after Buddy goes missing, Nora reports it to a drinking, shaking, lecherous police detective, Webb, Buddy's long-time friend, who worries about Buddy surviving on his own. The clues must necessarily come from Webb's own memory. Buddy is obsessed with death. Webb recalls when Nora's widowed mother visits, disappears, and is found strangled in her car. Buddy and Nora drive the corpse to the police station where the car is stolen. Webb proudly determines that it must have been a freak accident involving her pet boa. Webb recalls Buddy's nightmares about his children dying, in one of which he tries to cut off a hand.

Webb visits the musician Crawley who, after enthusing about a purging fast, tells of seeing Buddy board a boat at Shell Beach. There Buddy had fallen instantly in love with Robin Brewitt, wife of pianist Jaelin, with whom he is billeted for a three-night concert. Buddy plays gentle music as the couple goes up to bed and in the morning boards a day cruiser. Next day, Robin tells Webb that Buddy has gone away and the Brewitts then disappear. Nora is amazed only about the boat. Buddy recalls the first morning, finding Robin half-naked in the kitchen, fetching orange juice.

Webb is 20 and Buddy 17 when they work together at coastal fun fairs and first sense independence. They live together for two years, Webb collecting hanging magnets and Buddy building up strength in lips and lungs on his coronet. Webb trains for the police force while Buddy becomes a barber's apprentice, making the most of his ability to listen well. At Joseph's Shaving Parlor he often gets overly involved in his clients' stories and offers often bizarre advice to watch the reaction. Frank Lewis, who is critical of Buddy's music but admires his genius for jamming pain and gentleness in every number, recalls Buddy's entrance to the New Orleans music scene at age 22, walking into a parade one day, stepping out of the crowd at 300-yard intervals, playing a few notes, and moving on. Two years later, Webb visits New Orleans to investigate the murder of a Pontchartrain man while Buddy had been playing and tried to divert the audience. Webb attends a performance but finds it too coarse.

While Webb is investigating Buddy's disappearance, Buddy watches a woman chop carrots and recalls watching band members board the train at Shell Beach, looking for



him as he hides in the station, planning to live for years with the Brewitts. He never again wants to see anyone from his past. He drinks away his remaining dollar and bums around in silence for two days, appreciating the heat and smell of restaurant vents. Eventually, he returns to the Brewitts, shaking, asking to burn his stinking coat, and is taken in.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces several key characters and a few colorful minor ones. The fictional biography's subject, Buddy Bolden, is succinctly summarized as "a barber, publisher of *The Cricket*, a cornet player, good husband and father, and an infamous man about town." Each of these facets begin to be brought out, with emphasis on a sudden outburst of anger controlled at the last second to leave a window shattered but his hand uncut. Buddy's common-law wife, Nora Bass, is a retired prostitute. She becomes more important in the story going forward. At this point, she alerts the police to Buddy's sudden disappearance—some 5-6 months after the fact. This introduces Webb, the friend of Buddy's youth, now a police detective. He is first seen drunk and lecherous on duty but proves a decent sort in the long run. Webb and Buddy live together for three years before setting out on their career paths. As young men, Webb is the dominant character, but once Buddy becomes famous in New Orleans music, the roles reverse. Webb worries that Buddy cannot survive on his own and that he will leave few clues, chiefly in drawing on Webb's own memories. He interviews a witness, who places the non-nautical Buddy on a boat and in love with a married woman in Shell Beach.

The interview with Crawley captures the spirit of the novel. Formerly overweight, Crawley is emaciated from a total fast that he claims helps clean out the system. Webb must wait out the graphic scatological explanation before hearing about Buddy meeting Jaelin and Robin Brewitt. Meanwhile, Buddy is shown in great detail watching a woman deftly chop carrots. The perspective shifts to a critique of Buddy's musical genius, but his style is an acquired taste. Frank Lewis is glad Buddy never lets himself be recorded and describes his first dramatic entry to the New Orleans music scene. Buddy's flamboyant wardrobe on the occasion becomes a motif. The perspective then shifts back to Shell Beach, where Buddy bums around before asking the Brewitts to take him in. Buddy's first-person and an anonymous narrator's third-person alternate. The shifts blends and fit Lewis' description of Buddy's jazz style. Typical is the narrative of Buddy's breaking the window without hurting his hand, a shift to the first of many minimalist poems, "Nora's Song," a series of variations on "Dragging his bone over town" and the introduction of Webb leering over Nora.

The chapter opens with an evocation of Buddy's world, marked by sun-bleached advertising signs on streets about which no one writes songs. This is reiterated at the novel's conclusion. It includes sketches of historical events, including the famous murders of and by renowned 19th-century prostitutes Bricktop Jackson and "One-Legged Duffy" Rich. The narrator describes Olivia the Oyster Dancer making a raw oyster shimmy down her naked body and French Emma's "60 Second Plan," which refunds fees if she fails to make a customer have an orgasm within a minute, and other



ways to fleece customers. The stories are gratuitous, as are many incidents throughout the novel (like the long discussion of the birds in Audubon's drawings) but add texture and entertain.

Ondaatje's irregular (and often absent) punctuation, sentence fragments, and ambiguity of who is speaking at any given time often leave the reader wondering what has happened in a given passage. Does Buddy merely dream of amputating his hand after dreaming his child has died or does he do it after waking? It is clarified only when the police arrive with the official announcement of his other child's panicky announcement.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Crawley resumes describing the Joseph Shaving Parlor to Webb before Buddy's own account of cutting hair takes over. Melting ice in the window cool and adds atmosphere before watering the only plants on Liberty St. A revolving fan makes stretching impossible. Snipped hair gets into everything, but shaving soap gives Buddy the cleanest skin in town. Buddy studies the faces as they laugh nervously at the changes he makes. He dreams about slashing their trusting throats and feels enslaved. He takes little care of his talented hands, although his worst nightmare is having them severed.

Webb visits Cornish to get a photograph of Buddy, who sends him to the professional photographer Bellocq. Webb is looking through prints when Bellocq pins him with his tripod and tells him to leave Buddy alone. Webb gets Bellocq to talk about Buddy convincing whores to pose for Bellocq. Bellocq prints a copy of Buddy and the band for Webb and, claiming a busy night, sends him on his way. Buddy is the only one not looking solemn. Bellocq then makes another print and destroys the negative, along with an old photo of Nora, whom he has not seen since the wedding. Webb knows Bellocq is holding something back and investigates him. He finds a connection between social Buddy and busy, self-sufficient Bellocq odd.

Meanwhile, in the Brewitts' bathtub, Buddy soaks off the sweat and dirt before falling asleep. Robin wakes him with passionate kisses and convinces him to stay, despite Jaelin. Buddy tells her about Bellocq whose photographs are windows and who has no interest in Buddy's music. Bellocq makes Buddy see that Buddy is just playing games. While they have sex, Buddy plays "Cakewalking Babies" on Robin's back. Another time, Robin enters Buddy's room, locks the door, and insists on them remaining fully dressed and silent as they have sex standing up against the door. Jaelin understands and steps out overnight, returning for long conversations about diverse things, once including the newly-discovered Wolf-Ryat star.

Meanwhile, having interviewed everyone in Buddy's life, Webb discovers nothing useful. Bellocq is most surprised by Buddy's disappearance and only vaguely aware of how their conversations have tempted Buddy to the "edge of the social world." Bellocq realizes that he had been the patronizing one. He wants to tell Webb later about Buddy's relationship with the Brewitts. Only one photograph of Buddy survives the fire, which Bellocq sets intentionally, walking around a circle of chairs to ignite the wallpaper.

Feeling himself the only object between water and sky, Buddy recalls a gathering at which Robin flicks cream in his face, and he answers with a jug of milk. All are shocked silent. Buddy leaves like a coward until the guests leave and is surprised to find Robin still awake downstairs. She wants to swim and argues that he must accept that she is married to Jaelin and in love with Buddy. Buddy wants to hurt neither of them.



Cornish tells Webb to see Tom Pickett, whom Buddy has cut up. Pickett lives in a closed room among flies he has invited in to swarm over him. He has 5-6 scars on his once-beautiful face. Buddy recalls the incident: Having finished work on The Cricket and avoiding the bottle, he sees Pickett enter during a thunderstorm. Pickett accepts a drink and, as he and other beautiful people always do, says how he wants his hair cut. Pickett is abnormally hard to draw out until he responds to joking about Nora by grabbing Buddy's throat and holding a razor to Buddy's throat and accidentally slices off a nipple and cuts his face. Enraged, Buddy works loose and hits him with a chair.

Pickett takes up the narrative: Buddy has blood and tears streaming from his face and Buddy grabs the leather strop, aims it at Pickett's head but misses, shatters the mirror, and hurls large shards at Pickett, missing narrowly. Nora enters, horrified and screaming, and is ordered away. The strop breaks Pickett's elbow and damages his knee. Pickett drops the razor and Buddy slams him through the front window and follows him into the street. Rain pours down on their exhaustion. Nora emerges to throw Coke bottles at them until Pickett flees, cursing Buddy, and later tell Buddy's friends that he is crazy. Buddy feels none of Nora's comforting.

Brock Mumford declares that Buddy is impossible before he leaves. The band breaks up. Mumford observes that no one leaves at their peak, and Buddy certainly does not. He is still playing fine, but his temper does not wear off as usual. Buddy cares nothing about Mumford's problems and worries that people are watching the door for him. Like many women, Nora had needed the beautiful Pickett and fights him off without reference to Buddy. Buddy consults Cornish, who is everyone's ear, but gets no information on Nora, and loses nerve before biting through his wrist. The ecstasy before death marches through Buddy while he sleeps.

Buddy sees the reconstituted band play in Lincoln Park and heads to the boarded-up barber shop. Dude Botley describes him as a strutting rooster, breaking in nervously, drinking, crying, and beginning to play softly, a mixture of blues and hymns, which is dangerously blasphemous.

Webb goes to the Brewitts to find Buddy and finds him in the bathtub, unable to stop laughing to have been tracked down. Webb tells him about Bellocq and offers him the Pontchartrain cabin to get back in condition to play music. Buddy submerges himself, wanting to drown, but comes up gasping, recalling Robin's orange juice years earlier. Webb's stories over breakfast erect a wall between Robin and Buddy and places Buddy's past and future on the table. On the last night, they are out to wound one another. They go out for a bag of ice and play with it sexually. They know they will go crazy without one another and memorize one another's face. She is gone when he awakens and leaves for Webb's cabin, feeling too dead to lust after the bus passenger next to him.

Webb's cabin is familiar. Buddy recalls how Webb breeds him into something better, removing his immaturity and sends him away at the right time. Now, his leash has brought him back like a breeder of bull terriers. Buddy realizes that he always wants what he is not doing and is scared, being cut in half and not wanting answers. When



Buddy urinates in the yard, Webb's dog goes in the same spot; when Buddy urinates where the dog goes, the dog figures it has taught him "hound civilization" - and may be right.

Feeling tired, Buddy smells sulfur, as Bellocq always had, to revive himself. Bellocq would talk all the time about everything but music and make Buddy feel like a waste. Still, Buddy had spent whole evenings with him. Buddy had loved him for his ability, silently, simply to be, relying on nothing, trusting nothing - even Buddy. Bellocq had tempted Buddy away from audiences and offered "mole comfort."

Buddy recalls playing cards with the Brewitts and then leaving Jaelin downstairs to go up and sleep with his wife. Jaelin would eventually practice piano to remove his anger. Buddy and Jaelin's wife both love him for it. The heartbreaking music is like bullets flying into the bed. In Webb's closet he finds an old radio and listens to John Robichaux's waltzes. He hates that he enjoys the clear forms and large curves. He has always hated the way Robichaux dominates his audience, imposing emotions. Buddy wishes those Robichaux arches could come in and leave when they please without beginning or end. The right ending can mean the opposite of what one thinks. The station signs off.

Buddy calls fathers those who put their bodies over barbed wire for him to slide into the region of hell. Their sacrifice seduces him into music. They are Mutt Carey, Bud Scott, and Happy Galloway. Galloway in particular teaches him to play a "mood of sound" that he can recognize and remember, every note new and raw, never repeated. Carey is a technician, always reaching for the purest note. The ancestors die or fail and Buddy climbs over them and tries not to become them. People are drawn to opposites, even in the music that they play.

Buddy picks up a dirty black dog and snuggles with it at night for warmth. It tries out all the furniture but prefers the floor. Lonely, Buddy notices that someone has moved into a cabin across the lake. He is jumpy about the noises of animals and rain. Buddy notices how passion can twist around and choose people. Nora loves Buddy and then suddenly wants Pickett. Robin wants Buddy and intelligent, sensitive, love, pained Jaelin does not object. Buddy knows that he is hurting Jaelin but goes on. Buddy feels no power over anything in the world.

Buddy feels lost without Robin. He catches colds, drinks, and avoids food. Buddy's memory of Robin fades into Nora's and every other woman's within four weeks.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Long Chapter 2 begins by describing the barber shop in which Buddy works, the classiest and most comfortable spot in town. The ice set each morning in the front window to cool the establishment, frost the window, and eventually water the only shrubs in the neighborhood becomes important later in the chapter. A major new character is introduced and quickly disposed of. Photographer E. J. Bellocq is deformed by hydrocephalus ("water on the brain"). He reluctantly provides Webb a photograph of



Buddy's band before sending him on his way. Ondaatje goes into great detail describing the image appearing on the paper in the acid bath and Bellocq's fetish for photographing local prostitutes, not only in the nude. He describes how Bellocq waits for one model to tire of sitting silently and begins to contemplate what she might have made of her life and then snaps the shutter. While hurrying Webb out the door, Bellocq says that he has a busy day planned. He burns the room down around himself in a disturbing, graphic scene.

Knowing none of this, Buddy talks about Bellocq with Robin, amazed that Bellocq has no interest in Buddy's music and helps Buddy see that Buddy is playing a game. Later, after learning about Bellocq's suicide, Buddy reflects more about Bellocq removing his concentration on audiences. Buddy and Robin's sexual affair under Jaelin's nose is repeatedly depicted developing the theme of Buddy's helplessness to control anything in his life. He does not want to hurt noble Jaelin but knows that he is. Ondaatje develops the musical theme by having Jaelin pour his anger into the piano keys while the couple makes love upstairs. The notes are like bullets hitting the bed. Buddy finds that loves attach for no discernible reason and then attach elsewhere. Eventually they all blend together in the mind.

During one session in bed, Buddy fingers "Cakewalking Babies" on Robin's back. The next page is dedicated to a single enigmatic sentence: "Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like the sky." It is not, as seems likely, part of the lyrics, but becomes a recurring motif later in the novel.

Webb's investigation next turns to Tom Pickett, whose face Buddy carves up in the barber shop just before his disappearance. Pickett lies in bed, his wounds crawling with flies, whose presence he welcomes. He had a beautiful face. Pickett opens the narrative of his fateful haircut, emphasizing that Buddy has not been drinking. Bored when he cannot get Pickett to talk, Buddy charges that he has been having sex with Nora. The story shifts to Buddy's first-person perspective. They battle with razor, chair, brass-terminated leather strop, and shards of mirror glass. Buddy pauses the action to note the cost of the mirror he destroys: \$45. He also notes that his elbow is broken, having earlier asked Robin not to lean on that arm during sex. They tumble through the front window into the street and Nora emerges, throwing Coke bottles to break up the fight. At first she throws between them and then takes aim at Pickett, who goes away, cursing, to tell friends that Buddy is crazy. This seems confirmed when he visits a friend to find out if the stories about Nora are true. Getting nowhere, Buddy tries to kill himself by biting through his wrist to the blood vessels. Another crony tells of Buddy drinking and playing his coronet inside the boarded up barber shop. Dude Botley describes with superstitious horror how Buddy is intermixing blues and funeral hymns. He is sure that if Buddy ends with a hymn, God wins; if on the blues, the Devil does. There are a few allusions to religious superstition in the novel. This is the most pointed and Buddy's fate of being institutionalized is seen by some as a judgment for such blasphemy.

Webb eventually tracks Buddy down at the Brewitts and convinces him to come home, with a stopover in his empty cabin. Buddy broods that Webb's stories erect a wall between him and Robin. The narrative is in Buddy's voice, addressed to Webb, who is



clearly not present, a kind of commentary on Buddy's hesitant re-entry to the world. He develops the analogy of a pit bull trainer to how Webb has dealt with him, helpfully but painfully, and then shifts to describing how he imitates Webb's dog in urinating to establish territory. Buddy prides himself on achieving humor. He then thinks about Bellocq's influence on him (Buddy), admiring Bellocq's ability to trust no one and nothing. Buddy realizes that the way he is talking about Bellocq that it could be interpreted as hatred but insists that he loves him. The long shot is that Buddy feels like his life is a waste.

The chapter then focuses on music. It begins with Buddy telling Webb (who is still absent) about listening to John Robichaux, a contemporary jazz musician and composer, whose work Buddy has always disliked as too controlling of the audience. He muses in non-technical but specific musical terms about how jazz ought to flow before segueing into brief descriptions of older musicians whom he considers "fathers" more than teachers. He compares and contrasts their styles and tells how he walks over their dead bodies to become something they are not. The conflict of generations is clear: a dying jazz musician hating the new style in a genre that embraces improvisation. The introduction to this section pictures the old timers falling on barbed wire so others can scramble over. The image evokes the trench warfare of World War I, but the story is set a decade too early. It could point to escapes from slavery, but the novel has no references to that peculiar institution. It is probably simply an image of the suffering of creativity, a brutalized version of generations standing on the shoulders of their predecessors.

Chapter 2 ends showing Buddy utterly lost without Robin, making a new crisis inevitable.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter opens with John Joseph being interviewed about Buddy losing his mind and dying in the "bug house," before shifting to Buddy meditating on riding a bus with his career on fire, feeling like a parcel, famous as a fucker, barber, and cornet player - labels all. He arrives in New Orleans penniless in April 1907, and walks to his old home. Cornish answers. He has been living with Nora for two months. Buddy does not care. Cornish is uncomfortable as Buddy silently studies the ceiling until Nora returns. They have a long conversation before Buddy fondles and kisses Nora all over and then redresses her, so as not to destroy friendship. Buddy sees the world through Cornish's eyes. Everyone says that he has changed and do not like it. He does not analyze Cornish's part as when editing *The Cricket*. Buddy reviews four months' worth of back issues that Nora has stored. He reads about sex, money, pain, sweat, and happiness. *Cricket* is also Buddy's diary, so it talks about Nora, marriage, and surprise lovers.

On his second day home, Buddy walks the children to school. They and their friends warm to him as he teaches the tricks of driving teachers crazy. He goes to Chinatown to see Pickett but no one knows his whereabouts. Buddy walks to the waterfront in the evening mist, observing the quarter-a-fuck, mattress-totting whores. Those who try to sneak back to Storyville get their ankles broken by their pimps and are called "gypsy foot." All are "riddled with the pox" and avoid the affluent as dangerous. They watch Buddy pass harmlessly. On the third day, Buddy walks the kids to school, telling jokes, but not enlarging them as he has always done. Admirers bring bottles of Raleigh Rye, which he accepts but does not drink. Nora is like a sister. Old friends visit and tell predictable stories too loudly. When Buddy mentions Pickett and laughs at the memory of maiming him, all fall silent. This pains Nora and she wants to throw everyone out. That night Buddy falls asleep comforting Charles, Jr., and wonders if Cornish normally does this. Nora begs him to talk. She still loves him but not like before. She is sadder for Cornish. They laugh about Buddy's red shirt, and this leads to sex.

Bellocq is afraid of Buddy being present the first time he photographs whores, but Buddy pulls him upstairs. Bellocq is impressed by the wallpaper and imagines photographing a girl against it. Buddy has Nora gather the girls to try to explain Buddy non-commercial enterprise. Bellocq is bent but not weird. No one is willing to pose. Buddy continues building Bellocq up: kind, professional, and talented. It is morning and they have been up all night and need to sleep. Buddy concentrates on Nora posing to demonstrate but does not really know why Bellocq wants the pictures. He and Nora have sex. Next morning, Buddy fetches Bellocq to Nora's and carries him upstairs. Nora never talks about Bellocq until this last night. She had hated him for his harmlessness, loneliness, without ever seeing his beautiful pictures. She hates him for turning Buddy into what he now is. The next morning, Buddy's daughter tells him about an awful dream in which Mum makes them eat terrible food that is good for them.



Buddy joins the Henry Allen Sr. Brass Band for the weekend parade on his fifth day home. People come from all over to hear him. Starting at noon, they march south down Iberville, and Buddy's music separates into something powerful, spinning and crazy. A woman slides up to Buddy for a hug. He shoulders her away and squawks notes every 15 seconds or so. Buddy struts as they reach the heavy crowd. Buddy speeds up the tempo to lose the other musicians and the woman anticipates his every note in her dance. She is both Robin and Nora. With a few long, jerking notes Buddy sees her dance notes he cannot hear. She seems to be testing him. Worn out, he squawks and roars. His throat aches and finally bursts, sending up blood in gushes and preventing his breathing. Cornish puts him gently down. This is what Buddy has wanted.

A data sheet on Buddy includes relatives, addresses, and employment before noting that he at age 31 "goes mad" during a parade, is taken to the House of Detention, where he undergoes corrective surgery and is then judged insane by Judge T. C. W. Ellis and ordered to the insane asylum north of Baton Rouge. He lives there 1907-31 and dies. The streets that Buddy leaves 70 years ago are faded and void of sound except the author's camera shooting the barber shop in which Buddy probably worked. No one has heard of him other than when a researcher asks about this "famous musician." The signs are faded and the paint is flaking. The author is Buddy's age when he goes mad. When he hears that Buddy attacks himself in front of mirrors, they have something in common: slicing his cheeks and forehead and shaving his hair, bringing the enemy to the surface. Something draws the author to Buddy, a legend who goes berserk, without knowing anything about him. Some say that it is caused by playing the devil's music and hymns together. It takes him out of the "20th century game of fame" and in 1931 lands him in Holtz Cemetery, where a high water table strips flesh away in six months.

Buddy recalls receiving painkillers every three hours in the House of Detention and being unable to speak. He gets sponge baths from beautiful nurses. He repeatedly pictures his hand going up in agony and being caught in the circling fan. Lionel Gremillion gives an interview at the East Louisiana State Hospital. Buddy's mother Alice writes twice a month and calls him Charles. When he dies 4 Nov. 1931, his sister Cora Bolden Reed is notified and asks that Buddy's body be given to a different undertaker than the prison assigns. He is buried in an unmarked grave at Holtz Cemetery. The hospital's Protestant Chaplain, Rev. Sede Bradham considers Buddy hyperactive in performances at the hospital. Dr. Robard notes that Buddy had been a patient barber and never claimed to be a "jazz originator." Gremillion theorizes about paranoia and a possible "endocrine problem." A typical day is described. Buddy lives in both open and closed (psychopathic) wards and is assigned to cut hair when in open ward.

Buddy recalls being walked out of the House of D and put on a train with Civil Sheriffs H. B. McMurray and T. Jones for the rail ride to "the pound." As they pass through fields of wet chicory, Buddy laughs loudly and is swatted in the nose by McMurray. After his operation, Buddy's throat is held together by needles and cloth. He is anally raped the second day. They know he is a barber but he cannot tell them so. They step on his throat. Buddy lays out strings to tell time by the sun's shadow. He is angry at being explained.



Inmates get up at 4:30 AM in summer, have breakfast in silence at 7 and hold up their forks to be collected after eating. Monday mornings Buddy cuts hair. Bertram Lord comes every week and tries to grab scissors, which have to be turned in at the end of the shift and are locked away. Lord tries to get Buddy to escape with him but is ignored. Buddy is impressed when Lord makes his attempt, using the distraction of Antrim arguing with Dr. Vernon about which arm to inject to detour his fits. Lord grabs Vernon and holds the syringe near his eye, ordering guards out of his way and doors opened. He is on the loose for two days before being brought back and beaten. He limps because he secrets in his shoe a new weapon: a Coke bottle bottom.

Cornish reflects on how jazz becomes famous and all he has of Buddy is a photograph given to him by Webb. Cornish sees Buddy as having great talent and wisdom stolen from others and then smashed. Bellocq corrupts him; Buddy comes back gentle after two years and then goes crazy in public. When it becomes clear he will never leave the hospital, only fools who hardly know him talk about him. Cornish marries Bella Davenport in 1922, suffers a stroke while playing, and Bella asks about his band mates. She learns that he and Buddy are "just like that" and most of the musicians lose their minds. In 1924 at a loud party, Webb talks to Bella about Buddy, whom he had expected to return to normal. Webb had visited regularly until learning from Nora of Buddy's death. Pickett is shot and killed on Poydras St. that year. Webb sees that they are getting old.

To protest guard rapes, bad plumbing, lack of heat, and forced labor, the inmates cut their tendons, using Lord's coke bottom, which he passes under 28 doors. Buddy is the only one who refuses. At breakfast he enjoys the brilliant sunlight and follows its path all day. Nora writes Webb that Buddy dies years before he does, but Bella insists that Cornish has visited Buddy recently and found that he does nothing except look at and touch about twenty objects constantly. Webb flees the party to throw up.

Tulane University Library transcribes recorded interviews in the 1960s with Frank Amacker. William Russell, Alan and Sandra Jaffe, and Richard Allen are also present. Amacker is a 75-year-old pianist. On reel 1 (21 Jun. 1965) he plays some made-up rag, discusses playing with hands far apart, and tells about several murders he has seen. On reel 2 he plays some waltzes, but never what anyone requests. On Reel 3 he plays more rags, some with obscene titles. A digest provides a brief biography. Amacker feels God is still saving him for a special purpose and would like a good singer like Perry Como to turn one of his songs into a big hit and make him famous. On Reel 4, Amacker characterizes Buddy as the loudest, playing his "old lowdown music" and contrast him with various "masters."

T. Jones tells about Buddy's journey to the hospital. The first 100 miles is by rail. At the time they do not know he is famous and he keeps a typical emotionless face, the Mississippi like a friend traveling beside him. Now Jones knows that Buddy is important but also sick and crazy. The throat bandage is bloody by Baton Rouge, so they cover it. There are no problems along the way. They continue from Baton Rouge 48 miles by wagon, stopping for a swim but Buddy will not go in the river. They never see him after signing him in with the Superintendent. This is land in which Audubon draws his birds.



Buddy sits in a gray room that darkens into the corner. It has one window. He listens to his hair rustle in his shirt and looks away when things go past. He is 31 and there are no prizes.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Part 3 uses ostensible documents to characterize Buddy and the depressing institution he inhabits until his death and burial as an indigent. Buddy terms the mental hospital the "bug house." These documents are scattered throughout the chapter.

Buddy's five days in New Orleans are chronicled day by day. He finds that Cornish is living with Nora and accepts it much as Jaelin Brewitt had endured him. Buddy and Nora keep their relationship fairly platonic for a while before having sex. He resumes walking his children to school and becomes popular with their friends teaching them tricks to play on the teachers. He wonders about Cornish's relationship with the children in his absence. He fails to find Pickett but wanders through the dock area, which allows raw depiction of the whores there whose condition is deplorable. Contrast this with the opening stories about famous 19th-century prostitutes, who give the profession a sophisticated cachet. Even those working for Lula White whom Bellocq photographs are not hopeless untouchables for all the violence that they endure. Better late than never, Bellocq is sketched trying to set up his project without telling Buddy why he wants to do it. Buddy is left with weak selling points. Nora admits to hating Bellocq for changing Buddy's personality. Finally, Buddy joins the parade. The story is half-told earlier in the chapter and filled out here in a surrealistic look at Buddy's playing for a wild dance partner who, for lack of mention by any of the witnesses, must occur entirely in his feverish mind. The dancer is an amalgam of Nora and Robin. As his ecstasy builds, the dancer anticipates every note. The horror of being unable to draw breath and filling his coronet with blood is truly chilling. An operation to repair burst blood vessels in his throat leaves him unable to speak during the period that his fate is set.

It appears from Buddy's sedated description that raping new inmates is standard procedure. The outline history of the institution shows that it struggles continually with overcrowding and suggests that brutality is a constant. It is one of the factors against which the inmates strike in a uniquely insane way, by hamstringing themselves with a jagged Coke bottle bottom. Buddy alone refrains. The Coke bottle is smuggled into the hospital by one Bertram Lord when he is brought back after a break-out and beaten. In a dramatic scene, Lord takes a doctor hostage, holding a syringe at his eye, in order to be let out. Buddy sits in his barber's chair, watching calmly, and refuses Lord's calls that he come along. Returning, Lord claims his new limp comes from failing to negotiate a fence; they seem in the course of beating him not to have frisked him.

Cornish again has his say, blaming Bellocq for driving Buddy crazy. He marries Bella Davenport and promptly suffers a stroke. She looks into his companions' characters and discovers that he and Buddy are "just like that," implying a gesture of intimacy. She horrifies Webb by suggesting that Buddy in 1924 is not long dead, but that Cornish has seen him recently. Spurious details in the story show Webb that it is false. Enigmatically



it is said that Webb has "brought Buddy home." This follows a description of how Holtz Cemetery where Buddy is buried is so water-logged that it strips bodies clean in a year. To this an anonymous ghost comforts Buddy's spirit: it is there in the District among them, not in Holtz with its plastic flowers and crucifixes. Perhaps he has been re-interred.

The story shifts to a series of transcripts from audio interviews with a jazzman, Frank Amacker, which provides interesting tidbits about the music scene. Only at the end is Buddy mentioned as a loud player but not ranked among the masters. Civil Sheriff T. Jones, one of two who had accompanied Buddy from the House of Detention to the hospital, tells about the trip, obviously defensive over his partner having punched Buddy for laughing too loudly. Jones claims that the trip is uneventful and ends with delivering him into custody. He is so insistent on this point that one wonders if he is part of the rape. Slaughter, LA, is the last of the towns through which they take Buddy and where they stop for a swim that he only watches. Coming through Slaughter is Buddy's last bit of freedom. To Jones' account is appended a description of naturalist John James Audubon painting birds in these parts. Nora Bass' mother had sat with Buddy discussing those paintings and the supposed neuroses of the species that Audubon depicts. That scene had seemed overdone in context. Recalling the painter as Buddy figuratively goes under water and drowns is illuminating.

Buddy gets the last word, sitting in his barren room at age 31: life gives no prizes. The reader is left to wonder about how Buddy spends the next half of his life and how he dies.



Characters

Charles (Buddy) Bolden (1876-1931)

The subject of this fictionalized biography, Buddy plays jazz coronet and briefly attains renown in 1905 and 1907, in the Storyville neighborhood of New Orleans, LA. He comes to town one day at age 23, dramatically jumping out of the crowd at intervals to play a few stirring notes as a band passes by in parade. He joins a band that plays at Masonic Hall, Globe, and Jackson Hall, with occasional gigs elsewhere. Buddy also works as a barber at Joseph's Shaving Parlor from around 8 AM until 4 PM and is usually drunk by noon. Before work he walks to school his two children, daughter Bernadine by Nora, and a son, Charles, Jr., by a woman named Hattie. After work he sleeps with his common-law wife, Nora Bass, and then after dinner goes to play jazz. Between times he compiles a newspaper, *The Cricket*. Buddy's musical influences include Manuel Hall, Happy Galloway, Bud Scott, and Mutt Carey.

A great influence on Buddy's growing up is a friend named Webb, who goes on to become a police detective, and who investigates Buddy's sudden disappearance, abandoning family and work. Nora reports it 5-6 months after the fact. Webb discovers that Buddy's success at Joseph's is partly due to his ability to listen. He frequently offers bizarre advice in order to watch the reactions. Sometimes this gets him in trouble. His mind becomes the street. Hearing that "beautiful" Tom Pickett is having a sexual affair with Nora, Buddy confronts and then slits him up. They brawl in the barber shop and tumble bloody into the rainy street, where Pickett spreads word that Buddy is crazy. Buddy is heard that night sitting in the boarded-up shop playing a blasphemous combination of jazz, the Devil's music, and hymns. He and the band then go to a gig at Shell Beach where he lodges with Jaelin and Robin Brewitt. Buddy ditches the band and remains for two years; he has sex with Robin throughout this time. Webb finally locates him and talks him back home after determining that photographer E. J. Bellocq had influenced Buddy away from music and audiences before killing himself.

Buddy returns to find trombonist Willy Cornish living with Nora and makes the best of it for four days. He then struts along as the prime attraction in the parade through the District, playing in Henry Allen Sr. Brass Band. Buddy imagines a beautiful woman dancing beside him, anticipating his every note. He plays so hard that he ruptures blood vessels in his throat and collapses. The damage is surgically repaired and Buddy is ordered sent to the rather barbaric East Louisiana State Hospital as a psychological patient. There he spends in silence the last decades of his life and is buried in an unmarked grave. Decades later, researchers can find nothing about him. He never allows himself to be recorded and only one photograph of him survives.



Police Detective Webb

Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's friend from their youths, three years older than Buddy, Webb (first name never mentioned) has become a police detective and is obsessed with Buddy's sudden disappearance once he is informed of the disappearance by Buddy's common law wife, 5-6 months after the fact. Webb arrives looking rather disreputable, obviously drunk and leering at Nora Bass, a former prostitute whose services he has used. Webb claims, however, to be fond of Buddy and to admire his "great talent." He denies wanting money from Nora to investigate and begins a thorough search with little more to go on than memories and hunches. He knows Buddy says little and will leave few clues; nevertheless, he begins constructing a chain.

Webb has a cabin in Pontchartrain, which he and Buddy share in their teenage years, where Webb hangs magnets from the ceiling and is fascinated by their interaction. Buddy acknowledges that Webb helps him mature at the time he needs to do so. Buddy develops his technique at playing coronet and studies barbering while Webb begins training for the police force. Webb checks in on Buddy when Buddy goes to New Orleans and starts his rise to fame, becoming the dominant factor in the pair. Webb returns again later as part of a murder investigation and attends a concert, where Buddy's style of playing is beyond him. Buddy visits Webb for advice before his wedding; Webb puts his cabin at the couple's disposal for their honeymoon. When Buddy's mother-in-law turns up murdered, Webb investigates it and is pleased to figure out from a news report from France how the woman is accidentally—and bizarrely—strangled. Webb's two years of interviewing Buddy's friends leads him to Shell Beach where Webb goes to convince Buddy to return. Buddy spends some time in the familiar cabin alone before making the final move, which leads to his going insane and being institutionalized.

Webb faithfully visits his mostly-silent friend until Nora informs him that Buddy died. There are indications but no outright evidence that Webb collects Buddy's bones from the original burial site to "bring them home."

E. J. Bellocq

Another historical figure, Bellocq is given brief, dramatic, and unhistorical coverage as the premier cause of protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's dramatic personality change that leads to his tragic life. Well-known to the New Orleans police, Bellocq is an itinerant photographer, earning a living by shooting ship hulls for the Foundation Company. His avocation, however, is capturing images of the neighborhood whores. When Buddy suddenly disappears after slashing a friend in the barber shop where Buddy works, Detective Webb visits Bellocq hoping to obtain a picture of Buddy to help in the investigation. After making a print and destroying the negative, Bellocq arranges chairs so he can set fire to the wall paper all around his room, and perishes in the blaze.



Bellocq is hydrocephalic, scarcely taller than the tripod that seems a part of him. He suffers typical difficulty walking, but compensates, and is unlikely to live past forty. Before the incident Buddy talks the reluctant whores, from whom he gets stories for The Cricket, to pose for Bellocq. Bellocq remains silent about his reasons for the project, so Buddy is left with little to commend him other than his high artistic style and good nature. Among Bellocq's quirks is lighting candles to revive his spirits from the sulfur fumes. Buddy and Bellocq converse for whole evenings, with Bellocq talking all the time about diverse subjects but avoiding music. He makes Buddy feel like a waste, but Buddy loves him for his ability, silently, simply to be, relying on nothing, trusting nothing - even Buddy. Bellocq succeeds in tempting Buddy away from audiences and offered "mole comfort." Buddy's common-law wife, Nora Bass, the first whore whom Bellocq succeeds in photographing, hates Bellocq for changing Buddy's personality.

After the fire, 89 glass plates survive. Some of them Bellocq has slashed, defiling the depicted beauty. The print that Webb takes away before the fire is the only physical evidence of Buddy's existence.

Nora Bass

Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's common-law wife, Nora bears him a daughter, Bernadine, and raises his son from a previous affair. She works as a prostitute for Lula White for three years before Buddy "marries" her and helps convince her colleagues to pose for photographs by E. J. Bellocq. Nora is the only person in whom Buddy confides his fears. Her quirks include believing in the sandman even after the children do not and she bites Buddy's shirt collars until he takes to wearing collarless ones. They fight but also make love every afternoon after their four-hour nap.

Some 5-6 months after Buddy suddenly goes missing, Nora reports it to the police. Detective Webb is Nora's former client as well as Buddy's old friend. Nora has little to give Webb in the way of clues. It develops that Buddy had discovered her sexual affair with Tom Pickett, whom Buddy slashes in the barber chair and battles with until they tumble into the street. There Nora throws Coke bottles at Pickett to drive him away.

Two years after Buddy disappears, he returns to find that his old band mate, Willy Cornish, has moved in with Nora and taken his place in the family. Buddy at first avoid sex with Nora to keep the three-way relationship friendly but eventually succumbs. Next day, he goes crazy while marching in a parade and is institutionalized. It appears that Nora keeps contact with him and informs Webb of his death. Cornish goes his own way and marries.

Frank Amacker

A 75-year old blues pianist interviewed in the 1960s, Amacker is born 22 March 1890, in New Orleans, LA, and begins playing music in the District at age 16. He feels that God is still saving him for a special purpose. He wishes a good singer like Perry Como would turn his compositions into big hits and make him famous. One song tells of killing an



unfaithful girl friend in the woods but asking the undertaker to take special care of her. He mentions Buddy but does not include him among the great jazz players.

Tom Anderson

The "King of the District" between Rampart and Franklin streets, New Orleans, LA, Anderson publishes an annual Blue Book listing every whore in the city, grouped by complexion. Anderson provides a steady flow of liquor to protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden and the denizens of Joseph's Shaving Parlor, where Buddy cuts hair.

Mrs. Bass

Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's widowed mother-in-law, Mrs. Bass visits Nora and Buddy during their honeymoon at Webb's cabin. They enjoy a week together, drinking heavily, talking, and looking at copies of naturalist John James Audubon's drawings. Mrs. Bass leaves abruptly and her car is found two miles away with her strangled in the driver's seat. Buddy and Nora drive her to the police station, where the car and corpse are stolen, making it impossible to collect her insurance. Webb later determines that her pet boa must have gotten its tail caught in a wheel and seized her to keep from being pulled out of the car. He bases this on a story from St. Tropez, France, where a dancer, Isadora Duncan, is strangled when her silk scarf tangles in a wheel.

Jaelin and Robin Brewitt

A married couple living at 4763 Callarpine St., Shell Beach, LA, the Brewitts billet the musicians invited for a three-night concert. Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden falls instantly in love with Robin. Jaelin is a pianist, who works out his frustration over the tryst on the keys, sending notes that strike like bullets upstairs to the bed. Buddy is sorry about hurting someone so intelligent, sensitive, and understanding but cannot help himself. Robin loves her husband but also cannot resist Buddy. When Police Detective Webb tracks down his old friend to bring him home, Webb's stories create a wall between the lovers and Robin is missing from bed in the morning. Buddy never gets over missing Robin; she and his common-law wife Nora meld together in the vision of a wildly dancing woman at the time Buddy goes insane.

Mutt Carey

A trumpeter whom protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden acknowledges as one of his fathers rather than a teacher, Carey is a technician, always reaching for the purest note. Carey loses his hard lip too young and sleeps himself to death on the money he has accumulated. He dies listening to and damming new experimental jazz forms such as Buddy plays. Carey visits Buddy and Nora shortly before he dies, making passes at her



while she is pregnant and being irritated that Buddy is not jealous. Carey dies of a stroke in their house and Buddy kisses him goodbye.

Willy and Bella Cornish

Willy is a valve trombonist who performs with protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden. Bella enters the story only at the end after Buddy's death. Willy brings Northern music to the group and is upset that they "pervert" it into their own style. Willy always plays the same note the same way and serves as the group's "diving board." Buddy considers him "straight as a good fence all his life" and perfectly virtuous. He asks Willy whether rumors of Tom Pickett having sex with his common-law wife Nora are true. Willy only laughs about Nora being a beautiful lady. Buddy confronts Pickett and slashes his face before mysteriously disappearing for two years.

When Buddy disappears, Willy puts Detective Webb onto photographer E. J. Bellocq as a possible source of information. After a fire at Bellocq's, Webb long preserves the only surviving photograph of Buddy's band. Towards the end of Buddy's absence, Willy moves in with Nora. He sits uncomfortably with Buddy until Nora returns from grocery shopping. The three live together for four days until Buddy is institutionalized.

Willy marries Bella Davenport in 1922, and he is very healthy but suffers a stroke while performing. Bella asks about his band mates and learns that he and Buddy are "just like that" and most of the musicians lose their minds. When Detective Webb talks about Buddy being dead, Bella insists that he is alive, never speaking, doing nothing, but walking around touching things. Willie claims to be Buddy's brother to visit. Webb is upset by discrepancies in Bella's story.

Crawley

Losing weight and looking pale after fasting from everything but distilled water, Crawley tells his theories of cleaning out his bowels before answering questions about the missing protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden. Crawley last sees Buddy on a boat. A musician, Crawley does not usually play with Buddy, with whom he does not get along, but they go together to Shell Beach, where he sees Buddy fall immediately in love with Robin Brewitt. Crawley is heavy during their playing years.

Happy Galloway

A guitarist whom protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden acknowledges as one of his fathers rather than a teacher, Galloway bubbles beneath the other instruments, slipping and squealing in ways that stand apart from the others. It is like a human voice, swallowing moods and keeping the others going. Galloway teaches Buddy to play a "mood of sound." Dull Galloway dresses in lovely suits, playing with "shit bands." He is precise off-stage but alone in his music on-stage, trying to persuade no one into his



style and easily forgotten as a person. He plays until the day that he dies of a stroke at age 65 and is replaced.

Lionel Gremillion

Apparently, but not explicitly, the Superintendent of the East Louisiana State Hospital at the time of protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's internment, Gremillion gives an interview at the time of his death, 4 Nov. 1931, theorizing about paranoia and a possible "endocrine problem."

Manuel Hall

A trumpeter who lives with protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's mother in his last year of life, Hall hides his instrument in the cupboards and never touches it when anyone is around. Buddy admires that.

Bertram Lord

An inmate at the East Louisiana State Hospital, Lord comes every week to protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden for barbering and tries to convince him to escape together. While another patient is arguing with Dr. Vernon about which arm to inject, Lord grabs the doctor and holds the syringe near his eye, ordering guards out of his way and doors opened. He is on the loose for two days before being brought back and beaten. Lord limps because of a Coca-Cola bottle bottom in his shoe, a new weapon to use inside.

H. B. McMurray and T. Jones

Civil Sheriffs assigned by Judge T. C. W. Ellis of the Civil District Court of New Orleans, LA, to deliver protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden from the House of Detention to the East Louisiana State Hospital, McMurray rides in front of Buddy and Jones beside him. As they pass through fields of wet chicory, Buddy laughs loudly and is swatted in the nose by McMurray. Jones later gives an account of the ride in which everything is normal and peaceful. He makes a point of saying that they never see Buddy again after signing him over.

Brock Mumford

A guitarist who performs with protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, Mumford is seen in an E. J. Bellocq photograph of the band. As the band breaks up in the wake of Buddy's fight with Pickett, Mumford is forced to serve as middle-man. Mumford hides in his room, and Buddy comes in through his window with childlike anger.



Tom Pickett

A "beautiful" man living in The District, Pickett begins an affair with Nora Bass, common-law wife of protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden. While shaving him one evening, Buddy brings up the subject and Pickett reacts by grabbing the razor and cutting Buddy. Buddy fights Pickett off with a chair, but Pickett, using a brass-ended strop, breaks Buddy's elbow and damages his knee. Buddy pushes him through a glass window onto the street, where Nora hurls Coke bottles at him to drive him away. Pickett spreads rumors about Buddy being insane. During Buddy's two-year absence, Pickett lives in squalor in Chinatown as an opium addict. Detective Web visits to collect information on Buddy's whereabouts and is disgusted to see him covered in flies. "Fly King" becomes Pickett's nickname in the neighborhood. When Buddy tries to find him, no one can help. Pickett is shot to death in 1924 on Poydras St.

Bud Scott

A musician whom protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden acknowledges as one of his fathers rather than a teacher, Scott loses his career to neurotic women.

Willy Warner

A clarinet player who performs with protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, Johnson is seen in an E. J. Bellocq photograph of the band.



Objects/Places

Chinatown

A terrible maze and center for opium trade and consumption in New Orleans, Chinatown is home to Tom Pickett, whom protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden slashes as revenge for a tryst with his common-law wife. After Detective Webb questions Pickett in his fly-crawling flat, Pickett vanishes and no one knows his whereabouts. E. J. Bellocq once does a photo shoot in the opium dens.

The Cricket

Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's broadsheet newspaper, The Cricket consists of whatever stories he hears from customers and hired "spiders," put down without editing. It runs 1899-1905, offering "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies," favoring lurid stories of broken marriages and musical and political gossip. It deals excessively with death, which terrifies Buddy. Returning from his two-year disappearance, Buddy reviews back copies and realizes that The Cricket is to a large degree his own diary.

The District / Storyville

Much of the action of the novel takes place in what residents call "The District," a section of New Orleans, LA, to the right of Canal, between Rampart and Franklin streets, where prostitution, gambling, and jazz rule. The first chapter describes the District's sordid past, back to the Civil War, including famous whores, pimps, and murderers.

East Louisiana State Hospital

Located outside Jackson, LA, the pre-Civil War asylum provides protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden his final home, after he is diagnosed with "Dementia Praecox. Paranoid Type." For a while Buddy obliges by barbering the inmates but then closes in on himself, wandering around, inspecting the facilities. In his first days there, Buddy is raped by a guard. Lionel Gremillion writes a summary history of the institution from 1848, when it houses 87 patients, through 1912-14 when it has 1,650. Buddy dies in 1931 before the Medcraft Shock Machine is introduced.

Holtz Cemetery

The place of protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's final rest, Holtz Cemetery has such a high water table that flesh is stripped away from corpses within six months, allowing the plot to be reused.



House of Detention (House of D)

The New Orleans, LA, facility to which protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden is taken after playing his coronet so hard in a parade that he explodes blood vessels in his throat, the House of D is located near Chinatown. Buddy undergoes corrective surgery there before going to court and being sent to a mental hospital for life.

Joseph's Shaving Parlor

The two-seat barber shop that employs protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, Joseph's is a comfortable place to drink liquor and converse. It is located on the corner of First and Liberty Ice is place in the front window every day to fog the window, creating an atmosphere, and provide water for the plants—the only vegetation in the neighborhood. It has brothel wall paper and a ceiling fan that forces everyone to stoop to avoid getting hit. Tom Anderson and Dago Tony supply liquor at intervals, which is shared around the room. Buddy is usually drunk by noon and his cutting style grows more flamboyant. Customers in the know come early-morning. After learning that Tom Pickett is having a sexual affair with his common-law wife, Nora Bass, Buddy slashes Pickett's face and the two destroy the shop, crashing through the window into the street. Buddy returns that night, breaks through the boards covering the window, fetches his coronet, and plays a mixture of blues and hymns that seem blasphemous to observers. He then disappears for two years.

Masonic Hall

One of protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden's regular venues for performing, Masonic Hall is also where he gets his first professional music job.

Pontchartrain, LA

The lake area a few miles north of New Orleans, where Detective Webb owns a cabin, Pontchartrain is where Buddy spends two years of his young adulthood, his honeymoon with Nora Bass, and an extended recuperation after his mysterious two-year layoff from music before returning to New Orleans.

Shell Beach

One of the "suburbs" of New Orleans, LA, Shell Beach is home to music aficionados, including Jaelin and Robin Brewitt, who are assigned to take in protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden during a three-night concert. Buddy falls instantly in love with Robin and abandons his band members, spending days wandering Shell Beach without money. The Brewitts take him in and for two years he makes love to Robin upstairs while Jaelin pounds the piano downstairs, working out his frustration.

Themes

Sex

Sex is to be expected to loom large in a novel set in New Orleans' red-light district, and it does. Michael Ondaatje opens *Coming through Slaughter* with delicious anecdotes about 19th-century prostitution. Protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden "marries" without legal registration a prostitute, Nora Bass, who seems to have serviced most of his musician friends. Buddy arranges for his photographer friend, E. J. Bellocq, to photograph prostitutes as part of his fetish hobby, but they are reticent and worn out from a night's work. Eventually they agree and he produces works of beauty, aiming at exposing their spirits rather than capturing them (for added compensation) in grotesque, overtly sexual poses. Some bear the scars of patron's violence, but they do not appear a particularly oppressed lot. Later Buddy wanders through the waterfront and sees whores who have been exiled from the District and form a truly lamentable, dispirited caste. Their pimps break their ankles if they try to go back, so they wander with their mattresses on their backs and lie down submissively to anyone willing to enter their disease-ridden bodies.

Otherwise, Buddy enjoys a regular sex life with Nora until he discovers she is having an affair with Tom Pickett. After slashing and brawling with Pickett, Buddy flees to Shell Beach, where he falls instantly in love with Robin Brewitt, who with husband Jaelin hosts him while he plays in a concert. For two years Buddy makes love to Robin upstairs while Jaelin pounds the piano downstairs, working out his frustration but staying out of their way. Buddy feels bad about hurting the sensitive, intelligent man but cannot help himself. When his old friend, Detective Webb, catches up with him and convinces him to return to New Orleans, Buddy is distraught over losing Robin. He walks in on an old band mate, Willy Cornish, living with Nora for several months. Buddy assumes the Jaelin role for several days, groping Nora but refraining from intercourse in order to keep the arrangement friendly. This, of course, does not last, but Willy arranges not to be around much. On the fifth day, Buddy goes insane and is institutionalized.

In the East Louisiana State Hospital, drugged and unable to speak, Buddy is stripped, sodomized, and given a white gown to wear. It appears to be standard operating procedure. Later, guard rape is one of the factors that leads to a bizarre inmates' strike.

Insanity

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Coming through Slaughter* depicts the stark conditions inside the East Louisiana State Hospital under which protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden is held. Buddy experiences a mental frenzy marching in a parade, playing his coronet in his normal wild style and collapses, having ruptured blood vessels in his throat. Patched up at the House of Detention, he is diagnosed with "Dementia Praecox. Paranoid Type," and ordered locked up for life by a judge.



Up to this point, Buddy has demonstrated quirks. He has a violent temper that makes him lash out physically but is also able to exhibit last-second restraint to avoid physical harm to himself. He is obsessed with death, particularly fearing that his children may perish. When he dreams of such events, his reaction is to try to kill himself by cutting off a hand. As a musician, that would amount to professional suicide, even if he survived. Buddy edits a broadside, *The Cricket*, which he fills with bizarre cases of accidental death and homicide. His mother-in-law is found in her car strangled with no signs of robbery and he is suspect. His friend, Detective Webb, however, determines that it is an accident: her pet boa grabs her neck for safety when its tail is caught in the wheel; a similar incident from France is the needed clue. A barber, Buddy frequently dreams about slashing patron's throats to watch them stagger off with lifeless eyes. Eventually, Tom Pickett, is found to be having an affair with his common-law wife, Nora Bass. Pickett's silence enrages Buddy and Buddy slashes Pickett's face. It escalates into a full-scale fight and Pickett limps away, spreading word that Buddy is crazy. Buddy leaves town for two years but is not prosecuted.

Buddy returns, seeming adjusted, until the parade. The visions he sees meld together Nora and his two-year lover, Robin, into a dancer who is able to anticipate Buddy's every note. For a jazz player, this is extraordinary. His early time in the hospital suggests that the dramatic, bloody event has little to do with his psyche. He cuts inmates' hair, refuses to take part in a break-out, and alone among the inmates refuses to cut his leg tendon as a protest against conditions. Eventually, however, Buddy's mind does shut down and he sits silently in his dark room, contemplating how life has no prizes.

Almost parenthetically, Chapter 3 includes a number of "documents" produced around the time of Buddy's death. Mostly they are "cover-your-ass" pieces but a chronology of the hospital back to the Civil War is rather chilling in tracing the strain of an ever-growing inmate population. Its concluding entry shows how, years after Buddy's death a Medcraft Shock Machine is installed and notes "Still in use today."

Music

Music, specifically jazz, is the heart of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter*. A non-aficionado of the complex art form is at a decided disadvantage in reading the novel, not because of an overwhelming amount of technical language—although there is some—but in grasping how protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden fits in among his contemporary players and how he stands apart.

Many musicians are given an opportunity to comment on Buddy in their own words. Brock Mumford talks about his bad attitude as the band breaks up and observes that he is certainly not leaving at his peak. Buddy is still playing fine, but his temper does not wear off as usual. As confirmation, Buddy sees the reconstituted band play in Lincoln Park, heads to the boarded-up barber shop that he has destroyed, and sits, drinking and crying, while he softly plays a mixture of blues and hymns, that some consider dangerously blasphemous. Another colleague claims to want to "to clean nearly every



note he passed," because Buddy lacks control over anything but "the mood of his power." Observing that unlike many musicians of his day, Buddy refuses to make recordings, the critic is glad of this because one had to see Buddy in action to appreciate his genius. He stretches and wheels around and jumps. Because of this reticence, critics have little to work with in analyzing Buddy and he is forgotten.

The longest reflection on music comes when Buddy is in seclusion and finds an old radio and listens to John Robichaux's waltzes. Buddy hates that he enjoys the clear forms and large curves. He has always hated the way Robichaux dominates his audience, imposing emotions and wishes those Robichaux arches could come in and leave when they please without beginning or end. The right ending can mean the opposite of what one thinks. When the station signs off, Buddy meditates on his musical fathers whose sacrifice seduces him into music. He pays tribute to several in detail: Happy Galloway teaches him to play a "mood of sound" that he can recognize and remember, every note new and raw, never repeated. By contrast, Carey is a technician, always reaching for the purest note. Most people are drawn to opposites, even in the music that they play.

In fact, music touches everything in the novel. Buddy fingers a song on a lover's back. Heartbreaking piano notes from the woman's cuckolded but compliant husband come upstairs like bullets aimed at the bed. Everyone turns out to hear Buddy play in a parade as he had the first time he appeared in New Orleans. He quickly separates from the rest of the band, into something powerful, spinning and crazy. He imagines a woman sliding up to him and dancing as he struts. He speeds up the tempo to lose the other musicians and she anticipates his every note in her dance. She seems to be testing him. Worn out, he squawks and roars, his throat aches and bursts, which is specifically what he has wanted. This takes Buddy out of the "20th century game of fame"

A odd interlude narrates an interview with jazz player and composer Frank Amacker. He talks about his career, plays some made-up rag, and opines that God is still saving him for a special purpose. He wants a good singer like Perry Como to turn one of his songs into a big hit. He characterizes Buddy as the loudest jazzman, playing his "old lowdown music," but contrasts him with various true "masters."

Style

Point of View

Throughout *Coming through Slaughter*, Michael Ondaatje shifts perspective with the jarring rapidity of the jazz about which he writes. Much of the tale is told in the first person by the protagonist Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, a historical figure whose life story is her fictionalized. Buddy is a great jazz innovator, journalist, lover, husband, father and barber until jealousy makes him slash up a friend and client and then disappear for two years. In exile he falls in love with a married woman and lives with her and her husband. Meanwhile, his long-time friend, Detective Webb, interviews people to figure out where he is. Finding him, Webb talks him into coming home, where Buddy seems to adjust for four days before dramatically going insane during a parade at age 31. He spends the next 24 years silently in a mental hospital.

Sometimes Ondaatje narrates anonymously; ther times a character narrates events. Virtually all the characters who are drawn into the hunt for Buddy speaks at some point in his or her own voice, painting a picture of Buddy's character and disposition. Buddy's whereabouts and concerns, usually mundane, weave in and out of whatever else is going on in the story. Some events are played back and forth between Buddy's perspective and other character's, most notably in the fight scene in the barbershop. Often the shifts in perspective are not well-marked and the reader struggles to make sense of the chaos. It seems to be a conscious effort on Ondaatje's part to keep the reader off-balance. The build-up of clues must be reviewed, for instance, to understand why Webb staggers out of a party to be sick.

The vocabulary and imagery are rich and varied, always evoking the boldness and unexpectedness of jazz. Music theory is inevitably discussed, sometimes in technical terms that will lose a non-aficionado, but the heat of the medium driving the performers—and Buddy most extremely—comes across clearly. Buddy's colleagues agree he is loud and talented but not on the quality of his music. Conveniently, Buddy never allows himself to be recorded, so there can be no scholarly analysis. By the 1970s the narrator finds that Buddy is forgotten in the place he had won brief fame. The opening and closing visits to the District, with faded signs and flaking paint, put Buddy's story in the long-term perspective.

Setting

Most of the story of *Coming through Slaughter* takes place in the unfashionable parts of New Orleans, LA, away from Rampart St., Basin St., and Franklin, in areas about which no one writes songs: Gravier, Philips, and First streets, the city's red-light district, called by locals "The District," but also known as Storyville. It is a world even in 1907 marked by sun-bleached signs; when the anonymous narrator visits in the 1970s to gather



stories about Buddy Bolden, the signs are more faded and the paint worse chipped, and no one knows his name.

The novel spends a few pages relating colorful stories that survive from the 1870s, the hay day of notorious prostitutes, gamblers, and piano players. In Buddy's day, the business of prostitution is organized by Tom Anderson's Blue Book. The worst manifestations of the business leak out of the District to the waterfront, where near the end of the story Buddy wanders. This is near Chinatown, crowded, winding, and a haven for opium addicts.

Buddy lives two years in Shell Beach, considered a "suburb" of New Orleans, a few weeks at Webb's isolate cabin on Lake Pontchartrain, and 24 years in the East Louisiana State Hospital, only a few select scenes from which when he is 31 and first brought in are detailed before he ends up in an unmarked grave in Holtz Cemetery. The center of the novel is Joseph's Shaving Parlor on the corner of First and Liberty and Buddy's home at 2527 First St. The barbershop stands out in the neighborhood by its cool interior, conducive to conversation and passing a bottle, and live shrubbery outside, both thanks to ice melting in the front window. The great fight that sends Buddy away for two years takes place in the barbershop and crashes into the rainy street. After his sojourn at Shell Beach, Buddy returns home to find a friend sleeping with Nora, spends four days readjusting to normal life, and while marching in a parade through town, suffers the breakdown that gets him hospitalized.

Language and Meaning

Coming Through Slaughter by Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje deals with the sights and sounds of black life in the red-light district of New Orleans in and around 1907. Dialog is rather sparse and fairly generic in its presentation, except when dealing with music. Coming through Slaughter is also about jazz, and its writing captures the spontaneity of the medium. Topics and perspectives constantly and unexpectedly shift. Buddy's colleagues describe his talent for doing the same at any time, musically and personally, as when he vanishes from New Orleans for two years.

Ondaatje matches the flow of language to the circumstances masterfully. Ondaatje relates the events of Buddy's early incarceration in a stupor. Even being anally raped comes out matter-of-fact. By contrast, when excitement builds, Ondaatje, usually adopting Buddy's perspective, abandons punctuation, full sentences, and all convention, running thoughts together and poking in color words in a hodgepodge stream of consciousness. Buddy's rage in the barber shop with Pickett and his breakdown during the parade are the prime examples of this. Buddy is slightly more in control but is wandering, confusing, and adamant while considering how he has scrambled over the backs of the previous generation of jazzmen. Music seems a brutal battle. Colleagues do not universally admire his style but they acknowledge his talent. True jazz aficionados will doubtless get more out of the passages that deal directly with musicology, but all readers can draw from the written style what Buddy's music—and life—must have been like.



Structure

Coming Through Slaughter by Michael Ondaatje examines the final months of sanity in the life of a pioneer jazz performer in New Orleans in 1907. Charles ("Buddy") Bolden, a historical figure, is also a barber, a journalist, a good father and husband, a drunk, a runaway, a thinker, and "an infamous man about town." The novel consists of three numbered but untitled chapters, the first and third rather short but the second almost bloated.

Chapter 1 sets up the atmosphere of Buddy's neighborhood, driving through it in the 1970s, looking back rather romantically into its 19th-century history and then describing it in detail in Buddy's day, placing him firmly in its life. It then shows him already missing 5-6 months and being sought by Detective Webb, his friend since adolescence. Their formative years together are pictured at length. Webb worries about Buddy surviving on his own and interviews a few people about his disappearance, allowing diverse perspectives to enter the story. Buddy's preoccupation with death underlies much of the chapter. Webb learns that Buddy is in Shell Beach, living with a musically-inclined couple, Jaelin and Robin Brewitt. Buddy falls instantly in love with Robin and ends up staying with them two years. Buddy's dramatic entry upon the New Orleans music scene is described by a first-hand witness and is mirrored in his final performance in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 introduces the photographer E. J. Bellocq, another historical figure, on the last day of his life. Webb visits him, hoping to obtain a photograph to aid in his search. Bellocq's relationship with Buddy—Buddy getting whores to pose for Bellocq—is established. Bellocq burns down his room around himself in a dramatic suicide but remains in memory a key figure for the rest of the novel. Webb has possession of the only picture of Buddy, which is incorporated in the design of the back cover. Much of the chapter is devoted to Buddy's sexual relationship with Robin under Jaelin's nose. The three-way relationship—and even the two-way between Buddy and Robin—is complex. Descriptions of sex are less explicit than one might expect. Buddy talks to her about Bellocq's influence in getting him not to need an audience, at thinking beyond music. As Webb continues investigating Buddy's disappearance, additional witnesses assign a strong influence to Bellocq.

A major revelation comes when Webb catches up with Tom Pickett, whom Buddy carves up with a razor on the eve of disappearing from town. This suggests that he might have fled for fear of prosecution, although the reason for being at Shell Beach is a music gig. The fight scene is dramatic, set off by Buddy's suspicions that Pickett is having sex with Nora. Buddy is suicidal and blasphemous before disappearing. Time jumps forward two years to Webb finding Buddy and talking him back home. Buddy decompresses between worlds in Webb's cabin, where he tells an absent Webb about what he is experiencing. He also philosophizes about music. Above all, he misses Robin desperately.



This sets up the fatalism of Chapter 3, where Buddy returns home to find Cornish moved in with Nora and the children but as shrinking from conflict as Jaelin had been. Buddy reestablishes relations with his children and after an attempt at platonic love, has sex with Nora. She tells him that she hates Bellocq for changing his personality. The story of Bellocq's project photographing whores artistically comes out and segues into a description of prostitution at its worst, along the waterfront. On his fifth day home, Buddy joins the Henry Allen Sr. Brass Band for a parade. Everyone turns out to see and hear him. During the march, Buddy imagines a woman dancing to his notes, anticipating him constantly, and then feels blood spurting from broken throat vessels as he blows his coronet too hard.

Much of Chapter 3 documents, much of it through supposed official documents, Buddy's life while institutionalized as a schizophrenic. It is brutal and sterile, broken only occasionally by a few incidents of high drama. Buddy dies as a fact, not an incident described. He is buried as a fact, not described. There are suggestions of what his life inside is like but nothing concrete. The novel ends with Buddy in his dark room realizing that he is 31 and life offers no prizes. He lives in silence. The documents suggest that this continues unabated for 24 years.

Quotes

"What he did too little of was sleep and what he did too much of was drink and many interpreted his later crack-up as a morality tale of a talent that debauched itself. But his life at this time had a fine and precise balance to it, with a careful allotment of hours. A barber, publisher of The Cricket, a cornet player, good husband and father, and an infamous man about town. When he opened up the shop he was usually without customers for an hour or so and if there were any there they were usually 'spiders' with news for The Cricket. All the information he was given put unedited into the broadsheet. Then he cut hair till 4, then walked home and slept with Nora till 8, the two of them loving each other when they woke. And after dinner leaving for Masonic Hall or the Globe or wherever he was playing. Onto the stage." Chapter 1, pgs. 7-8.

"It was a music that had so little wisdom you wanted to clean nearly every note he passed, passed it seemed along the way as if traveling in a car, passed before he even approached it and saw it properly. There was no control except the mood of his power... and it is for this reason it is good you never heard him play on recordings. If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes - then you should never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history, those who said later that Bolden broke the path. It was just as important to watch him stretch and wheel around on the last notes or to watch nerves jumping under the sweat of his head." Chapter 1, pg. 32.

"I see them watch their own faces for the twenty minutes they sit below me. Men hate to see themselves change. They laugh nervously. This is the power I live in. I manipulate their looks. They trust me with the cold razor at the vein under their ears. They trust me with liquid soap cupped in my palms as I pass by their eyes and massage it into their hair. Dreams of the neck. Gushing onto the floor and my white apron. The men stumbling with no more sight to the door and feeling even through their pain the waves of heat as they go through the door into the real climate of Liberty and First, leaving this ice, wallpaper and sweet smell and gracious conversation, mirrors, my slavery here." Chapter 2, pg. 43.

"The photographs of Bellocq. HYDROCEPHALIC. 89 glass plates survive. Look at the pictures. Imagine the mis-shapen man who moved round the room, his grace as he swivelled round his tripod, the casual shot of the dresser that holds the photograph of the whore's baby that she gave away, the plaster Christ on the wall. Compare Christ's hands holding the metal spikes to the badly sewn appendix scar of the thirty year old naked woman he photographed when she returned to the room - unaware that he had already photographed her baby and her dresser and her crucifix and her rug. She now offering grotesque poses for an extra dollar and Bellocq grim and quiet saying No, just stand there against the wall there that one, no keep the petticoat on this time. One snap to quickly catch her scorning him and then waiting, waiting for minutes so she would become self-conscious towards him and the camera and her status, embarrassed at



just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads she imagined she could take as a child. And he photographed that." Chapter 2, pg. 50.

"He stands with a large piece of mirror and skims it hard across the room at me,. It hits the wall to the left of my shoulder but it came really fast and it scares me. I know he will slice me. He takes the next piece and jerks it at me twenty feet away and it comes straight for me. My neck. Is coming for me I'm dead I can't. Move. And then catches on a muscle of air and tilts up crashing above my head. Door opens near me. Nora. What! Stay back. And I run to him before he can get more and wave him from the sink with the razor., he holds me back with the chair in his left hand,m with the right he swings the strop gets me hard on the left elbow. Broken. Just like that, no pain yet but I know it is broken. He swings the chair but it is too heavy for speed and I avoid it,. Swings the strop and gets me on the knee. Numb but I can move it., next time he swings the chair I drop the razor and wrestle it from him and push him backwards now able to keep the strop off but my left hand still dead. And see Nora in another mirror. The parlor is totally empty except for the two of us and Nora shouting in a corner at the back screaming to us that we're crazy we're crazy." Chapter 2, pg. 71.

"Then I hear Bolden's cornet, very quiet, and I move across the street, closer. There he is, relaxed back in a chair blowing that silver softly, just about a whisper and I see he's got the hat over the bell of the horn... Thought I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he's playing something that sounds like both. I cannot make out the tune and then I catch on. He's mixing them up. He's playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together." Chapter 2, pg. 78.

"Got here this afternoon. Walk around remembering you from the objects I find. Books, pictures on the wall, nail holes in the ceiling where you've hung your magnets, seed packets on the shelf above the sink - the skin you shed when you finish your vacations,. Re-smell your character.

Not enough blankets here, Webb, and it's cold. Found an old hunting jacket. I sleep against its cloth full of hunter sweat, aroma of cartridges. I went to bed as soon as I arrived and am awake now after midnight,. Scratch of suicide at the side of my brain. Our friendship had nothing accidental did it. Even at the start you set out to breed me into something better. Which you did. You removed my immaturity at just the right time and saved me a lot of energy and I sped away happy and alone in a new town away from you, and now you produce a leash, curl the leather round and round your fist, and walk straight into me. And you pull me home. Like those breeders of bull terriers in the Storyville pits who can prove anything of their creatures, can prove how determined their dogs are by setting them onto an animal and while the jaws clamp shut they can slice the dog's body in half knowing the jaws will still not let go." Chapter 2, pg. 86.

"From the very first night I was lost from Robin.

The cold in my head and the cough woke me up. Walking round your house making hot water grapefruit and Raleigh Rye drinks. That was the first night that was four weeks ago. And now too my starving avoiding food. Drunk and hungry in the middle of the



night in this place crowded with your furniture and my muttering voice. Robin lost. Who slid out of my heart. Who has become anonymous as cloud. I wake up with erections in memory of Robin. Every morning. Till she has begun to blur into Nora and everybody else." Chapter 2, pg. 99.

"I had wanted to be the reservoir where engines and people drank, blood sperm music pouring out and getting hooked in someone's ear. The way flowers were still and fed bees,. And we took from the others too this way, music that was nothing till Mumford and Lewis and Johnson and I joined Cornish and made him furious because we wouldn't let him even finish the song once before we changed it to our blood. Cornish who played the same note the same way every time who was out frame our diving board that we leapt off, the one we sacrificed so he could remain the overlooked metronome." Chapter 3, pgs. 110-111.

"So their lives have become simplified by seeing all the right and healthy as dangerous, and they automatically run when they seen them. The ones who can run. The others drop their mattress and lie down and flick their skirts up, spread their legs with socks on, these ones who don't care who it is that's coming. If it's a pimp he's gonna check her for a swollen foot so she can't slip back to Storyville. These broken women so ruined they use the cock in them as a scratcher. The women who are called gypsy feet. And the ones not caught yet carrying the disease like coy girls into and among the rocks and the shallows of the river where the pimps in good shoes won't follow. But those who are lame thrusting their fat foot at you, immune from swinging stick that has already got them swelled and fixed in a deformed walk, gypsy foot gypsy foot." Chapter 3, pgs. 116-117.

"All my body moves to my throat and I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her waist her head and hair back bending back to me, all the desire in me is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, eternal, for my heart is at my throat hitting slow pure notes into the shimmy dance of victory, hair toss victory, a local strut, eyes meeting sweat down her chin arms out in final exercise pain, take on the last long squawk and letting it cough and climb to spear her all those watching like a javelin through the brain and down into the stomach, feel the blood that is real move up bringing fresh energy in its suitcase, it comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can't stop got can't stop it can't stop the air the red force coming up can't remove it from my mouth, no intake gasp, so deep blooming it up god I can't choke it the music still pouring in a roughness I've never hit, watch it listen it listen it, can't see I CAN'T SEE. Air floating through the blood to the girl red hitting the blind spot I can feel others turning, the silence of the crowd, can't see. Willy Cornish catching him as he fell outward, covering him, seeing the red on the white shirt thinking it is torn and the red undershirt is showing and then lifting the horn sees the blood spill out from it as he finally lifts the metal from the hard kiss of the mouth. What I wanted." Chapter 3, pgs. 131-132.

"Am going to the pound. McMurray and Jones holding my hands. Breastless woman in blue pajamas will be there. Muscles in the arms will be there. Tie. Belt. Boots. They make me love them. They are the arms looking after me. On the second day they



came into my room and took off all my clothes and bent me over a table and broke my anus. They gave me a white dress. They know I am a barber and I didn't tell them I'm a barber. won't. Can't. Boot in my throat, the food has to climb over it and then go down and meet with all their pals in the stomach. Hi sausage. Hi cabbage. Did yuh see that fuckin boot. Yeah I nearly turned round 'n went back on the plate. Who is this guy we're in anyway?" Chapter 3, pg. 141.

"I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes." Chapter 3, pg. 160.



Topics for Discussion

How do dogs figure in the novel? How are they used symbolically?

How do the opening scenes describing old-time prostitution in New Orleans flavor the novel?

How is Webb's interest in magnets important in the novel?

How is Bellocq's suicide a pivotal act in the novel. Does knowing that the historical E. J. Bellocq dies decades later in real life than in the story suggest why or how Ondaatje uses the character?

In what ways is Buddy's relationship with Jaelin and Robin Brewitt like and unlike Willy Cornish's with Nora and him after Buddy's return? Does this seem to contribute to his breakdown?

How do the "historical" documents included in Chapter 3 contribute to your understanding of Buddy's situation, living the second half of his life institutionalized? Is it more or less effective to present documents than to present the information in other ways?

What purpose is served by the interviews with Frank Amacker? Do they interrupt the flow towards conclusion or contribute to the completion?