

The Counterlife Study Guide

The Counterlife by Philip Roth

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Plot Summary

The novel *The Counterlife* tells multiple versions of the same story. Sometimes the stories seem to be slight modifications of others, and other times the stories are complete and drastic revisions.

Part 1 tells the story of Henry Zuckerman, who risks his life undergoing heart surgery so he can stop taking medication that has deprived him of his sexual potency. Not yet forty, the dentist Henry cannot face life without the ability to have sex with either his wife or his mistress and assistant. Though the doctor tries to convince him not to have the risky operation, Henry is determined. Shortly before his operation, Henry confides in his older brother, Nathan, his predicament and his desire to restore his virility, and it is Nathan who tries to understand what drives his brother to such drastic measures.

In Part 2, Henry does not die from the surgery, but his emotional recovery from the operation is lacking. Though the operation is a success physically, Henry senses emptiness in his life. During a leisure trip to Israel, Henry feels like he has lost touch with his Jewish heritage. This notion persists even after Henry returns to the United States, and one day without warning Henry leaves his dental office and boards a plane to Israel. Nathan goes to Israel to meet with Henry in an effort to get some answers about Henry's unexpected actions.

During his time in Israel, Nathan meets many unforgettable characters. Nathan, who has never thought much of his Jewish heritage beyond its potential for humor in his many novels, has difficulty understanding the religious and patriotic passions of the residents of the Israeli settlements.

Part 3 consists of an in-flight adventure of Nathan's. What begins as an absurdly comic notion of a young man to hijack the plane for the benefit of the Jewish people ends in a situation devoid of any humor.

In Part 4, Nathan, not Henry, has died from complications during heart surgery. Unlike Henry's reasons for risking surgery to regain the ability to have recreational sex, Nathan risks the surgery so he can become a father. Henry tries to attend the funeral in order to put some grievances toward his older brother to rest, but first his brother's eulogy that praises the very book that caused the estrangement and then the discovery of an unpublished manuscripts reignites all of Henry's anger toward Nathan.

Part 5 seems to take place in England where Nathan has recently moved after marrying an Englishwoman, Maria. Maria is five months pregnant with their child, and they look forward to a happy life together. They are remodeling a home in the Greater London area, and both Maria and Nathan believe that they have reached the happiest moments yet in their lives. Nathan's exposure to both the English class system and his first experience with overt anti-Semitism cause him to reevaluate his plans, and the ensuing discussion leads to a serious and damaging argument with his new wife. The argument

also provides some clues as to how the different versions of the same stories relate to each other.



Part 1 Basel, pages 3-13

Part 1 Basel, pages 3-13 Summary

The Counterlife tells multiple versions of the same story. It begins with the story of Henry Zuckerman, who has been diagnosed with a heart problem.

Henry, a successful dentist, is diagnosed as being at risk of a heart attack. Henry's doctor prescribes medication, and soon Henry complains about the side effects. The most troublesome side effect for Henry is sexual impotence. Henry is unable to have sexual relations with either his wife, Carol, or his mistress and dental assistant, Wendy. Over a period of months, the impotence causes Henry to be depressed. He wants to consider surgery as an option, but the doctor advises against that course because of the dangers.

Henry remembers an affair he had with a Swiss woman named Maria ten years earlier, and this makes him feel more depressed. He travels from his home in New Jersey to New York to visit his brother Nathan. Henry has tried to talk to his wife, but she does not seem to understand why he wants to consider surgery. Henry tries to call Nathan, but he hangs up. He tries to leave a note for Nathan, but he tears it up. Henry walks in Central Park and cries. He thinks about the poor relationship he has with his brother, who is a successful writer. Nathan had revealed some family secrets in one of his books, and that caused the poor relationship between the brothers.

Henry visits Wendy, and he is unable to have sex with her. When he returns home, he discovers that Carol has been so worried that she notified the police of his absence. Henry wonders if the cause for his stress and his heart condition started with having to give up his affair with Maria. Henry is more determined to have the surgery, despite the doctor's advice against it. In the evening, Henry telephones Nathan.

Part 1 Basel, pages 3-13 Analysis

The novel opens with a third person narrative. For some reason not yet revealed, this opening narrative is in italics, unlike the remainder of the book. The main character of the narrative is Henry, a successful dentist in his late thirties. Henry's response to the news of his heart condition and the side effects of the medication have a significant effect on his psychological well being. He seems frantic and desperate the day that he goes to visit his brother, and he seems conflicted and unable to decide what to do. He calls numbers he see written in a telephone booth, he hangs up instead of waiting for his brother to answer the telephone, and he shows up unannounced at the residence of his mistress only to act in an even more bizarre manner.



Part 2 Basel, pages 13-49

Part 2 Basel, pages 13-49 Summary

Nathan tries to understand Henry's recent situation. Henry has died, and the preceding text in italics began as Nathan's attempt at a eulogy. Many people attend Henry's funeral. Nathan notices a girlish looking young woman sitting toward the back, and he recognizes the woman as Wendy from a photo that Henry had once showed him. As Nathan looks at Wendy and fails to find her attractive, he thinks he should have tried harder to talk Henry out of having the surgery. Nathan thinks about his childhood with Henry, and then he thinks about Henry's affair with Maria. Perhaps Henry regarded his affair with Wendy as a consolation for having to end the affair with Maria.

Nathan sits with Carol and Henry's children. Carol tells the children that Nathan is too shaken to deliver a eulogy, so she will speak at the funeral. During the funeral, one of Henry's daughters plays the violin, and while listening to the music, Nathan thinks of all the notes he took after conversations with Henry. Some of this notes recorded intimate details of Henry's affair with Maria.

Carol delivers the eulogy, and Nathan notices how calm and composed Carol appears. Carol tells the funeral attendees that Henry's surgery was not necessary. Henry had decided to have the surgery so that his married life would be complete, including sexual relations.

After the service, the family goes to the burial. During the burial, Nathan thinks about notes he took after conversations with Henry. He thinks about a time that Carol and the children were away visiting Carol's parents and Maria came to Henry's house. Nathan comes out of his wondering about Henry's motivations and speaks to one of Henry's daughters. She says that now she has only one parent.

Nathan looks around to see if Wendy has attended this portion of the funeral. He thinks about how Wendy knew of Henry's recent visits to Nathan, but Carol did not know. Again, Nathan thinks that he should have tried harder to dissuade his brother from having the surgery, and he thinks about what Henry told him of his first interview with Wendy. Henry and Wendy had a discussion about techniques in dentistry full of innuendo. Six weeks later Henry and Wendy began their sexual affair. Nathan thinks he was stupid not to talk Henry out of the surgery.

Nathan speaks to various relatives, but he also spends a great deal of time thinking about past conversations with Henry, and how they lead to Henry's death. Nathan recalls a conversation with Henry about how he once considered moving to Switzerland with Maria. Henry had been surprised to learn that Maria celebrated Christmas. Nathan hears some relatives discussing conditions in Israel, and he wonders if Maria's celebration of Christmas had anything to do with Henry's decision to end the affair. Nathan thinks it is unlikely that Henry, born into a Jewish family but also a college



educated atheist, would have been so put off by Maria's observance of a Christian holiday. Nevertheless, Nathan cannot stop thinking about the implications. If Henry did break off the affair because of Maria's observance of Christmas, and if losing Maria did cause Henry's heart condition, then it was being a Jew that killed Henry.

As Nathan is leaving, he wonders how much Carol really knew about Henry's situation. He wonders if she is really naïve and does not know about the affairs. When Nathan arrives home, he reviews some notes that indicate that Carol knew much more than she let on.

Part 2 Basel, pages 13-49 Analysis

After the italicized text ends and the subsequent text begins, there is again a third person narrator, but it is unclear if it is from the same narrator. The preceding italicized text was composed by Nathan Zuckerman, brother of Henry. Henry has died as a result of failed bypass surgery, and Carol asked Nathan to deliver the eulogy.

Nathan is a well-known author, and this seems to be the reason for the poor relationship with Henry. In fact, it seems that Nathan regards nothing as sacred or trusted information. He has copious notes on conversations he had with his brother. And during events of the funeral the narrative alternates between the ongoing action and Nathan's notes. The amount of detail in Nathan's notes is shocking. He recorded details not just about times and places and people involved, but also minute details about specific types of sexual activity.

Nathan wonders at the end of the funeral how much Carol really knows. Once he gets home he consults his notes in an effort to find the answer. This action could be significant to Nathan's character and to the plot of the entire novel. It seems that Nathan regards the written text, in this case notes on a conversation, as real as the actual people the characters are based upon.



Part 2 Judea, pages 50-66

Part 2 Judea, pages 50-66 Summary

Nathan is in Israel and he thinks about a visit eighteen years earlier in 1960. During that first visit, Nathan has lunch with his friend Shuki and Shuki's father, Mr. Elchanan. Mr. Elchanan tries to convince Nathan that he should remain in Israel. Nathan explains what being a Jew means to him. He talks at length about how his experience as a Jew is tied to growing up in New Jersey and how it has nothing to do with events in Israel. After Nathan's wordy speech, Mr. Elchanan says that Nathan has just given the best reason for Jews to never leave Israel. During his visit, Nathan is able to have a photograph taken with him and the prime minister. For years to come, Nathan's family is proud of the photograph.

On his visit to Israel in 1978, Nathan thinks about how only days earlier he had been in London and seen Christmas trees. Nathan thinks about how things have changed since his previous visit.

Eight months after Henry's bypass surgery, Henry takes a trip to Israel. Never before had Henry shown any interest in visiting Israel. After his physical recovery is complete, Carol notices that Henry still shows signs of depression. She encourages him to take a vacation. Henry resists the idea, so Carol asks Nathan to try to convince Henry to get away from home in an effort to raise his spirits. Nathan and Henry have many conversations over the next few weeks, and eventually Henry agrees to go on a vacation with some dental colleagues. Once in Israel, Henry breaks away from the rest of the group.

While alone on the trip, Henry has an experience that drastically alters the way he sees the world. On the surface the experience seems simple, but to Henry it has deep significance. Henry looks around and sees Jews of all ages living together in a land that is anything but beautiful. Yet these Jews have come together and made this land their home. This realization makes Henry feel like his own life is superficial.

Three weeks after returning back to the United States, Henry walked out of his dental office without saying anything to anyone about his intentions. He went to the airport and boarded a plane bound for Israel. He took nothing with him except his passport. Five months pass, and Henry remains in Israel.

Shuki asks Nathan about New York, and Nathan says that he now lives in London, and he is married to an English woman named Maria. Nathan tells about how he met Maria and how they married after her divorce. Nathan also tells of how at a dinner party Maria, though not a Jew, championed the Israeli position during a political discussion.



Part 2 Judea, pages 50-66 Analysis

In Part 2, the narration changes to first person. After a couple of pages, clues emerge that reveal Nathan as the narrator.

During the discussion with Shuki and his father, Nathan speaks at length on one of the recurring themes of the novel, the theme of "what kind of Jew" Nathan and other characters embody. In this case, Mr. Elchanaan politely but firmly dismisses Nathan's entire argument.

With the mention of a living Henry, the first among many confusing reversals emerges. Henry was certainly dead in Part 1, but in part two, the surgery had been successful. It is not clear if this is a different story by a different narrator, or if the same narrator using different points of view is telling alternate versions of a similar story. When Nathan mentions being married to a woman named Maria, it is not clear if this is the same Maria as in Part 1 or if this is an entirely different person with the same name. In Part 1, Maria is Swiss, or at least a resident of Switzerland. In Part 2, Maria is English.



Part 2 Judea, pages 66-83

Part 2 Judea, pages 66-83 Summary

Nathan recounts the events surrounding Maria's divorce. In exchange for not mentioning her infidelity, Maria's estranged husband insists that she sign a legal document agreeing not to remove their daughter, Phoebe, from England. Maria sees this as an attempt to sabotage her new marriage, and Nathan agrees, but he tells her to sign and they can try to renegotiate again in a few years. Maria worries that being forced to live in England will hurt Nathan's writing. At forty-four, Nathan believes this might be his last chance at a family. His previous three marriages had been childless. Maria worries that she is too ordinary a woman for Nathan. She judges herself against the characters in Nathan's fiction, but he convinces her that he loves her. Nathan again remembers how out of character it was for Maria to argue at the dinner party. The other guests had assumed Nathan, a Jewish writer, would respond. Nathan wonders if part of Maria's vehemence in defending the Israeli view might have been due to her anxiety over their future together.

After Nathan finishes telling Shuki the story of the dinner party, he also mentions that he is in Israel to find Henry. Shuki is shocked to think that Nathan a writer well known for his sarcasm about Jewish topics has a brother that is living in Israel. Nathan says that Carol asked him to come and check on Henry, and Nathan also mentions that Henry has spoken of being a follower of a man named Lippman.

At the mention of Lippman, Shuki becomes concerned. He has an extremely low opinion of Lippman. He believes the man is a dangerous fanatic and is harmful to the cause of peace in Israel. Shuki describes Lippman as the kind of man who goes into an Arab area with a pistol and tells the Arabs that everyone can get along so long as the Arabs are subservient to the Jews.

Shuki cannot understand why successful Jews like Nathan and Henry who have good lives in other countries would want to come to Israel. Shuki tells of some of the recent stress in his own family. One of his sons has a promising career as a pianist, but he has recently been drafted into the Israeli military for three years.

After saying goodbye to Shuki, Nathan decides rather than remaining in Tel Aviv, to get a hotel and stay in Jerusalem. He hopes that maybe Henry will agree to have dinner with him. Nathan also wonders whether Henry is staying voluntarily, or if he is a captive. He remembers Carol's reasons for asking him to go see Henry. She says that Henry cannot dismiss Nathan as easily as he does her. Once he checks into a hotel, Nathan calls the settlement where Henry is staying and asks to speak to him. While someone goes to find Henry, Nathan recalls a conversation with one of Henry's daughters. She said that she believed what her father did was brave and she admired him.

When Henry speaks on the telephone he is immediately cold, suspicious, and defensive.

Part 2 Judea, pages 66-83 Analysis

Nathan seems to see marriage to Maria as a significant and perhaps final opportunity at having the type of life he wants. This desire does not seem to involve desperation as it is described here, but Nathan is willing to make sacrifices in order to make the relationship a success, including relocating to England despite Maria's fears that such a move will adversely affect his writing.

Shuki's reaction to hearing that Nathan has a brother living in Israel is significant to understanding the character of Nathan. Nathan is regarded as a person who is never serious, a person who believes anything is fair game for ridicule. Shuki, on the other hand, becomes gravely serious when he hears the name Lippman. Shuki is ardent in his description of Lippman as a dangerous fanatic.

Again, the idea of "type of Jew" emerges with Shuki's failure to understand why successful and secure Jews would want to live in Israel. Away from Israel, Nathan and Henry enjoy financial success, and they do not have to fear for the security of their families. In Israel there are, according to Shuki, fanatic Jews who endanger the security of more moderate Jews like his own family.



Part 2 Judea, pages 83-104

Part 2 Judea, pages 83-104 Summary

After the telephone conversation with Henry, Nathan decides to spend the evening visiting the Wailing Wall. When Nathan sees the devout worshippers praying at the rock wall, he is amused and thinks that worshipping a rock has the same outcome as worshipping any other deity. Nathan also observes how ordinary, how "unholy," the place looks. A young man encourages Nathan to participate in the religious observances, but Nathan politely declines. The young man is not put off and continues to insist that Nathan take part in the religious activities. Nathan continues to politely refuse and the two continue back and forth for some time.

Nathan continues his tour of the area and he meets another young man. This young man recognizes Nathan and calls him by name. He says he is a fan and has read all of Nathan's books. Nathan wonders if the young man is simply enthusiastic or perhaps mentally imbalanced. The young man introduces himself as Jimmy Ben-Joseph, and he says he has come to Israel to stay. He also says that the reason he likes Nathan's writing so much is because of the way Nathan writes about baseball. Jimmy says that the main thing that Israel is missing is baseball, and if only Israel had baseball, the messiah would come.

The next morning, after breakfast, Nathan takes a taxi to the settlement where Henry lives. Nathan arrives in the settlement and asks for Henry. There is some initial confusion until Nathan learns that Henry has started calling himself Hanoch. On the way to find Henry, Nathan encounters a woman who speaks with an American accent. When he asks her if she is an American, she is offended and says she is Jewish. Nathan explains that he meant to ask if she was born in America, and she says she was born Jewish.

Nathan finds Henry in his Hebrew class. Henry is much older than the other students, but Nathan notices how fit and healthy Henry looks. The teacher asks Nathan to address the class, but Nathan says he came only to see Henry. The teacher continues to ask, so Nathan agrees. The first student asks if Nathan knows Hebrew, and Nathan says that he knows only the words for boy and girl. The next student is rude and aggressive and wants to know what Nathan could have to say that is worth the students hearing. The student goes on to make an angry speech and berate Nathan for only having visited Israel twice. The teacher wants Nathan to respond, but Nathan refuses. So the teacher makes a lengthy and fanatical speech about how the American Jews that marry non-Jews are enacting another holocaust.



Part 2 Judea, pages 83-104 Analysis

Nathan notices that many of the people he encounters in Israel regard his turning away from the Jewish religion as merely a lapse in judgment rather than a well thought out decision or a firm conviction. They seem to view it as a temporary lark and not something to be taken seriously. Nathan wonders if they are unable to comprehend the possibility that someone born Jewish could not share the Jewish religious views.

Jimmy's ideas on Israel and religion seem comical, but once Nathan arrives at the settlement where Henry lives, there is no humor to be found. The first person he speaks to seems to be militant, and the beliefs get more ardent from there. The young man in the class berates Nathan for not caring about Israel, and the teacher goes so far as to say that American Jews are intentionally killing themselves by marrying non-Jews.



Part 2 Judea, pages 104-129

Part 2 Judea, pages 104-129 Summary

As Nathan and Henry walk and attempt to have a conversation, Henry is immediately combative. He says he will not answer any sort of questions requesting justification for his decision to come to Israel, and he will not tolerate any criticism of that decision. Henry suggests that they go to an area where Arabs and Jews live peacefully, and he explains some of the recent strife between Arabs and Jews. Henry explains that at lunch Nathan will understand that peace between Arabs and Jews is possible. According to Henry, there are only a few troublemakers, and he criticizes the Israeli army for not resolving the situation.

Nathan notices how Henry continually uses the term "we" when speaking of Jew versus Arab, and he thinks Henry has taken the Jewish settlers' cause as his own. When the two brothers get into the car, Nathan is shocked to discover that Henry is carrying a gun. Nathan is unable to take his mind off the pistol in Henry's possession. However, at lunch Nathan does notice that the atmosphere seems peaceful concerning everyone around, even if it is strained between him and Henry.

Henry speaks of the exact location they are visiting, as opposed to other Israeli cities like Tel Aviv, as being the real birthplace of the Jews. While Henry speaks of Jewish heritage, Nathan asks about their own family heritage. He asks what about the heritage of their parents and grandparents in New Jersey. This causes Henry to angrily speak of how his life New Jersey was misdirected and pointless. While Henry talks, Nathan considers the possibilities that might have caused Henry to make such an abrupt shift in his life. First, he wonders if guilt over the affair with Wendy causes Henry to try to find more meaning in his life. Then he wonders if perhaps Henry simply was bored with marriage and used his newfound religious fervor as an excuse. Nathan does not share his ideas because he is still afraid of the fact that Henry is carrying a gun.

When Henry and Nathan return to the settlement, Nathan meets Mordecai Lippman, and Nathan's first impression of Lippman is that of an overly theatrical frontline soldier. Lippman shows Nathan his collection of books and begins the first of his many monologues of the night. When the subject of Nathan's friend Shuki arises, Lippman criticizes Shuki as vehemently as Shuki had earlier criticized Lippman.

During dinner Lippman continues his monologues, pausing only to let his other guests offer speeches supporting his views and in many ways parroting his ideas. One guest tells Nathan that in America the whites will soon turn against the Jews, and Nathan questions the guest's familiarity with America. Rather than receive an answer to the question, Nathan receives from a different dinner guest criticism that compares him personally to other American writers who are responsible for ideas that are critical of Israel. Before the end of the dinner, Lippman goes on another rant about Jewish military strength and the will to fight.



Part 2 Judea, pages 104-129 Analysis

Meeting with Henry causes Nathan to uncover more questions than answers about his brother. Nathan struggles to comprehend what he regards as wild exaggerations and irrationality. When Henry speaks of the ability to shell Jordan with artillery and does so with pride, Nathan sees that they inhabit two different worlds. At no time can Nathan pinpoint exactly what caused his brother's transformation. He considers many ideas, some as opposite as Henry just needed an excuse to get out of his marriage to the thought that perhaps Henry truly believes all the rhetoric of zealots like Lippman. And in Lippman, Nathan is baffled at what Henry finds admirable. All Nathan sees in Lippman is a man who enjoys being a leader because it provides him with an audience for his frequent and long monologues.



Part 2 Judea, pages 129-140

Part 2 Judea, pages 129-140 Summary

After leaving the dinner at Lippman's, Henry takes Nathan to where he will sleep. After the shock of the dinner, Nathan has little to say at first. He wonders if Henry is also in shock after the dinner and secretly wants to go home, and then he wonders if Carol had been correct in suspecting that Henry had become crazy after the surgery. Nathan thinks he should have told Lippman "let my brother go."

Nathan mentions that not once has Henry mentioned his children, and Henry is immediately defensive. Henry angrily says that the children are coming to visit at Passover. Nathan reminds Henry that he said his life in New Jersey was meaningless, and he asks if Henry was also including the children. He tells Henry what Henry's daughter said on the telephone, and Henry cries. Henry says he feels confused without the children near.

Once they reach the house where Nathan will stay, Henry is about to return to his dormitory, but Nathan asks him to talk further. Nathan asks if Lippman reminds Henry of anyone, and Henry is angered by Nathan's comparison of Lippman to their own father. Henry wants to know if Nathan has any other frame of reference besides New Jersey, and Nathan answers that New Jersey is the source of his Jewish memories. Nathan also suggests that Henry is becoming an apprentice fanatic. This causes Henry to explode in anger and call Nathan a decadent Jew among other things before he storms out.

Part 2 Judea, pages 129-140 Analysis

Despite the shock Nathan feels after the dinner and the confusion about why his brother has chosen such a life, he still retains his sense of humor. When he thinks about what he should have said to Lippman, he decides on "let my brother go." This is possibly a reference to the words the character Moses was supposed to have said to the Egyptian Pharaoh in the biblical stories telling of Jewish captivity in Egypt.

Though Nathan tries very hard to communicate with his brother without offending any sensitive subjects, and for a moment it seems he has gotten through, ultimately the two brothers are unable to talk without rancor. For Nathan's part, he simply cannot understand the actions of his brother. From Henry's perspective, everything Nathan says is designed to ridicule Henry without taking any of his beliefs seriously.



Part 3 Aloft, pages 141-163

Part 3 Aloft, pages 141-163 Summary

Nathan is on a plane. The man next to Nathan tries to begin a conversation, but Nathan is not interested. The man wants to discuss Nathan's impressions of Israel and relate his own. Nathan politely tries to halt the conversation, but the man persists, so Nathan searches for another seat. He finds an empty seat next to a young man reading a Jewish prayer book and eating candy bars. For reasons he is not certain he understands, Nathan finds the combination of activities odd.

Nathan takes the seat next to the young man and begins writing a letter to Henry. Nathan begins his lengthy letter by questioning where their failed meeting has left the two of them. He describes what he sees as Henry's current state and describes what his own must appear like to Henry. Nathan admits that he has tried diligently ever since their meeting to understand things from Henry's point of view. He says that he can understand that Henry finds some wisdom in Lippman's ideas but admits that he found Lippman interesting only in his showmanship. Nathan cautions Henry to be wary of what he sees as fanaticism, but also repeats that there is much he does not understand. He concludes by saying that he hopes his brother will be ever careful with his physical safety.

After finishing the letter to Henry, Nathan begins making notes of all he can remember of the previous day's telephone conversation with Carol. Carol is no longer patient. In fact, she is angry. Carol doubts whether Henry has really had some sort of spiritual awakening, and when Nathan tells her that Henry seems genuine, Carol says the cause must be madness. She explains that they were never practicing Jews, and that there was nothing in their life to explain Henry's sudden fervor. When Nathan mentions that Henry seems to think that the children will visit at Passover, Carol angrily says that she does not even know when Passover is and states that she will not even consider sending her children to be exposed to such madness.

After finishing the notes on the conversation with Carol, Nathan again notices the young man sitting beside him and thinks that he looks familiar, but Nathan cannot place him. Nathan turns his attention to a letter that had been delivered to his hotel. The letter is from Shuki. Shuki begins by saying that he worries about Nathan meeting Lippman. Specifically, he worries that Nathan will be entertained and think that Lippman will be the perfect character for a future novel. Shuki says that while in much the rest of the world, Jews may have the luxury of reading about Lippman-like characters and being entertained, in Israel the dangers are real. Shuki even recounts some recent history, and he reminds Nathan that for its defense, Israel relies heavily on aid from America. If Nathan writes of a Lippman-like character and amuses America, the American voters may underestimate the danger of the situation in Israel, and that could affect future willingness to offer aid. Shuki also says that Lippman has Arab counterparts who are



every bit as fanatical, and when one contemplates the potential for violence, the situation is not nearly so humorous as Nathan may think.

Nathan begins to write a reply to Shuki, and from the first line it is apparent that Nathan is a little annoyed at Shuki's message. Nathan says that the United States Congress does not make decisions about appropriations of foreign aid based on humorous prose narrative. Before he can finish his letter to Shuki, Nathan is interrupted by the young man sitting next to him.

Part 3 Aloft, pages 141-163 Analysis

The letter to Henry is clearly an attempt to articulate what the brothers were unable to calmly discuss during their prior meeting. Nathan restates his entire case, but this time he manages to do so in a way that will probably be more palatable to Henry since it speaks more of Nathan's own confusion rather than being overtly critical of Henry. The most significant part of the letter comes at the end when Nathan says that his chief concern is the welfare of his brother. He cautions Henry against accepting what might be distortions of truth, but Nathan also acknowledges that he may not be knowledgeable in such areas. His last plea is that Henry guard his physical wellbeing.

Carol has long since stopped being a concerned wife. Her confusion over Henry's recent actions is every bit as much as Nathan's, but unlike Nathan, she is not longer willing to extend any benefit of doubt. She sees Henry's recent actions as either irresponsible abandonment of familial obligations or outright madness. She is steadfast in her decision not to send her children into an environment where they may be kidnapped and brainwashed.

Nathan's taking notes about the conversation with Carol underscores again that to him nothing is sacred. Even family troubles are fair game for material for his novels, and with this in mind, some of Shuki's concerns are more understandable.

Shuki worries that if Nathan uses his recent experiences in Israel to create a humorous story, those that offer aid to Israel may stop acknowledging the danger. It is unclear what Nathan is annoyed by in Shuki's letter. It may be that Nathan thinks Shuki has underestimated him, though it seems more likely that he is annoyed that Shuki takes the situation too seriously himself.



Part 3 Aloft, pages 163-181

Part 3 Aloft, pages 163-181 Summary

Nathan stops writing the letter to Shuki when he notices that the passenger next to him has slumped and seems to have difficulty breathing. He asks if the young man is all right, and the man greets Nathan by name. Nathan is surprised to see that he is Jimmy Ben-Joseph, the young man he met at the wailing wall who believed that the cure to Israel's problems could be solved if Israel would import baseball. Jimmy explains that he feels "under pressure" because he intends to hijack the plane. He also claims to have a pistol and a grenade in his possession.

Jimmy seems to believe that Nathan will be willing to help. Nathan, of course, believes that Jimmy is joking, but Jimmy allows Nathan to feel the grenade through his coat pocket. Nathan wonders how Jimmy could have possibly gotten the grenade through the security that the airport in Tel Aviv. Nathan recounts all of the security measures he had to pass through and thinks it is simply impossible that Jimmy could have gotten such items aboard the plane.

Jimmy shows Nathan a note he has composed and that he calls a press statement. In the note Jimmy calls for the closing of an Israeli museum dedicated to the holocaust. He seems to believe that remembering the holocaust is what is holding the Jewish people back, and that if they would simply stop thinking about the past and focus on the future that their lives would improve immediately.

Nathan reminds Jimmy that armed security personnel are on the plane and they will not share Jimmy's sense of humor. This statement causes Jimmy to begin speaking loudly, and Nathan tries to calm him and explain that he wants nothing to do with Jimmy's plan, joke or not. Jimmy returns to speaking loudly, and again Nathan tries to calm him. Nathan begins to change seats, but Jimmy verbally threatens him with the gun, though he does not actually show it. Nathan decides to try to humor Jimmy. Nathan also notices that the other passengers have noticed Jimmy's odd behavior and loud speech.

Jimmy explains that he is joking about the hijack plans. He says that he plans to follow in Nathan's footsteps and go to England and find an English wife. Nathan asks about what Jimmy had told him about wanting to remain in Israel the first time they met at the wailing wall, and Jimmy responds that he was serious at the time, but after meeting Nathan he decided that he wanted to leave Israel and follow in Nathan's footsteps. He says that Nathan is his role model. After some more joking about Jimmy's plan, Nathan asks what is really in Jimmy's pocket. Jimmy produces both a pistol and a grenade.

One man leaps over the back of Jimmy's seat and seizes Jimmy's head. Another jumps across Nathan and takes the grenade and pistol from Jimmy. Jimmy appears to already be injured, but he is struck again. Nathan is lifted from his seat and handcuffed.



Nathan and Jimmy are moved to the front of the plane, searched, and questioned.

Part 3 Aloft, pages 163-181 Analysis

Jimmy's constant reversals in his story mirror the reversals in the larger plot. Just like in one section Henry dies and in other he lives, Jimmy says one thing and then immediately says another. First Jimmy says he intends to help the Jewish people with his terrorist action. He believes he is doing it for the good of the Jewish people. Later Jimmy says that he is simply joking and that he wants to be like his role model, Nathan, a man he thinks pokes fun of the Jewish people. Before being apprehended, Jimmy again returns to saying he intends to hijack the plane.

When Jimmy actually produces the weapons, it becomes apparent that his real story is that he intends to hijack the plane. All the talk of joking and viewing Nathan as the greatest of Jewish jokesters is at Nathan's expense. In fact, after Jimmy produces the weapons, it seems that he has contempt for Nathan's lack of religious devotion.

Once the two are apprehended by the security personnel on the plane, Nathan's reputation as a novelist who often writes in a comical way about Jewish characters will not help him in his predicament.



Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 182-205

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 182-205 Summary

Nathan writes that a year after being put on heart medication he does not have the same temptations as his brother Henry. While Henry had his dental assistant as his source of temptation and infidelity, Nathan craves something different. He has recently met a neighbor woman seventeen years younger than him. She has recently had a baby, and she is ignored by her husband. Even though Nathan cannot have sex, they begin an affair. Nathan feels affection for both Maria and her daughter Phoebe.

During Maria's visits, they discuss many things. Maria says Nathan's plans for the surgery are foolish because Americans do not stay married long enough to justify such a risky procedure. Nathan resists the idea and says he loves her and wants to have a child with her. Maria says that Nathan will not still love her when she is pregnant. Maria also asks Nathan why he specifically picked her. Nathan answers that he did it for love, but Maria points out that Nathan has been in love before. She also says that she is far too conservative to be his type.

Maria's husband is away for two weeks, and during that time Nathan, Maria, and Phoebe live together. Maria says she has never dated a Jew. She says that all of her relationships have been with the same type of English men.

Two days before Maria's husband is scheduled to return, she has a vivid dream that she discusses with Nathan. She is being pursued by a man in a green tweed suit. To get away, she jumps into the water and begins swimming. Other people on the shore shout to her and try to help her. They point in the direction she should swim and shout, "Judea! Judea!"

To Maria, the dream is so simple that it does not even require interpretation. Nathan does not immediately understand, so Maria explains. She says that green and tweed are obvious symbols for England and also her English husband. The reference to Judea pertains to her contemplation about leaving her husband and marrying a Jewish man. It seems that in her subconscious, she views a future with Nathan as a sanctuary and an escape from her present unhappy marriage.

Nathan and Maria continue to discuss many things. Maria says that although it is frustrating to be unable to have a physical relationship with Nathan, she feels a degree of power she thinks she would not feel otherwise. Nathan asks if Maria and her husband still have a physical relationship, and she says they do. In fact, she says they have relations often, yet the encounters lack much emotional content. Maria also says that Nathan is very different from her husband and perhaps that is part of her attraction to him since she has always wanted to get away from that background.



Nathan asks why Maria married so young, and she says that she simply did not know any better. Based on what information she had at the time, it seemed like a good decision. She had no brothers, so she did not know what to look for in a man. Her husband was good looking and funny. Also, Maria doubted that she had the potential for a career of her own.

Maria tries to talk Nathan out of the surgery, but he insists that he wants to marry her and have a child with her. He is absolutely determined to have the risky surgical operation. Maria agrees to marry him.

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 182-205 Analysis

Part 4 begins with a first person narrator, Nathan. It is not immediately clear if this is a back track in time or yet another alternate version of reality. It is also not clear if Nathan is saying that Henry has already had the surgery he is contemplating having, or if Nathan is merely using the example of Henry's affair with his dental assistant as an example of the types different things that tempt the two brothers.

As the talks between Maria and Nathan progress, it becomes clear that this is not simply a back track in time. It is a completely different version than any that have been presented thus far. Yet even in this version there are some things about Nathan's character that remain consistent. Maria does not trust Nathan not to reveal their discussions in a future book.

In the conversation of Maria's dream, the distinction between Judea and the West Bank seems to be an echo of an alternate version of the story as presented in the previous part of the novel.



Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 205-220

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 205-220 Summary

Henry has always felt unable to write while having a professional writer for a brother. Henry attends Nathan's funeral in New York. Henry wants to forgive his dead brother for the trouble that erupted after the publication of one of Nathan's books, but the eulogist's constant references to the book remind Henry of things he would rather forget. The eulogist is Nathan's editor. The more the editor praises Nathan's book the more Henry angrily remembers what caused the rift between the two.

Henry had been asked to write the eulogy, but he could not. He begins to remember how the novel cast Henry in the role of defender of his father and Nathan in the role of assassin of the same man.

In the part of the eulogy that upsets Henry the most, Nathan's editor speaks of how so many readers of Nathan's book wanted to know if it is fiction or a true story of Nathan's own family. The editor admits that even he suspects that it is heavily based on truth. This of course upsets Henry, who sees the book as a betrayal full of enough truth to harm the family and enough distortions of truth to make them look utterly ridiculous.

After the funeral service, Henry thinks about how easy it would have been not to attend. Henry encounters Nathan's third wife, and the two discuss Nathan. Nathan's ex wife is now remarried and happy with children. She is surprised to discover that Henry knew nothing of Nathan's illness or surgery until after Nathan's death. The two wonder if Nathan was alone when he died, but they remember that he always had women in his life. She asks if the reason for Henry and Nathan's estrangement was because of Nathan's book, and Henry says that it was. Henry asks if Nathan ever wrote about her, and she says that Nathan must not have found her a worthy subject.

Before leaving the funeral, Henry encounters a bearded man who recognizes him as Nathan's brother. Henry vehemently denies it, and even curses at the man before leaving.

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 205-220 Analysis

The point of view abruptly switches to a third person narrator focused on Henry's perspective. It would seem to be that this is a continuation in the latest alternate story, but past alterations have shown that it is likely not safe to make such an assumption. It could simply be presenting the aftermath of the opening of Part 4 or it could be another alternate altogether.

Henry begins by wishing he cared more for his dead brother. He goes to the funeral hoping he can put some past grievances to rest, but the eulogy and all the references to the book that caused the rift between the two brothers makes Henry remember the

offenses and insults as if they have happened all over again. By the end of the funeral he does not want anyone to know he is even related to Nathan.



Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 220-254

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 220-254 Summary

After the funeral, Henry goes to Nathan's apartment building and contacts the landlord. She says that she cannot let him in Nathan's apartment, but some friendly words and forty dollars persuade her to let Henry inside. Henry begins examining Nathan's papers and discovers that Nathan took detailed notes on every conversation he ever had with Henry, including those detailing Henry's extramarital affairs. Henry thinks about how biographers often study the notes of dead novelists, and he begins tearing out pages that mention him.

Henry finds a manuscript titled Draft # 2. He notices that the first section is titled "Basel" and is entirely about him having a fictional heart problem, surgery, and death. As Henry reads further, he notes that Nathan's fictional English wife has the same name as Henry's real Swiss mistress. Henry wonders if Nathan picked the name for any particular reason or simply thought that was good as any name for a non-Jewish woman.

Henry wonders how he can take the notes and the portions of the manuscript that mention him. He decides to take only what he sees as compromising to his own family, and he searches for other copies of Draft # 2 and a copy of Draft # 1. Henry finds notes that indicate that Nathan wrote his own eulogy and supplied it to his editor to be used in the event of his death.

Henry takes the papers wrapped in one of Nathan's raincoats and stops at the landlord's apartment before leaving the building. He tells her that it is probably a good idea not to mention he has been there, and he gives her another forty dollars.

Away from the apartment, Henry considers throwing away the papers immediately, but he decides that it is too risky to discard them in Manhattan. He imagines them being found and serialized in the newspaper.

Henry thinks about how he has learned to stop trying to escape the boredom of his own marriage by obsessing about other women. He sees how patience has paid off in the long run, and how his family has a happy life. Henry has learned to appreciate his own family, and he equates the effort put into family to the effort he puts into his dental profession. Both have yielded rewards.

While driving, Henry wonders if he had been thorough enough in searching Nathan's papers. He considers stopping at his office to lock the papers in his safe so he can think of a way to discard them later. Henry stops to telephone his family so they will know he is on his way home. When Henry hears the concern in the voices of his family, he thinks all over again how Nathan distorts the love the family shares, and he is again angry.



Henry finds a garbage container in a parking garage and he dumps the papers inside, and then Henry vomits.

After a break in the text, a new section begins with a different format. Questions are in italics, followed by answers. Soon the questions reveal that the person answering the questions is Maria, Nathan's Maria.

Maria had received a telephone call from Nathan's doctor informing her that the surgery had failed and that Nathan had died. She decides that there is no point in going to the funeral. She does not believe that she is personally responsible for Nathan's death. She believes that if Nathan had not had the surgery so he could marry her, he would have done it for someone else.

On the day of the funeral Maria takes her daughter for a walk in the park. That evening she goes to Nathan's apartment. She finds a manuscript titled Draft # 2, and the final section titled "Christendom" deeply affects the way Maria feels about Nathan. She believes it reduces the amount of love she has for him. She believes that reading the final section of the manuscript tells her more about Nathan than knowing the real man.

Maria has always despised women who destroyed their husbands' papers after their death, but after reading the final section to Nathan's manuscript, she understands why some women do this. She does not destroy any of Nathan's papers. She says she did not do it because all Nathan had was his writing. He had no children.

Maria acknowledges that publication of the book will likely damage her marriage. She believes that regardless of how her husband reacts, she will benefit. If he divorces her, that will be her escape. If he stays married to her, he will know that she too is unhappy in the present situation.

Maria does not believe that Nathan truly loved her. She believes that he found her entertaining because of his peculiar predicament. Maria says she has begun writing, and in her writing she speaks to the person posing the questions.

Part 4 Gloucestershire, pages 220-254 Analysis

The manuscript titled Draft # 2 mirrors the novel *The Counterlife* in its section titles, characters, and content. Henry considers it an outright lie. In fact, he considers it Nathan's most irresponsible and offensive work yet. Henry wonders why Nathan persists in belittling him in writing, and Henry wonders if he is the only person Nathan has left to betray. Overall, Henry is disgusted with Nathan.

In this version of the story, Henry's renunciation of his mistress Maria marked the beginning of a happy life for Henry and his family, not the beginning of Henry's demise.

It is overtly symbolic that Henry vomits on Nathan's manuscript.

After the break in the text that marks Maria's question and answer session, it is never completely clear who is asking the questions, though most evidence points to Nathan. The person asking the questions knows things Maria does not, and some of Maria's answers contain second person references that make most sense if referring to Nathan.

While Henry destroyed part of Nathan's manuscript to protect his marriage, Maria left the manuscript intact, knowing that her marriage might be destroyed. She sees publication of the manuscript as her vehicle of escape from her present unpleasant life.

Maria says that reading the final section of the manuscript made her understand that novelist do not entirely invent new stories. Instead, they tell alternate versions of existing stories.

This final section of Part 4 might have introduced a new narrator to the novel: Maria.



Part 5 Christendom, pages 255-275

Part 5 Christendom, pages 255-275 Summary

Six hours after leaving Henry in Israel, Nathan is at a church in London with Maria and Phoebe for a Christmas service. Maria is pregnant. Also in attendance at the church service are Maria's mother and Maria's two sisters, Sarah and Georgina. After some singing by the congregation, Maria's mother goes to the pulpit and reads some verses from the Bible. Nathan thinks about the story of Maria's parents' unhappy marriage and divorce.

After the service, the congregation shares refreshments and conversation. Many people ask Maria and Nathan about their new home that is being renovated. Nathan is glad that no one asks about his recent trip to Israel. Nathan thinks about what Maria told him about her family. She described her younger sister, Georgina, as shy, but she says that her older sister, Sarah, has a habit of verbally attacking people and repeatedly fails at jobs and relationships. She tells Nathan that the best way to get along with her mother is to praise her furniture, since Maria's mother has published many works on Georgian style decorated homes. This makes Nathan remember his first meeting with Maria's mother. He did as instructed and praised the furniture. Maria's mother was polite enough, but Nathan wondered if all her comments weren't subtle put-downs.

Part 5 Christendom, pages 255-275 Analysis

The narrative again switches to first person with Nathan as the narrator. In this version of the story, the flight from Israel is peaceful, and Nathan passed the time writing letters.

During the church service, Nathan observes that he feels most like a Jew when surrounded by Christians. During the singing of the carols, Nathan thinks how childish Christian notions like virgin birth and resurrection seem when compared to Lippman's politically charged rhetoric about violent struggle.



Part 5 Christendom, pages 275-306

Part 5 Christendom, pages 275-306 Summary

Nathan finds a quiet corner away from those taking refreshments. Maria's sister, Sarah, approaches and begins a conversation by calling Nathan a "moral guinea pig." The conversation immediately escalates into Sarah saying insulting things about Nathan and everyone in her family. In her unceasing attack she insults Maria, calls her mother a "terrible anti-Semite," and lists several anti-Semitic English books in case Nathan doubts the anti-Semitic mood of the nation as a whole. Sarah concludes her attack by threatening Nathan with what will happen with relations between Maria and her mother if Nathan tries to prevent the new baby from being christened.

After leaving the service, Nathan does not immediately tell Maria of the conversation with Sarah. They are on the way to celebrate her birthday, and he does not want to ruin the mood. Nevertheless, he is troubled by Sarah's remarks, and he wonders if he has not been naïve in thinking he could marry a person from such a different background without difficulty.

At Maria's favorite restaurant, Nathan thinks that Maria, now five months pregnant, is beautiful. He gives Maria an expensive bracelet, and Maria comments on how wonderful their life is now. Nathan suppresses a desire to mention the christening issue and instead says that he does not know what Maria's mother thinks of their marriage. Maria tells Nathan all of the concerns her mother has raised, but none of them involve infant baptism.

Maria asks if something happened between Nathan and Sarah, but Nathan dodges the question by asking a question of his own. He continues asking short questions, and Maria gives long answers.

A white haired woman in the restaurant shouts that something is disgusting, and Nathan notices that the woman is staring directly at him. He wonders if the woman is disturbed by him being with Maria. The woman shouts that something smells awful and commands the waiter to open a window. Maria tells Nathan that the woman is obviously insane, and she urges him to ignore the woman. The woman continues to shout and complain about the smell, all the while staring at Nathan. Nathan can endure no more and approaches the woman and tells her that if she continues to insult him he will ask the management to have her removed from the restaurant.

Even after leaving the restaurant Maria is embarrassed by Nathan's behavior, but she finally concedes that all her life she has been embarrassed by her mother's anti-Semitism. At home Maria cries and tells Nathan that the woman's insults have sparked an awful memory. Once Maria brought a Jewish friend home, and her mother said the same thing about how Jews smell.



Part 5 Christendom, pages 275-306 Analysis

Sarah seems to have read all of Nathan's books, and many of her insults refer to actions of some of Nathan's fictional characters. At first the only thing that really shocks and troubles Nathan is how much Sarah seems to hate Maria. Later, the more he thinks about it, Nathan becomes increasingly troubled about the issue of christening.

Having just endured the unpleasant confrontation with Sarah, Nathan wonders if he is not being overly sensitive or even paranoid when the woman in the restaurant begins her racially insulting shouting. Maria at first denies there is anything beyond insanity happening with the woman, but she later confirms all that Nathan suspects.

The portion of the dinner conversation where Nathan asks short questions and Maria gives detailed answers mimics the format of the last section in Part 4.



Part 5 Christendom, pages 306-324

Part 5 Christendom, pages 306-324 Summary

Nathan is surprised at how angry he has become. He thinks that perhaps it is because he has never encountered outright anti-Semitism. Nathan knows that unless he does something immediately, his relationship with Maria will be irreparably damaged. He takes a taxicab to the house he and Maria are having renovated and thinks about recent events. He wonders what to say to Maria when he returns, and then he wonders if she will even be there.

Nathan receives a letter. Maria writes that she has left him and the book. Maria speaks of Nathan writing about his own illness and death and his writing about his brother's illness and death. She wonders if one day he will decide to write a fictional account of something bad happening to Phoebe. Maria questions why Nathan invented Sarah's hateful attack and why he invented the anti-Semitic woman in the restaurant. Maria even refers to a specific page number where she should have left the story.

The remainder of the text consists of Nathan's reply to Maria. In it he rejects the notion of self, and he says that England taught him more about being a Jew than a lifetime in the United States.

Part 5 Christendom, pages 306-324 Analysis

For the remainder of the novel, there is no more dialogue. After a section where Nathan describes his reaction to the argument with Maria, the remainder of the text consists of first a letter from Maria to Nathan and then Nathan's reply. It seems that Maria has read the manuscript because she makes many references that only someone who had read all the different versions of the story could know. Also she makes reference to a specific page number where she wishes that she had stopped being a part of the story. The reader cannot be certain of anything at this point. It is entirely possible that there is no character named Maria because the one Nathan refers to as Maria says she does not like being called that, and at one point Nathan refers to her as "Marietta."

If all the discussion is about a manuscript, it seems that the two characters communicating in the final part of Part 5 never left New York, and the depiction of England was a product of Nathan's writing. Both characters make comments indicating that they still inhabit the same building in New York.

Perhaps just like Nathan says, there is no self, but just versions of characters that one adopts to suit a situation: there is no one real story, but several versions of a story.



Characters

Nathan Zuckerman

Nathan Zuckerman is a Jewish novelist in his mid forties. His many novels have met with a great deal of commercial and critical success, and he is best known for making jokes about his own Jewish-American background and family. By the time the novel opens, Nathan has already been married and divorced four times, each time to non-Jewish women. He does not seem to take much seriously; indeed, one could say that Nathan Zuckerman holds nothing sacred. He has a habit of taking detailed notes any time anyone tells him personal or confidential stories, and he seems to prize the compromising or embarrassing stories above all others. Nathan is not a mean or vindictive person. He simply believes anything is fair game for publishing since all stories are really just versions of another, so he is not really betraying a confidence by publishing another's story.

Throughout his life, Nathan has enjoyed an existence free from prejudice. He thinks those Jews that speak of prejudice often are likely paranoid. He considers the Jews he meets in the Israeli settlement to be fanatics. He even thinks his friend Shuki overreacts to some matters. Nathan reconsiders some of these ideas after a troubling evening in England. During this experience, his usual comedian approach to community and family identity leaves him, and he finds himself genuinely outraged.

Of the two brothers, Nathan is the most consistent in character, but this likely has to do more with his role as a principle narrator than in any defining character traits.

Henry Zuckerman

Henry is multiple characters in one depending on how Nathan as first person narrator or another third person narrator wants to present Henry. At the opening of the novel, Henry is a corpse. Henry is a man so obsessed with his adulterous affair that he risks his life to have surgery that will restore his ability to have recreational sex. In another version of the story, Henry survives the surgery but leaves behind a successful dental practice and a family to go to the Jewish homeland in an effort to find meaning in his life. In yet another version, Henry is a dedicated family man and a successful dentist who learned about his brother Nathan's illness only after Nathan's death.

A few things about Henry remain consistent in the several versions. He is married and has several children. He is a successful dentist, and he has had two affairs in his past. Henry has spent much of his life feeling inferior to his older brother the successful novelist, and upon publication of a novel that Henry regards as a cruel distortion of the truth about their family, Henry ceases communication with Nathan. While Nathan is the brother that sees family traits as fodder for humor, Henry is the brother that is forced into the role of protector of family dignity. Despite his two affairs, Henry is the



conservative father and husband while Nathan is the cosmopolitan playboy. Henry lives in suburban New Jersey, while Nathan lives in Manhattan.

Maria

In some sections this character is Nathan's Englishwoman wife, and in other areas she is the romantic interest he wants to marry. In all sections she is twenty-eight years old and married to a neglectful husband. Maria has a young daughter, and her husband's lack of attention seemed to begin with her pregnancy. It was her loneliness that led her to Nathan. Aside from the two Zuckerman brothers, Maria is the novel's most significant character, and she makes some of the more memorable points about relationships between individuals as well as relations between groups of people.

Carol

This is Henry's wife. She finds Henry's decision to relocate to Israel incomprehensible.

Wendy

This is Henry's dental assistant and mistress. In one version of Henry's story, he undergoes risky heart surgery in hope of regaining the ability to have sex with Wendy.

Shuki Elchanan

This is Nathan's Israeli journalist friend. Shuki warns Nathan about Mordecai Lippman both before and after Nathan meets Lippman.

Jimmy Ben-Joseph

Nathan first meets this character at the Wailing Wall where Jimmy says he is Nathan's biggest fan and the cure to Israel's problems could be found if Israel would import baseball. Nathan encounters Jimmy again when Jimmy plans to hijack an airplane.

Mordecai Lippman

This man is a leader who is regarded as a hero to some and a dangerous zealot to others.

Mrs. Freshfield

This is Maria's mother. She is a traditional English woman, but she is also known to have strong anti-Semitic views.

Phoebe

This is Maria's toddler daughter.



Objects/Places

Newark, New Jersey

This is where the Nathan and Henry are from, and it is the setting of some of the character Nathan's novels.

Shiska

This is a Yiddish term for a non-Jewish woman.

Diaspora

This is a term for the scattering of a people away from their traditional homeland. It is often used to describe the scattering of the Jews over thousands of years.

Judea

This is a portion of the country of Israel. Other names for this region include the West Bank.

Goyim

This is a Yiddish term meaning non-Jew. In modern usage it can sometimes have negative connotations.

The Wailing Wall

This is an important Jewish religious structure in Jerusalem. Here Nathan first meets Jimmy Ben-Joseph.

Carnovsky

This is the title of Nathan's well-known novel based on his own family. This novel caused Henry to stop speaking to Nathan for many years.

Chiswick

This is an area within Greater London where Nathan and Maria are having a home remodeled.



Gloustershire

This is an area in southwestern England. It is where Maria's family is from.

Hebron

This is a city in the West Bank. Nathan hears much about the conflict between Jews and Arabs in this place when he visits Henry.



Themes

Identity Within a Group or What Kind of Jew Are You?

Throughout the novel at least two of the main characters, Nathan and Henry Zuckerman, struggle with their place within their own ethnic or religious group. Often they find themselves uncomfortable and unsure when the question is posed, and just as often they find themselves on the defensive when the issue is raised as an accusation. In one alternate version of the story, Part 2 "Judea," Henry has a sudden awakening and seeks to embrace his Jewish heritage. With only one exception, Nathan remains aloof and finds the question worthy only of generating humor in his fiction writing.

The exception to Nathan's experience comes in the final part of the novel titled "Christendom." Confronted with blatant anti-Semitism in England, Nathan is surprised how angry he becomes. Always before he had remained above what he saw as petty, or perhaps even silly, issues of religious affiliation. First his sister-in-law, then a rude and belligerent woman, and then even his own wife spout ideas of prejudice that Nathan finds shocking. He concludes that despite considering himself a Jew only by accident of birth, he is still the same type of Jew to those that harbor prejudice.

Some of the most intriguing ideas on the issue come from within the Jewish community itself. In Israel, Henry and Nathan encounter Jews that consider them Americanized and out of touch with what is truly important in the struggle of their people. They are far more familiar with the people back home in New Jersey who are Jewish in name only. Henry's wife says it best when she says she has no idea when Passover occurs.

The Counterlife as an Expression of the Desire to Correct Mi

Part of the human experience is to live a life with a course governed by decisions. Decisions often result in mistakes, and mistakes, just as definitely correct decisions, alter the course of one's life. All people in evaluating the crossroads they pass ask the question, "What if?" The characters in this novel are no exception, but unlike characters in reality. these characters can experience the consequences of alternate versions of reality.

The first and clearest example occurs in the transition from Part 1 to Part 2. In Part 1, Henry dies as a result of his surgery. In Part 2, Henry not only lives but he goes on a quest in search of understanding his Jewish heritage. In other alternate versions of the same story, Henry and Nathan switch roles. In Part 4, it is Nathan who dies as a result of surgery and Henry is left behind to try to understand the puzzles of his estranged brother's last days. Part 3 involves a somewhat bizarre tale of what could have happened to Nathan if there had been a hijack attempt on his flight to London, and in Part 5 the flight to London is quiet and peaceful.



Not only do the two main characters experience alternate versions of the same story. In Part 4, Maria experiences one ending to the story, the death of her lover and the discovery of her writing voice. In Part 5, Maria experiences what would have happened had Nathan lived, and with that final part to the novel she, and the readers, experience multiple versions of that ending.

The Counterlife: A Struggle Between Fiction and Reality

In the novel *The Counterlife*, all of the traditional boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred. As readers we are often shocked by abrupt reversals or completely new scenarios involving the same characters. We cannot tell if these alternate versions are the result of different narrators or are if they are entirely separate stories involving characters who happen to have the same names and associates. Even within the various alternate versions, it is difficult to tell what is part of the action and what is part of the internal imaginings of one of the narrators. Much of what some readers think is traditional action turns out to be the contents of an unpublished manuscript that three principle characters read and refer to.

Related to this seemingly unknowable distinction between reality and fiction is the idea of one of the main characters, Nathan Zuckerman, that there is no such thing as "self." He says that it is impossible for him to write about a particular person because no matter how hard he tries, the best he can do is end up with a character that is similar to the person. Nathan goes further and states that no one has a self. Everyone's self is a version of someone else that they adopt to suit various situations.

If there is any conclusion to the question of what distinguishes fiction from reality, it seems to be that all stories are merely versions, which means that all are both fiction and reality, and which means that all are equally valid.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is one of the most crucial and intriguing elements in *The Counterlife*. It changes in each of the five parts, and it often changes with absolutely no warning within those parts. Many times the reader must read on for paragraphs or pages to be certain of the narrator's identity, and even then often the best one can determine is that it is a third person narrator focused on the perspective of a certain character.

Part 1 begins with what seems like a third person narrator, and then after a section break a first person narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, reveals that the preceding part had been his failed attempt at a eulogy for his brother. After continuing on for some time with a first person narrator, the novel shifts at the beginning of Part 4 to a third person narrator focused on the perspective of Henry Zuckerman in an alternate version of the story that involves the death of Nathan. After a section break before the end of Part 4, the tone and structure of the narrative changes and may even introduce another character, Maria, as a sort of narrator. The final part of the novel seems to come entirely from the first person perspective of Nathan, but inclusion of a lengthy letter from Maria could also constitute first person narrative on her part.

The rapidly changes in points of view, though confusing, compliment one of the novel's main themes: that all narratives are merely versions of other stories.

Setting

There are several different physical settings in the novel *The Counterlife*. All occur in the late 1970s. Part 1, though named after a town in Switzerland, takes place almost entirely in the same locale in New Jersey. Part 2 takes place in Israel. Part 3 is set on an ill-fated airline flight. Part 4, though named after a region of England, physically occurs in Manhattan. The final part to the novel seems to take place in England, but there are subtle clues that seem to indicate that it could all take place within a single apartment in Manhattan.

Within the novel there are also two other types of settings of a less tangible sort. There is the action within what seems to be the main narrative, and then within that element there is also the Draft #2 manuscript that seems to mirror *The Counterlife* in structure, subject, characters, and even titles to the parts. Some of what readers think happens in the main novel is revealed later to have happened only in the manuscript.

One of the best examples of how the settings of the main novel and the manuscript compete occurs in Part 5. On the surface it seems that all action is occurring in England, but through subtle references to terms like elevator and foyer and upstairs the reader might conclude that the action has never left the confines of Nathan Zuckerman's



apartment in Manhattan. Whether this pertains to the entire novel or just Part 5 is unclear, though it seems likely that it could pertain to the entire novel.

Language and Meaning

The language and its meaning is as delightful as one would expect from a Philip Roth novel. However, there is more to the language than its poetic eloquence. In many cases, the language, or more specifically the terminology, shows how some of our notions have become so familiar to us that we forget the meaning of the original terms.

One such example occurs in the distinction between the regional name Judea and the West Bank. Both refer to the same area of land, but to different people the terms have different meanings. The first mention of this occurs in the version of the story that involves the hijacking of the airplane. Nathan refers to visiting the West Bank, and the security officer asks Nathan why if he is a Jew he uses a non-Jewish term for the place. In another part of the novel Maria tells Nathan about a dream she had, and she uses the term Judea. Nathan corrects her and says the proper name for the place is the West Bank. She responds that she was dreaming, not reading newspaper headlines.

Another example of terms and their often forgotten meanings occurs during the fight that ends the relationship between Nathan and Maria. Maria tries to explain to Nathan that the Gentiles do not have a monopoly on prejudicial thought. She reminds him of the terms "goyim" and "shiska." She says that he and other Jews use them so casually that they may have forgotten that they also can have pejorative meaning.

Structure

The novel is divided into five parts, and all of the parts have place names as titles. The place names in the titles do not always coincide with where the action of the part takes place. Within each of the five parts are multiple sections. Sometimes the sections are divided according to the passing of time, but most often they are divided according to a more distinct change like a change in narrative voice.

The novel does not proceed in a linear fashion. Even some of the separate parts do not always proceed in a linear chronological manner. Because the novel consists of many versions of similar stories, a timeline is difficult to construct. Often similar versions of stories seem to overlap in time or even retell a completely new version of the story occupying the same place in time. One such example is the distinction between Part 4 and Part 5. Part 4 seems to present an ending to the main story in terms of its place in chronological time, but Part 5 presents a different version of the same story which seems to claim that Part 4 had been merely a draft of an unpublished manuscript.

For readers accustomed to more traditional linear narrative, the structure of *The Counterlife* is one of the most difficult elements to adjust to. The author provides clues at the beginning to help prepare the reader for this trait of the novel. What begins as a story told in third person is soon revealed to be merely a brief version of the story once

the narrative changes to first person. These sorts of abrupt shifts in structure are typical throughout the novel.



Quotes

"Henry had expected Nathan to laugh. Of course! He had driven over from Jersey to confess to the mocking author the ridiculous absurdity of his dilemma, and instead he had been indulged by a solicitous brother who was unable any longer to give either advice or offense."

Part 1 Basel, pp. 29-30

"H. phones and for half an hour speaks of nothing but Carol's virtues. Carol is someone whose qualities you can only really know if you've lived with the woman as long as he has. 'She's interesting, dynamic, curious, perceptive . . .' A long and very impressive list. A startling list."

Part 1 Basel, p. 40

"To be the Jew that I was, I told Shuki's father, which was neither more nor less than the Jew I wished to be, I didn't need to live in a Jewish nation any more than he, from what I understood, felt obliged to pray in a synagogue three times a day. My landscape wasn't the Negev wilderness, or the Galilean hills, or the coastal plain of ancient Philistia; it was industrial, immigrant America—Newark where I had been raised, Chicago where I'd been educated, and New York where I was living in a basement apartment on a Lower East Side street among poor Ukrainians and Puerto Ricans."

Part 2 Judea, p. 53

"In there too were pious worshippers, seated with their prayer books only inches from the Wall. Leaning forward, their elbows on their knees, they reminded me of poor souls who'd been waiting all day in a welfare office or on an unemployment line. Low lozenge-like floodlights did not serve to make the place any cozier or more congenial. Religion couldn't come less adorned than this. Those Jews needed nothing but that wall."

Part 2 Judea, p. 88

"But because he couldn't completely follow what I was saying, or because he wanted to harass me and drive my sinfulness from this holy place, or because he wanted to correct the little mistake of my having left the fold, or maybe because he simply needed another pious Jew in the world the way someone who is thirsty needs a glass of water, he wouldn't let me be."

Part 2 Judea, p. 90

"Judea was something had been left just as it had been made; this could have passed for a piece of the moon to which the Jews had been sadistically exiled by their worst enemies rather than the place they passionately maintained was theirs and no one else's from time immemorial."

Part 2 Judea, p. 113

"What purpose is now hidden in what he now calls 'Jew'—or is 'Jew' just something he now hides behind? He tells me that here he is essential, he belongs, he fits in—but isn't it more likely that what he has finally found is the unchallengeable means to escape his



hedged-in life?"

Part 2 Judea, p. 119

"If I had nothing to say to Henry right off it was because, following Lippman's seminar, language didn't really seem my domain any longer. I wasn't exactly a stranger to disputation, but never in my life had I felt so enclosed by a world so contentious, where the argument is enormous and constant and everything turns out to be pro or con, positions taken, positions argued, and everything italicized by indignation and rage."

Part 2 Judea, p. 130

"'When is Passover?' I don't even know when Passover is, Nathan. We don't do any of that. We never did, not even when I was at home with my parents. Even my father, who owned a shoe store, was free of that. He didn't care about Passover, he cared about golf, which now appears to put him three thousand rungs up the evolutionary ladder than his stupid son-in-law. Religion! A lot of fanaticism and superstition and wars and death! Stupid, medieval nonsense! If they tore down all the churches and synagogues to make way for more golf courses, the world would be a better place!"

Part 3 Aloft, p. 153

"Had we met and had a heated affair back before my illness, chances are that we would never have had to do all this talking and it would more than likely be over now, another adultery safely contained by the ordinary impediments."

Part 4 Gloucestershire, p. 203

"In the midst of all that was sheer, sadistic, punitive, spiteful, invention, sheer sadistic sorcery, there, copied verbatim from the notebooks, were half the journal entries that Henry had torn out to destroy."

Part 4 Gloucestershire, p. 226

"Of course resisting provocation is always an option, but can you really have your sister-in-law calling you a dirty Jew bastard, and someone else saying you're stinking up the place, and then someone you love saying why do you make such a production of these things, without your head starting to explode, no matter what sort of peaceable person you've tried turning yourself into?"

Part 5 Christendom, pp. 307-308



Topics for Discussion

Does a writer owe any obligation to friends and family that shares stories in confidence, or is it acceptable to publish anything so long as the writer changes the names and calls the work fiction?

Is the novel *The Counterlife* making any statement about the nature of fiction versus reality, and is this in any way reflected in the title?

The novel contains many instances of types of individuals and some embody stereotypes. What sorts of stereotypes are contained in the novel (religious zealot, snob, hard working conservative, joker, etc.), and do any of the characters change type from one section to another?

The novel contains more than one instance of third person narration. Is the third person narrator the same in all the sections coming that point of view, or are there indications that there may be more than one third person narrator?

What does Nathan mean that there is no such thing as self and that anyone seeming to be themselves is merely doing a good job of impersonating their idea of self?

Maria describes herself as a quiet, submissive, conservative woman, yet she makes some of the more vivid points in the novel. What are some important points Maria makes in her answers to questions or in her angry defense of her views?

Could all of *The Counterlife* be contained in Draft # 2, or are there parts of the novel that must exist independently of the manuscript that Henry and Maria separately encounter in Part 4?