

Crash Study Guide

Crash by J. G. Ballard

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Plot Summary

Crash is a novel by English author J.G. Ballard. Crash is told through the eyes of James Ballard, a young man who becomes acquainted with a man obsessed with car crashes after Ballard experiences a crash of his own. Ballard looks up to this obsessed man and follows him as he chases after one car crash to the next. Ballard has become obsessed himself, allowing all aspects of his own car crash influence everything in his life from his marriage, to his extramarital affairs, to his expectations in regards to his own mortality. As the behavior of his new friend escalates, Ballard goes along for the ride, anxious to feel as alive as he does near a car crash. Crash is a unique novel that explores the effects of modern technology on human relationships, leaving the reader breathless and wondering just how far these characters will go.

James Ballard has arrived at the scene of a car crash at London Airport. The crash was caused when a man drove his car over the edge of a flyover onto a bus passing below. Ballard knows the intended target was the young actress in the car ahead of the bus, an actress who is now watching the emergency vehicles administer to the injured. The driver of the car is Dr. Robert Vaughan, an acquaintance of Ballard's who planned to die this day along with the American actress Elizabeth Taylor.

Ballard met Vaughan several months before after he experienced an accident of his own. Driving home from an encounter with his mistress, Ballard loses control of his car and ends up driving the wrong way up a flyover. Ballard's car misses two oncoming cars, but cannot get out of the way of a third. A woman and her husband are in the other car; the man does not survive. Ballard recuperates in the hospital for several days where he discovers his once aloof and disinterested wife has suddenly found new interest in him.

After returning home after the accident, Ballard begins to notice how large a part of the city roads and cars have become. Ballard begins to believe that all of humanity is destined to die in one large car accident. With this in mind, Ballard returns to work and begins renting every car the studio lot where he works has to offer. Ballard drives obsessively now, returning to the scene of his accident on multiple occasions. Ballard also thinks often of the widow who survived the car crash along with him. When they meet again after the inquest investigating the accident, she and Ballard begin an affair. After a short time, Ballard comes to recognize that he and his new lover, Helen Remington, only make love in his car. Ballard believes this is because their connection is the car and it is the car and the tragedy that took place that excites them.

Several times Ballard sees a man hanging around Helen or the places where they go. One night, Ballard takes Helen to a stock car show where a stunt driver reenacts a car accident. At this show, Ballard and Helen run into this strange man whom Ballard learns is Dr. Robert Vaughan, a television personality who has become a crash obsessive. Helen and Ballard go with Vaughan to take the stunt man to the hospital and later to the stunt man's home. It is in this man's home that Vaughan shows Ballard a photo album he has created filled with pictures of accident victims, Ballard included.



Vaughan and Ballard begin spending time together. Helen works for an accident prevention group and invites the two of them to watch a staged accident. Ballard notices Vaughan's sexual reaction to the accident and he becomes attracted to Vaughan. Ballard and Vaughan begin spending their days together searching the highways for car crashes. Every time they see an accident, Vaughan leaves Ballard at the car while he goes to take pictures of the victims. When not studying car crashes, Vaughan and Ballard will pick up women and Vaughan will make love to them in the back seat while Ballard drives. One night the woman is Ballard's wife.

When Vaughan visits Ballard at his office on a movie set he becomes aware that Elizabeth Taylor is making a film on the same set. One day Ballard and Vaughan watch as Elizabeth Taylor films a scene in which her character has just become the victim of a car crash. Vaughan is excited by this scene and begins to plot a crash in which he and Elizabeth Taylor will die together. As Vaughan is planning this crash, his stunt driver friend is killed in an accident in which he purposely ran his car into a car belonging to a young actress.

Vaughan and Ballard meet one night and take illegal drugs. The two men drive around for a while and finally stop outside a junk yard and spend the night making love. The following morning Vaughan wakes to find Ballard outside the car. Vaughan attempts to run Ballard over. During the next few weeks, Vaughan begins following Ballard's wife in his car and attempting to cause a car crash. A short time later, Ballard and his wife learn that Vaughan is wanted for running down a pedestrian at the airport. It is about this time that Vaughan steals Ballard's car.

Using Ballard's car, Vaughan runs his car off the flyover at the airport and kills himself when he lands on a bus full of airline passengers rather than the limo carrying Elizabeth Taylor as he had hoped. Ballard and his wife intend to buy a new car and continue hunting down car crashes as they wait for the one that will kill them both.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Dr. Robert Vaughan, a former television personality, is killed in a car accident when he drives his car off an airport flyover. Vaughan is known by the police to have orchestrated many car crashes and at the time of his death was wanted for running down a pedestrian at the same airport. Vaughan intentionally caused the accident that took his life.

In chapter 1, James Ballard watches as the emergency personnel work at the site of an accident that took the life of his friend, Vaughan. Ballard notices Elizabeth Taylor among the spectators watching and realizes that Vaughan missed his target when his car landed on an airport bus rather than the limo carrying Ms. Taylor to her flight. Vaughan had been a man obsessed with car crashes, often orchestrated them in order to derive a sort of pleasure from them. Vaughan's sexuality was locked in these car crashes, creating for him a sort of aphrodisiac that excited him more than any naked woman might have done. Vaughan would haunt the highways of London, searching for car crashes and photographing them. In his obsession, Vaughan helped Ballard come to terms with his own obsession, releasing in him the inhibitions that prevented him from fully understanding the power of modern technology.

In chapter 2, Ballard recalls his own car crash. Ballard is on his way home from a rendezvous with his secretary and lover, Renata. It is because of this rendezvous that Ballard has on his seatbelt when a tire blows on his car. Ballard's car swerves out of control, traveling the wrong way up a flyover. Ballard is able to avoid two oncoming cars, but is unable to avoid the third. The two cars hit head on and a man in the second car is thrown from his car onto Ballard's hood. Ballard remembers staring into the face of the dead man's wife, still stuck behind the wheel of her own car, in shock and unable to look away.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

These chapters introduce two main characters. The first is Vaughan, a man who has just died in a car accident that the narrator says he caused himself. Immediately the reader can see that Vaughan is not functioning within what some people might consider sane parameters. Vaughan wanted to die and he wanted to die as he crashed his car into that of an American actress, Elizabeth Taylor. This seems suicidal, but as the narrator continues to discuss his friend, the reader begins to see that Vaughan did not only want to die, but that he wanted to die in a specific way. Vaughan was obsessed with car crashes, introducing a theme of the novel. It was the crash itself that Vaughan planned out and executed, not an attempt to end his own life. This introduces the odd themes that run through this entire novel, leaving the reader only slightly prepared for the adventure about to unfold.



The other character introduced is the narrator, James Ballard. Ballard immediately appears sympathetic to Vaughan's obsession, revealing almost immediately to the reader his own obsession with car crashes. Ballard explains that Vaughan was like a teacher to him, someone who guided him through his obsession and allowed him to understand that what he was going through was, if not normal, something others have gone through before him. Ballard then tells the reader about his own accident that introduced him to this obsession, an accident that was as tragic as it was frightening, leaving the reader with some degree of sympathy for Ballard and the poor woman who survived the crash along with him.



Chapters 3-5

Chapters 3-5 Summary

In chapter 3, Ballard is taken to the hospital where he is treated for his many injuries. Ballard has injured his knees and has an imprint of the steering wheel on his chest. Ballard studies these injuries, imagining the car has become a part of him, leaving its imprint on his body. Ballard's wife, Catherine, comes to the hospital to visit him often. Ballard is amused by his wife's behavior because their marriage had been stale, the only excitement taking place when Ballard would question his wife about her latest affair. Catherine tells Ballard the name of the woman in the other car, Dr. Helen Remington, but refuses to tell him anything about the woman's husband who died in the crash. Catherine also tells Ballard that his car has been taken to the police impound. As Catherine visits with him, Ballard finds his mind turning to sexual thoughts. It seems the crash has awakened the potential of sex in many things Ballard had not thought about before. Ballard recalls a shopping trip he took once with Catherine and her secretary and wonders if Catherine is having an affair with the young woman. The nurses, too, arouse the sexual thoughts in Ballard even as they care for his many injuries.

In chapter 4, Ballard begins taking walks along the hospital corridors, befriending the nursing staff, and running minor errands for them. While walking in the corridor near the women's wing one afternoon Ballard sees Helen Remington come into the corridor with a tall man in a doctor's white coat. Ballard attempts to speak to her, but Dr. Remington does not respond. Later, Ballard speaks to Catherine about the funeral for Dr. Remington's husband and is disappointed to learn she did not attend. In chapter 5, Ballard is released from the hospital. Ballard spends the first few days sitting on the veranda outside his apartment, amazed at the roads that unfold in the city below him. Ballard becomes convinced that this accident was only his dress rehearsal for the massive accident that would one day end all humanity. Despite this conviction, Ballard is determined to drive again. Ballard returns to work and rents a car from the studio where his office is located. Ballard drives to the spot where his accident took place with Renata, his secretary. As they sit on this fateful spot, Ballard begins to seduce Renata. However, their embrace is interrupted when Ballard again sees the man who was with Dr. Remington at the hospital a short time before.

Chapters 3-5 Analysis

As Ballard recuperates in the hospital, the reader is introduced to his wife. Catherine is a professional woman who runs her own business and is learning to fly a plane. Catherine is also a woman who does not take her marriage vows too seriously. In fact, Ballard believes he knows every time Catherine strays in their marriage and has made a game of guessing the name and techniques of her latest lover in order to spice up their own sex life. This suggests to the reader that Ballard and his wife are bored in their relationship, perhaps explaining both Catherine's lovers as well as Ballard's. This also



suggests that fidelity is not going to be an issue for Ballard as his thoughts of sex begin to overwhelm him as he recuperates in the hospital.

Ballard runs into Dr. Remington, the other survivor of his car crash, and is completely ignored. The reader sees this and might think that Dr. Remington blames Ballard for the death of her husband, a reasonable assumption at this point in the novel. However, this assumption might prove to be false as the novel continues to develop. The reader also becomes aware of a strange man that seems to continuously appear as Ballard begins to reenter society as he recovers from his injuries. This man shows up twice in these chapters, suggesting he will play an important role in the developing plot. Finally, Ballard begins to drive again, returning to the scene of his accident to make out with his girlfriend. This connection of sex and the accident scene begins to illustrate the theme of mortality and sex, as well as beginning to show how Ballard now connects sex with his own accident, foreshadowing a time when Ballard will become obsessed with car crashes, his and others alike.



Chapters 6-9

Chapters 6-9 Summary

In chapter 6, Ballard begins renting more cars, a new one every day. Ballard drives everywhere he can, imagining the people who drove these cars before him. One afternoon, while driving a large American sedan, Ballard picks up a prostitute and takes her to a parking garage to make love in his car. However, the love making is interrupted when Ballard becomes aware of a man watching them. This man calmly puts a camera away in his car. Ballard recognizes him as Dr. Robert Vaughan, a former television personality who had suffered a horrible motorcycle accident. In chapter 7, Ballard buys a new car that is an exact replica of the one he was driving when his accident took place. After it arrives, Ballard drives out to the police impound yard to see his old car. While studying the damage to the car, Ballard becomes aware that Dr. Remington is also in the impound yard to survey the damage to her own car. Ballard offers her a ride to work and she readily accepts. Ballard and Dr. Remington end up going for a long drive, discussing everything from Helen's job to the trouble she is having with her husband's will.

In chapter 8, a week after the inquest into Ballard's accident he happens to see Helen Remington at the airport. Ballard picks her up and they go for a ride. Ballard drives to the site of their car accident and he and Helen make love in the front seat of the car. Ballard finds himself imagining that Helen is somehow punishing him for the death of her husband and he in return is somehow offering a piece of her husband back. Over the next few weeks, Ballard and Helen see one another frequently and Ballard waits for Catherine to discover his affair. In chapter 9, Ballard takes Helen to the stock-car races. To his surprise, Vaughan is there as well as a stunt driver from the studio who is there to reenact a famous car accident. The accident reenactment does not go well and Ballard finds himself helping to take the stunt driver to the hospital. Ballard remains in the car with Vaughan while Helen escorts the driver, Seagrave, into the hospital. Ballard finds himself studying Vaughan, fascinated by his many scars from his motorcycle accident and the sexuality he seemed to exude inside the car.

Chapters 6-9 Analysis

Ballard has become obsessed with driving, driving a new car everyday and imagining car crashes involving the people who drove the car before him. Ballard's thoughts show the progression of his obsession, moving beyond a morbid fascination with his own accident and moving toward a fascination with car crashes in general. At the same time, Ballard begins to associate sex with cars and car crashes, first with a prostitute and then when he takes the widow of the man killed in his car accident as a lover. This sexual behavior not only shows the reader the fascination Ballard now has with sex, touching on the theme of mortality and sex, but also shows a snapshot of his overall

character in the fact that he chooses to indulge his fascination with a stranger rather than his wife.

Ballard continues to notice the strange man following him and finally figures out this man's identity. Ballard's stalker is Dr. Robert Vaughan, a former television personality who suffered his own accident on the back of a motorcycle. Vaughan appears to be fascinated with Ballard for reasons Ballard does not understand at this point. However, when Ballard meets Vaughan at a stock car show, he begins to find himself attracted to the strange man in both in relation to Vaughan's interest in car crashes and in a sexual way. Ballard confesses that he has never had sexual feelings for a man before, but finds Vaughan's sexuality inside the car appealing. Ballard's feelings seem to show the reader that Ballard looks to Vaughan as not only some sort of mentor, but also as a possible romantic companion, foreshadowing a complicated relationship between the two men.



Chapters 10-13

Chapters 10-13 Summary

In chapter 10, Ballard accompanies Vaughan and Helen to the home of the stunt driver, Seagrave. At this home, Ballard and Helen are introduced to Vera, Seagrave's wife, and Gabrielle, a young social worker who clearly has suffered some terrible accident. Gabrielle is disfigured and wears a brace on her leg. Ballard takes Ballard to a room in the back of the house and shows him a photo album. Pictures in the album show Gabrielle in the aftermath of her accident and the following months while she recuperated from her injuries. The album also includes pictures of Ballard after his own accident, including pictures of Ballard with the women in his life. Ballard notices a sexual overtone to many of these photos, coming to understand that Vaughan has also made the connection between sex and car crashes that Ballard has made. Vaughan takes the album back and asks Ballard about Elizabeth Taylor. Vaughan knows that the actress is filming a movie at the studio where Ballard works. Later Ballard notices a magazine in Vaughan's room that includes sexual poses of various women with cars.

In chapter 11, Ballard finds himself excited by the memories of his accident Vaughan has caused. Ballard spends the following day searching the roads for Vaughan. Having no luck, Ballard returns to his offices at the studio where he discovers a wrecked car waiting to be used in a scene in Ms. Taylor's movie. Ballard watches Ms. Taylor prepare for the scene while thinking of Gabrielle. Seagrave arrives, scheduled to drive the car in the scene in which the accident takes place. Vaughan appears as well, eager to watch the scene. When Catherine comes to pick up her husband, Ballard introduces them. Ballard and Catherine give Vaughan a ride home. Ballard thinks of Catherine touching the car in a sexual way, becoming deeply excited about his wife for the first time in a long while. In chapter 12, Catherine begins having sexual fantasies about Vaughan, talking to Ballard about him as they make love. Ballard finds himself even more excited by the idea of Catherine's attraction to Vaughan. In chapter 13, Ballard goes to the Road Research Laboratory with Helen, who has taken a new job there. Vaughan arrives moments before a crash between a family vehicle and a motorcycle is enacted. Vaughan tells Ballard that Seagrave has gone missing. While watching the slow motion replay, Ballard notices Vaughan's sexual reaction to the crash and becomes aroused, finding himself more attracted to Vaughan than before. Afterward, Vaughan gives Ballard a ride, asking him to look over some questionnaires he has given to survivors of car crashes.

Chapters 10-13 Analysis

Ballard is shown one of the photo albums Vaughan makes of the pictures he takes at car accidents. The album includes pictures of Ballard, both in the aftermath of his car accident and other moments in which Ballard was driving a car after the accident, including a few racy photos of Ballard with the women in his life. These photos do not



surprise Ballard. In fact, it seems to please him to discover that Vaughan has made the same connection between cars, car crashes, and sex that he has. Ballard also finds a magazine among Vaughan's things that depicts women in sexual poses with cars. This again reaffirms Ballard's association with sex, cars, and car crashes, giving him the impression that his odd new feelings are somehow normal, or at least shared. This allows Ballard to further indulge his fantasy.

When Catherine meets Vaughan, she finds herself sexually excited by him. In turn, this excitement on Catherine's part excites Ballard. Rather than feeling jealousy, Ballard shares in this excitement, exploring the idea of surrealism that fills this novel. When Ballard notices Vaughan's obvious sexual reaction to a stimulated accident between a motorcycle and family vehicle, this only plays to increase Ballard's sexual interest in Vaughan. Again the reader sees the suggestion that Ballard's interest in Vaughan goes deeper than friendship or a mentorship, that the two men might have a sexual relationship before the plot reaches its climax.



Chapters 14-17

Chapters 14-17 Summary

In chapter 14, Ballard looks through the questionnaires and finds himself drawn to questions that reflect sexual attitudes of the crash survivors. Especially interesting to Ballard is questions about the celebrities these survivors would like to see in a crash and the type of injuries they would be interested in seeing inflicted. Many of the injuries the respondents choose are sexual injuries. Included with the questionnaires, Ballard finds pictures of celebrities who have died in car accidents as well as pictures of Elizabeth Taylor. In chapter 15, Vaughan picks up a couple of prostitutes and gives Ballard the keys to the car. Vaughan begins making love to one of the prostitutes while Ballard drives through the city, changing his technique and movements to the way Ballard is driving. Ballard becomes excited by the way he seems to be able to control Vaughan's sexual act. Later, Vaughan poses the prostitutes in the various poses of crash victims.

In chapter 16, Vaughan pressures Ballard into giving one of his questionnaires to Elizabeth Taylor, but Ballard has little luck. Ballard tries to convince Vaughan that it is useless to continue to pursue Elizabeth Taylor and that the chance she would die in a car accident are slim anyway. Vaughan shows Ballard some photographs he took of Ms. Taylor and altered to reflect possible injuries sustain in car crashes. As Ballard watches, Vaughan has a sexual climax simply from viewing the photographs. Afterward, Vaughan is so drained that Catherine insists she and Ballard drive him home. In chapter 17, Ballard drives as Catherine sits in the back seat with Vaughan. Before they have gone very far, they come across an accident involving a taxi and a limo. Vaughan leaves the car to photograph the accident, ignoring the police officers who attempt to force him to stay back. As they pull over to wait for Vaughan, Ballard looks around and discovers just how many people have stopped to stare, including people with small children. When Vaughan returns, they set out again. As Ballard drives through a car wash, he watches Vaughan and Catherine make love in the backseat.

Chapters 14-17 Analysis

Vaughan is clearly more interested in the sexual connection with car crashes than Ballard or the reader previously thought. Vaughan also appears to have a fascination with celebrities involved in car accidents, perhaps explaining his choice of a Lincoln Continental similar to the one Kennedy was riding in when he died. This obsession becomes even more interesting when Vaughan continues to question Ballard about Elizabeth Taylor. The idea of Ms. Taylor suffering a car accident clearly is a sexual aphrodisiac for Vaughan. This gives the reader some hint as to the reason Vaughan chose to kill himself in an attempt to crash his car into Ms. Taylor's car.

For the first time the reader sees Vaughan come across a new car crash. As Vaughan rushes off to photograph the victims, Ballard looks around and notices the interest of the people around them. People are standing around with children on their shoulders, watching the chaos as though it is a sporting event. This suggests to the reader that perhaps Ballard and Vaughan's obsession is not so unusual in modern times, touching on the theme of modern technology and human relationships. Afterward, Vaughan and Catherine make love in the back of the car while Ballard drives through a car wash. Ballard shows no sign of jealousy, and in fact appears to be excited by this act of betrayal on his wife's part, again injecting a sense of surrealism to the plot.



Chapter 18-20

Chapter 18-20 Summary

In chapter 18, Ballard and Catherine arrive at their home where they part with Vaughan. Catherine appears to be somewhat ashamed of her behavior, but Ballard reassures her that he is not bothered by her actions. The following day Ballard drives around with Vaughan in order to look for Seagrave. In the evening they stop by Vaughan's apartment where Ballard looks through many photographs, including some taken before Vaughan suffered his own crash. Vaughan and Ballard spend the night on the roads and see three accidents. At the scene of the final accident, Vaughan has a sexual experience in a car that had been driven by a dentist who died in his accident. In the next few weeks, Vaughan and Ballard spend every day driving around, looking for car crashes. Vaughan tires of his Lincoln and begins borrowing cars from the long term parking at the airport. During this time, Vaughan brings many women to the cars, making love to them as Ballard drives, each woman resembling Elizabeth Taylor more and more as time goes on.

In chapter 19, Vaughan, Ballard, and Gabrielle attend a car show. Ballard finds himself deeply attracted to Gabrielle and he makes love to her in his car after the show. Ballard is excited by the scars on Gabrielle's body and begins to imagine what it would be like if Catherine were to suffer a catastrophic car accident. In chapter 20, Vaughan appears to be becoming more obsessed not only with car crashes, but with a sexually oriented car crash with Elizabeth Taylor. Vaughan even appears disappointed as each day passes without this accident taking place. One day Vaughan and Ballard come across a car crash involving a minor actress. When they arrive, they discover that the accident was caused by Seagrave. Ballard watches Vaughan take pictures and finds himself wondering if the dead Seagrave was encouraged to cause this accident by Vaughan. Ballard encourages Vaughan to tell Seagrave's wife about his death, but Vaughan is too deeply engrossed with a souvenir he took from the actress's car. Their trips along the highways increase for a time and Ballard begins to feel as though their actions have become one, as though he has become symbiotic with Vaughan even as Vaughan's obsessions begin to exact a toll on his sanity.

Chapter 18-20 Analysis

Ballard gives up everything to spend his days with Vaughan. Ballard no longer goes to work and spends little time with Catherine. Instead, Ballard finds himself enthralled with the car crashes he and Vaughan come across as they haunt the highways day and night. At the same time Ballard begins to feel as though he has reached the same pentacle in his obsession as Vaughan, he notices that Vaughan is beginning to fall apart. Vaughan's obsession is beginning to take over all else, leaving him depressed and disappointed with each day that passes and he is still alive.



When Seagrave dies in a car crash with an actress, Ballard immediately recognizes that this crash is somehow a dress rehearsal for an accident Vaughan hopes to have with Elizabeth Taylor. Rather than becoming concerned for the safety of the actress, however, Ballard continues to search out accidents with Vaughan, continuing to enjoy their shared obsession, a theme of the novel. This strange behavior, this lack of basic morality, again injects the plot with a sense of surrealism as though Ballard does not realize that these things happening around him and Vaughan are real.



Chapter 21-24

Chapter 21-24 Summary

In chapter 21, Ballard and Vaughan meet at an airport bar. Vaughan gives Ballard some LSD before he hands him the keys to his car. The two men drive around as they have many times before until the drugs begin to take effect. They participate in crazy behavior, driving the wrong way up a flyover. Later, Ballard parks near a junk yard and he and Ballard make love in the car. Throughout the act, Ballard thinks of the imagery of the car in the sex act, increasing his excitement for Vaughan. In chapter 22, Ballard climbs out of the car the following morning to escape the after effects of the drugs. When Vaughan wakes, he drives the car into a palisade, narrowly missing Ballard.

In chapter 23, Ballard stays home with Catherine the following few days after his encounter with Vaughan to recover from the lingering effects of the drug. One day when Catherine returns from a flying lesson, Ballard notices a ding in her fender. Catherine says someone ran their car into her own parked car. A short time later, when Ballard takes Catherine for a drive, Vaughan chases them and tries to force them off the road. When Ballard runs into Vera Seagrave at a gas station he learns that Vaughan is wanted by the police in connection to the hit and run of a pedestrian at the airport. For several days after this, Vaughan begins to follow Catherine, attempting to cause her to crash. Ballard begins following Catherine, hoping either to prevent a crash or to watch it happen. Ballard asks Catherine to stop driving, but she refuses. Then one night Vaughan leaves his car outside Ballard's apartment building and steals Ballard's car.

In chapter 24, Vaughan dies ten days after stealing Ballard's car. Ballard learns about the accident when the police call Catherine to tell her that Ballard has been killed in a car crash. Both Ballard and Catherine rush to the crash site and discover Vaughan has used Ballard's car in his attempt to crash with Elizabeth Taylor. A few days later, Ballard and Catherine visit the police impound where Ballard's car was taken. As they make love in the car where Vaughan died, Helen and Gabrielle arrive. They do not speak, they simply acknowledge each other. As he leaves, Ballard drips the remnants of his coupling with Catherine on the crashed cars around them.

Chapter 21-24 Analysis

Ballard and Vaughan indulge in the sexual encounter the reader has sensed was coming since the two men met. The encounter is enhanced with both drugs and the euphoria they experience after dodging certain death. The following morning, however, Vaughan attempts to kill Ballard when he wakes to find Ballard outside the car. The reader is curious why Vaughan would turn on Ballard, wondering if his reaction is based in guilt for the act they indulged in. However, when Vaughan begins attempting to kill Catherine as well, the reader begins to wonder if Vaughan's actions are based in



jealousy. After all, Catherine is Ballard's wife and Ballard has begun spending a large amount of time with her after his night with Vaughan.

Vaughan is becoming more and more obsessed and his mental health is clearly in question. Vaughan is not only attempting to kill Catherine, but is also accused of running down a pedestrian at the airport. The reader sees this melt down as a dangerous, sad circumstance, but Ballard seems to think it is the normal progress of their shared obsession. Again the reader sees the surrealism in this novel and wonders how anyone could react in this way in reality. Finally Vaughan causes the accident he has dreamed of, planned for, and organized throughout the novel. Vaughan missed his intended target, however, landing instead on an airport bus filled with airline passengers. This tragedy is glossed over as Ballard and his wife celebrate the life and death of Vaughan. It is clear that Vaughan was the master, Ballard the student, and that Ballard has grown to take Vaughan's place, leaving the reader worried for the safety of both Catherine and all the people around Ballard.



Characters

James Ballard

James Ballard is a young, married man who works creating commercials. Ballard is in an unhappy marriage in which both he and his wife have frequent affairs. The day Ballard ends his relationship with a secretary he is in a car crash that results in the death of another man. Ballard is mildly injured, but survives this accident. When released from the hospital, Ballard becomes aware of the millions of cars on the roads every day. He begins to believe that one day there will be a massive car accident, killing everyone.

After his accident, Ballard begins to have an affair with the wife of the man killed in his accident. This affair is loveless and seems to be a result of Ballard's sense of guilt for surviving the crash. Ballard's feelings are not resolved with this affair, however. When Ballard meets Vaughan, a man obsessed with car accidents, he allows himself to be drawn into the dark obsession that Vaughan indulges. Before long Ballard finds himself riding the highways in search of accidents for Vaughan to photograph.

Ballard believes that the whole world will end in a massive car crash. Ballard is excited by the idea of a car crash and does nothing to try to keep himself or his wife safe. When Vaughan begins planning a crash that he hopes will end in his death along with the death of actress Elizabeth Taylor, Ballard does nothing to stop him. In fact, Ballard is excited by the idea. Ballard knows a crash will end his own life, so he simply sits back and allows this behavior to continue around him.

Catherine Ballard

Catherine Ballard is James Ballard's wife. Catherine is in the airline industry and is learning to fly. Catherine and James have a stale marriage that is complicated by the numerous affairs both Catherine and James indulge in. In fact, Catherine's affairs often provide some level of excitement to the couples love life as Ballard tries to guess the name of her latest conquest and his techniques in bed.

After Ballard has his accident, Catherine becomes a doting wife. Catherine worries about Ballard's state of mind, but does not seem too worried about his physical health. In fact, the car crash appears to make Catherine reckless, as though she is curious what it would be like to be in accident herself. When Ballard befriends Vaughan, Catherine finds herself attracted to him. Catherine and Vaughan have a sexual encounter in the back of Vaughan's car while Ballard is driving. Later, when Vaughan and Ballard have something of a falling out, Vaughan begins following Catherine, attempting to cause an accident. Catherine and Ballard both seem to be excited by this despite Ballard's concern over his wife's safety.



Dr. Robert Vaughan

Dr. Robert Vaughan was once a scientific expert with a show on television. However, when Vaughan suffered a motorcycle accident he was forced to quit his job. Vaughan is obsessed with car crashes and spends most of his time traveling the highways in and around London looking for car crashes. At times, Vaughan has even been known to cause accidents. Vaughan's obsession has led him to make friends with many crash survivors, including Seagrave, a stunt driver who often enacts car crashes for movies.

Vaughan befriends Ballard after following him around in order to photograph him in the aftermath of his car crash. Vaughan takes Ballard on searches for car crashes, often leaving Ballard with his car while Vaughan rushes off to take pictures of the victims of the crashes. At other times, Vaughan brings prostitutes into the car and makes love to them while Ballard drives the car, responding to the prostitute as though responding to the speed and recklessness of Ballard's driving. Vaughan becomes obsessed with Elizabeth Taylor, especially after he learns that she is filming a movie on the studio lot where Ballard works. Vaughan orchestrates a wreck in which he hopes to die with the actress, but he misses her car and hits an airport bus instead, killing him instantly.

Renata

Renata is Ballard's secretary. Ballard is with Renata in the moments before his accident. Ballard credits Renata with saving his life because he put his seatbelt on to keep her from feeling obligated to embrace him. As a result, Ballard has his seatbelt on during the accident, keeping him from flying through the windshield. Later, when Ballard is released from the hospital, he often takes Renata to the sight of the accident. On one of these occasions Ballard finds himself sexually aroused and attempts to seduce Renata. Renata allows Ballard to kiss her, but ends the encounter before it can go much further.

Dr. Helen Remington

Dr. Helen Remington is driving the vehicle that Ballard runs into during his accident. Helen's husband is killed in the accident when he is ejected from the car and lands on Ballard's hood. Ballard is filled with guilt over this death, so he goes out of his way to see Helen again. After the inquest, Ballard seduces Helen. The couple begins an affair that lasts for several weeks. One night Ballard takes Helen to a stock car show where a stunt driver acts out a famous accident. At the car show, Helen and Ballard meet Vaughan and a stunt driver. This introduction brings Helen into contact with Gabrielle, an accident survivor with whom Helen will begin an affair.

Seagrave

Seagrave is a stunt car driver who often drives cars in movies to allow the director to film crashes without endangering the actors in the movie. Seagrave is as obsessed with



car crashes as Vaughan. Therefore, he allows Vaughan to put him in situations where he will crash his car, such as a dangerous reenactment of a car crash at the show to which Helen takes Ballard. Eventually Seagrave runs his car into that of a young actress he knows from the movie studio. Seagrave dies in the accident. Vaughan is fascinated by the accident because he has also planned to die in a car accident with an actress. It is unclear, therefore, whether or not Vaughan put Seagrave up to the accident or if Seagrave just happened to pick this actress on his own.

Vera Seagrave

Vera Seagrave is Seagrave's wife. Vera is aware of her husband's obsession with car crash. Vera is aware of Vaughan's influence over her husband as well because Vera allows Vaughan to use a room in her house to develop and keep his photographs. Vera and Seagrave have a small child. When Seagrave disappears shortly before his accident, Vera suspects what is going on. Later, when Vaughan begins acting oddly, causing minor accidents and running down pedestrians, the police come to Vera's house to find him. Vera is frightened by him and the police and decides to leave town. It is through Vera that Ballard and Catherine learn about Vaughan's legal troubles.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle is a young woman who was in a car accident that left her tragically injured. Gabrielle's accident was witnessed by Vaughan and he took pictures of her both at the scene and in the months afterward. Vaughan became friends with Gabrielle, bringing her into his circle of friends. Later Ballard becomes infatuated with her, having a sexual encounter with her in a car. Later, Helen and Gabrielle begin an affair with one another. Gabrielle seems to represent the tragedy of car accidents and the vitality of the survivors.

Elizabeth Taylor

Elizabeth Taylor is a famous actress. During the time Ballard and Vaughan know each other, Elizabeth Taylor is filming a movie at the studio where Ballard works. Vaughan becomes obsessed with Elizabeth Taylor, especially after he sees a crashed car that she is to use in a scene in the movie she is filming. Vaughan decides he would like to orchestrate a car accident in which both he and Elizabeth Taylor die. Vaughan plans it out carefully, but on the chosen day he misses Ms. Taylor's car and hits an airplane bus instead. Vaughan is killed. Elizabeth Taylor is a witness to the crash and is scene by Ballard watching the rescue workers extract the survivors.

Dr. Remington's Husband

Dr. Remington's husband is killed in the car accident in which Ballard is involved. The death of Helen Remington's husband is the catalysis that causes Ballard to become

involved with Helen. Ballard feels guilty over the death of this man despite his denials and begins an affair with Helen in an attempt to allow her to punish him for his part in the accident. Ballard is also excited by the idea of making love to Helen because of her connection to his accident, which Ballard sees as the event that woke him to some of more unusual nuances of sex.



Objects/Places

Ballard's Car

Ballard crashes his car in an accident on his way home from work. After the accident, Ballard buys a new car exactly like the old one. Later Vaughan will still this new car and use it in his attempt to die with Elizabeth Taylor, killing only himself.

Rental Cars

Ballard rents multiple rental cars from the movie studio where he works in order to experience the excitement of driving and imagining accidents in the many different cars.

Wrecked Car

The studio where Ballard works brings a wrecked car onto the set to use in a scene in a movie Elizabeth Taylor is making to simulate a crash her character has experienced. This car excites Vaughan and promotes his fantasy of dying in a car crash with Elizabeth Taylor.

Lincoln Continental

Vaughan drives a Lincoln Continental similar to the one Kennedy was riding in the day of his assassination.

London Airport

Ballard and his wife live and work near the London Airport. It is also at the airport where Vaughan has the accident that kills him.

Highways

Vaughan and Ballard cruise the highways looking for accidents.

Western Avenue Flyover

Western Avenue is a major throughway near London Airport. It is on the Western Avenue Flyover where Ballard has his accident.



Police Impound

After the initial car crash Ballard's car is taken to the police impound. Later, Ballard's second car is taken there as well after it is used by Vaughan in his fatal car crash. Ballard visits this impound to see both cars.

Airport Bus

Vaughan crashes his car into an airport bus in an attempt to crash the car into a limo carrying actress Elizabeth Taylor.

Oceanic Terminal

Vaughan's accident happens outside the Oceanic Terminal at London Airport.

Camera

Vaughan often carries a camera around with him so that he can photograph accidents.

Photo Album

Vaughan shows Ballard a photo album in which he has collected pictures of crash victims, Ballard included.



Themes

Modern Technology in Human Relationships

The main character of this novel survived a terrible car crash and meets a man who also survived a crash. Both men are obsessed with car accidents and how they change a person's life. The main character, James Ballard, goes along with his new friend's obsession, cruising the highways looking for car crashes. Unfortunately, there is never a lack of crashes to find. Ballard becomes aware that there are highways everywhere and it seems that every time there is a crash it is like a dress rehearsal for the ultimate death, for the moment when all humans will perish from the use of the technology they have come to rely on.

Ballard observes the people around him and notices how dependent they have all become on technology. No one seems to be able to leave their homes without using an elevator, a car, or a plane. These things have also influenced human relationships. No one can visit a friend without their car. The car is a social dating spot, a place to hang out and talk with friends. Planes allow people to visit one another more often, perhaps causing rifts where there might not have been one if distance had been allowed to continue. Ballard watches all of this, first from his home as he recuperates from his injuries, then as Vaughan's companion. Ballard feels as though life has been altered by modern technologies in ways that are irreversible. For this reason, modern technology in human relationships is a theme of the novel.

Obsession

After experiencing a car accident, James Ballard finds that he is obsessed with cars and accidents. Ballard looks at the injuries on his body and feels as though his car has left its mark on him, somehow becoming a part of him. Ballard goes home and notices for the first time how many roads there are right outside his home and how many accidents there are on any given day. Ballard begins to think that all of humanity is moving toward a massive accident that will end life on the entire planet.

As Ballard begins to recover, he finds himself drawn to driving. Ballard feels as though he should be afraid to drive again, but instead he is pulled to the car, pulled to the sight of his accident. Ballard cannot forget what happened that day and it seems to be growing inside of him, becoming bigger and bigger every day.

When Ballard meets Vaughan, he recognizes in Vaughan a similar obsession. Vaughan too has experienced a crash that changed his life. Now Vaughan spends his days cruising the highways in search of accidents. When Vaughan finds an accident he often photographs it, saving the photos in an album of his own creation. Vaughan talks about car crashes constantly and all his friends have been in some sort of accident at least



once. Vaughan dreams of the day he will die in a car accident, hoping to take with him the famous actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Vaughan does die, but not with Ms. Taylor.

Mortality and Sex

Even as Ballard becomes obsessed with car crashes, he begins to obsess over sex as well. However, it is not just sex that Ballard obsesses over. It is sex in a car, sex with other crash victims, and sex with victims whose sexual organs were somehow altered in their car crash. Ballard begins having an affair with the female survivor from his car crash, imagining that he can somehow bring back the woman's husband by making love to her. Ballard is even more aroused by this woman when they make love at the same spot where their car crash took place. At one point, Ballard comes to realize that his new lover has never suggested they make love any place but a car, causing Ballard to recognize it is only the car that excites them both.

Ballard rides around town with Vaughan, looking for car crashes to observe and photograph. While doing this, Ballard watches as Vaughan makes love to a prostitute, recognizing that his driving technique seems to encourage and excite Vaughan. Ballard is empowered by this idea and carries it forward when Vaughan makes love to Ballard's wife in the back seat of the car. Vaughan has connected his obsession with car crashes to his sexual arousal at the same time Ballard has come to connect not only cars, but his simple mortality with sex.

Car crashes nearly guarantee death for some people, while others are able to walk away. Ballard's obsession seems to be based on the fact that he lived while another man died because Ballard lost control of his car and crashed into him. Ballard has connected cars and technology in general with mortality. Ballard has also connected sex to the car crash, as though he is using sex as a way to reaffirm the fact that he is still alive. As a result, Ballard begins having multiple affairs in his car, including a brief sexual relationship with his friend Vaughan, that he might not have had otherwise, which is what makes mortality and sex a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The main character and narrator is James Ballard, a young Englishman who has recently survived a car crash that left another man dead. Ballard meets a man obsessed with car crashes while attempting to deal with the emotional aftermath of his own car crash. Ballard tells the story of this other man, expressing his obsession and his own part in it, leading to the tale of his friend's death in a car crash.

The point of view of this novel is unique in that it is almost autobiographical, as though the writer were telling a non-fiction story rather than a fictional story. The author of the novel even gives the main character his own name. This point of view adds a sense of realism to the novel that is unnerving, leaving the reader questioning their own beliefs when it comes to modern technology. The point of view is tight, specific, remaining within the mind of only one character and showing the events within the story only through one set of eyes. While this might present a narrow viewpoint, it does tell a story that is unique, frightening, and amazingly real.

Setting

The novel is set in London. The main character lives and works near London Airport, therefore the airport plays a major role in most of the novel. The setting is never truly described in detail, except for multiple descriptions of the highways leading into and out of the airport. These highways play a major role in the novel, almost becoming a character in their own right, therefore their description is very important to the overall plot of the novel.

The setting of this novel could be any major city in the world. The city itself is not important to the plot. The highways that run in and out of the city are the most important setting. The highways in this novel exist in London and move in and out of London Airport, making the airport a major setting. This setting is second to the roads, however, leaving the reader only aware of the many roads around the airport. Due to the nature of the novel and its major themes, the setting works well in that the only setting really described in the novel are the highways.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. There is some slang in the novel, but it is minor and easily interpreted by a reader who might not be familiar with English slang. There are few foreign words in the novel. The novel is written in a language that is easy to understand, though at times can be a little formal and tedious. The language often utilizes words one might associate with cars and car crashes, touching on the overall



plot of the novel, and the use of these words might at times be somewhat unexpected in their use, but completely comprehensible.

The author of this novel uses his language simply, while utilizing a great deal of language that one would associate with cars, car crashes, and modern technology. The purpose behind the use of the language in this novel is clear to reader as the plot begins to develop and the reader becomes aware of how obsessed the main characters are with cars and car crashes. The language is simple to understand and well used in this novel, leaving the reader with no doubt as to the overall message the author is attempting to leave with his readers.

Structure

The novel is divided into twenty-four chapters, each simply numbered and not named. The chapters are fairly short, most no more than five or six pages in length. The novel is told mainly in exposition with very little dialogue. The novel is written as though it were a memoir someone were writing about the life of a friend who just passed away rather than a novel with scenes written to tell a story. The story is almost that of a non-fiction biography, a plot that revolves around the final weeks of a single man's life and how his obsession led to his own death.

The novel contains two distinct plots. The first is the obsession Vaughan has developed with cars and car crashes since his own near death experience. Vaughan spends his life in a car, observing and chronicling the car crashes of other people, mostly strangers. Vaughan lives, eats, and makes love in his car, rarely doing anything that does not in some way involve cars. Vaughan also plans his own death in a car, succeeding in killing himself, but not the young starlet he intended to take with him. The other plot follows the life of Vaughan's biographer, James Ballard, as he deals with his own developing obsession with car crashes after suffering a crash of his own. Ballard begins to follow Vaughan around, participating in the same sort of behavior Vaughan indulges, having his own affairs in cars and anticipating the moment when all of humanity will suffer in one big car crash. The plot following Vaughan is resolved when Vaughan is killed, but Ballard's story line is implied to continue beyond the pages of the book until he too meets a similar end as Vaughan's.

Quotes

"Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"Even this first death seemed timid compared with the others in which Vaughan took part, and with those imaginary deaths that filled his mind." Chapter 1, pg. 13

"I began to understand the real excitements of the car-crash after my first meeting with Vaughn. Propelled on a pair of scarred and uneven legs repeatedly injured in one or other vehicle collision, the harsh and unsettling figure of this hoodlum scientist came into my life at a time when his obsessions were self-evidently those of a mad-man." Chapter 2, pg. 19

"During my first hours in Ashford Hospital all I could see in my mind was the image of us locked together face to face in those two cars, the body of her dying husband lying between u on the bonnet of my car. We looked at each other through he fractured windshields, neither able to move." Chapter 2, pg. 20

"This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash." Chapter 3, pg. 29

"Since my accident Catherine's driving had become worse, not better, as if she were confident now that the unseen powers of the universe would guarantee her erratic passage down these high-speed concrete avenues." Chapter 5, pg. 47

"During my first days at home I spent all my time on the veranda, watching the traffic move along the motorway, determined to spot the first signs o this end of the world by automobile, for which the accident had been my own private rehearsal." Chapter 5, pg. 50

"This was a ten-year-old model of a Lincoln Continental, the same make of vehicle as the open limousine in which President Kennedy had died. I remembered that one of Vaughan's obsessions had been Kennedy's assassination." Chapter 6, pg. 64

"Strangely, our sexual acts took place only within my automobile. In the large bedroom of her rented house I was unable even to mount an erection, and Helen herself would become argumentative and remote, talking endlessly about the more boring aspects of her work. Once together in my car, with the crowded traffic lanes through which we had moved forming an unseen and unseeing audience, we were able to arouse each other." Chapter 8, pg. 82



"I looked out at the drivers of the cars alongside us, visualizing their lives in the terms Vaughan had defined for them. For Vaughan they were already dead." Chapter 14, pg. 137

"By this time I was certain that if the screen actress never died in a car-crash, Vaughan had created all the possibilities of her death." Chapter 20, pg. 182

"Meanwhile, the traffic moves in an unceasing flow along the flyover. The aircraft rise from the runways of the airport, carrying the remnants of Vaughan's semen to the instrument panels and radiator grilles of thousands of crashing cars, the leg stances of a million passengers."
Chapter 24, pg. 224

Topics for Discussion

Who is Vaughan? Why did Vaughan want to crash his car into Elizabeth Taylor's car? Is this a suicidal desire or something else? Why is Vaughan obsessed with car crashes? Does this have anything to do with the accident Vaughan survived? If so, how? Is Vaughan's obsession unhealthy? How?

Who is James Ballard? How did Ballard's accident change his life? Is this a good change or a bad one? Describe Ballard's marriage. How has Ballard's accident affected his marriage? Is the change good or bad? Explain. Why does Ballard become obsessed with car crashes? Would this have happened if Ballard had not had an accident of his own? Why or why not?

Who is Dr. Helen Remington? How is she connected to Ballard? Why does she begin an affair with Ballard? Why do they only meet in cars? How does the car relate to their affair? Would they have an affair if not for the car accident?

Who is Catherine Ballard? How does her husband's car accident change her life? How does the accident change the dynamics of her marriage? How does the accident change the way Catherine and James Ballard look at their mutual extramarital affairs? Why? How does Catherine feel about James? Does she love him? What about Vaughan? Does she love Vaughan?

Discuss obsession. How is obsession defined? What is an obsession? Who has an obsession in this novel? What is this person's obsession? Who is has an obsession? Name all the obsessions defined in this novel. Is there more than one? What are they? What defines them in the plot? Why do people become obsessed? Are these obsession easily defined by a single event?

Discuss sex. Why is sex such a major theme in this novel? Why do the characters associate car crashes with sex? Is this a reasonable association? Why does Ballard begin an affair with the other survivor of his car crash? How are the crash and the affair related in Ballard's mind? Is this affair a manifestation of guilt? How does sex relate to survivor's guilt? Is this a motivation for all the characters of the novel? Why or why not?

Discuss technology. The author seems to believe that modern technology has changed the way people relate to one another. Do you agree? How does technology affect human relationships? Is this a good thing? Why or why not? Is technology innocent in the guilt the author attempts to apply to it? Why or why not?