

# **Dear Committee Members Study Guide**

**Dear Committee Members by Julie Schumacher**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to *Dear Committee Members*. by Julie Schumacher, Anchor Books, 2014.

*Dear Committee Members* is a witty collection of letters of recommendation that explore the life of Jason Fitger over the course of one academic year.

Tasked with writing letters of recommendation for students, acquaintances, and colleagues, Jason uses his platform to recommend, dissuade, and vent his frustrations to captive audiences.

Jason Fitger is a creative writing professor whose letters often involve recommending creative writing students for literary residencies and to his own literary agent, Ken Doyle. The student he is most concerned with is Darren Browles, a young man in whom Jason sees himself. Darren is working on a novel that retells Melville's *Bartelby the Scrivener*. Fitger's attempts to get Darren a residency to allow him the funding to concentrate on his novel are refused.

Fitger's efforts are complicated by his past relationships with people in the academic community. His ex-wife Janet and his former mistress Carol both work at the university. Eleanor, a woman with whom he attended graduate school and had a relationship with is also someone to whom he writes his letters. He tries to reconnect with Janet and keep Carol from making a mistake career-wise, but he does so in a manner which drives the women away from him.

Increasingly isolated in his department, Fitger confronts both the dean and chair of the English department about the status of the department, issues with other faculty members, and how the department is facing a slow death through his letters.

He continues to try and find funding for Darren, reaching out to other departments and even the radio station after a large monetary gift was bequeathed. While he has no luck in finding a place for Darren, he begins to witness the successes of another student he recommended, Vivian Zelles.

Not only is Vivian the recipient of a six-month literary residency, she has gained representation with Ken Doyle at his agency. After Ken secures Vivian a six-figure deal for her first book, Jason begins to get more requests from past students to recommend them to Ken's agency. Jason expresses his displeasure at Ken's refusal to accept Darren as a client.

As Jason begins to doubt his assessment of Darren's literary talent, he sends Darren's manuscript to Hanf, one of Fitger's former creative writing professors who is now becoming senile. Jason learns that Hanf gave an interview claiming Darren's idea as his own.



As the academic year comes to a close, Jason learns that Darren has committed suicide. Jason feels guilty, wondering if his misjudged Darren's work because he saw himself in Darren. Because he could not find funding for Darren while he was alive, Jason decides to start a scholarship with his own money in Darren's name. Eleanor contributes to the fund, and the two begin discussing the possibility of a reunion of the group of students who attended the writing seminar taught by Hanf.

As the novel comes to a close, Jason tries to embrace the promise and optimism of a new school year.



# Letters 1-16

## Summary

NOTE: For the purposes of clarity in this study guide, each letter in Dear Committee Members has been assigned a number. The letters are not numbered in the text of the book.

Letter 1 is addressed to the committee members of the Bentham Literary Residency Program. In it, Jason Fitger, a creative writing professor, recommends Darren Browles, whom he believes to have a great deal of literary talent. In the letter, Jason also offers his condolences on Mike's death. Mike was the director of the program. Jason has submitted a selection of Darren's novel to his own literary agent, Ken Doyle.

Letter 2 is addressed to Ted Boti, the chair of the English Department. The letter is in regards to recommendations for director of graduate studies. Jason discusses the state of the department. While the department is sizeable, the pool of eligible people is not. The department relies heavily on adjunct faculty, who would not be eligible and the remaining members of the faculty bear "the scars of disenfranchisement" (94). Others are retiring or on leave. Fitger even goes so far as to deem himself too "unpleasant" (94) to be considered for the job.

Letter 3 recommends John Leszcynski, a former student, to Wexler Foods. Jason extols John's ability to attend class on time and not check his phone. He also mentions John's creative work in the fantasy/horror genre.

Letter 4 is again addressed to Ted Boti regarding his request that Jason write a letter of recommendation (often referred to as LOR) for Franklin Kentrell for the Davidson Chair. Jason provides a quick recommendation, while addressing that Kentrell is not a good fit for the position. He considers the LOR absurd, noting that he has even been required to write one for himself and feels that a quick phone call could achieve the same result. Jason uses the remainder of the letter to address the status of the English hallway, which is shared with the Economics Department. Most of the economists have moved to avoid the distraction of the noise from construction and that the Tech Help has moved as well.

Letter 5 is addressed to the "Overworked Committee Members" (10) for the Bentham Literary Residency Program. Jason recommends Vivian Zelles for a residency, even though she has waited until the last minute to request the letter and Jason does not consider her in his top tier of students. He reminds the committee that he recommended Darren Browles.

Letter 6 is to recommend Melanie deRueda, whom he has known for eleven minutes, to the Payne University Law School. The letter is addressed to the admissions committee and Janet Matthias-Fitger, Jason's ex-wife. After recommending Melanie, Jason shifts



the focus to Janet in two postscripts. One postscript addressed that Eleanor is a finalist for a directorship. The second postscript acknowledges that Janet maintains a relationship with Eleanor, whom they both went to college with, and how he and Janet were happy together prior to the publication of his book, *Transfer*.

In Letter 7, Jason tells the Field-Bantry College of Government and Public Affairs that he will not complete the online recommendation form. He highly recommends Stella Castle.

Letter 8 is addressed to Eleanor Acton, congratulating her on becoming the director the Bentham Literary Residency Program. Jason makes a second recommendation of Darren Browles for the residency, even asking for a longer residency so that Darren can finish his novel. In the postscript, Jason tells her that he knows that she and Janet still communicate and that they get together twice annually on their wedding anniversary and the anniversary of when they signed their divorce papers.

Letter 9 recommends Assistant Professor Lance West for an undergraduate advising award. Jason comments that West is not yet jaded.

Letter 10 recommends Allen Trent to Avengers Paintball, Inc. Allen barely earned a C- and wrote his final essay on his rage issues.

Letter 11 again recommends Darren Browles. The recommendation is to Ken Doyle who is at Hautman and Doyle Literary Agency. Jason explains that Darren's novel is a reinterpretation of *Bartleby* and that while it is over five hundred pages, it has potential and is in need of an editor. He shifts focus to himself and his own literary work *Transfer of Affection*, acknowledging that it did not perform as well as hoped. He tells Ken that Eleanor is now Bentham's director and reminds him of a time when they were all at college together.

Letter 12 is an online recommendation form, in which Jason foregoes the questions and fills in his recommendation letter for Jervana Natal.

Letter 13 is addressed to Carole Samarkind, recommending Gunnar Lang. After recommending the student, Jason apologizes to Carol for an e-mail he sent in August. He suggests that it may be awkward for both Carol and Janet to serve on the diversity committee together.

Letter 14 recommends Vivian Zelles to Payne University's medical school. Jason suggests that Vivian is a strong student who wants to attend medical school and be a novelist.

Letter 15 also recommends Vivian Zelles to the Payne University Law School. It is addressed to Janet. Jason details that Vivian Zelles is enrolled in his graduate-level fiction class, which he suspects will be the last. He finds her creative work dull. In the post-script, he thanks Janet for not requiring that letters of recommendation be submitted online. He regrets his "reply all email" in August and tells Janet that Carol is "no longer angry" (33).



Letter 16 is to Ted Boti. The letter recommends Gunnar Lang to a work-study program. The letter also addresses Ted's departmental plan, thinking that Ted's time would be better served addressing the "fiscal, curricular, and architectural crisis" (35), instead of updating the plan that no one will read. In the postscript, he asks that Ted reconsider revoking the funding of the graduate creative writing program.

## Analysis

The novel opens with a letter from the beginning of the school year and introduces the theme of hope. Jason writes to advocate for a residency for Darren Browles, whom he believes to be of significant talent. The tone alludes to the promise of what Darren can offer as a literary writer. Darren's success would be good for him, as well as for the English Department, Payne University, and the Bentham Residency. Jason wants Darren to be successful, and this recommendation is a way for him to get on the right path. The residency would offer him funding to be able to live and concentrate on his writing without other distractions. Jason has also sent a sample of Darren's work to his own literary agent, Ken Doyle. Jason is doing what he can in an effort to give Darren opportunity. The themes of success and failure are introduced at this point.

Other early letters introduce characters that the reader will only get a sense of through Jason's communication with them. Anything the reader knows about the other characters is filtered through Jason. At no point are any of the characters seen directly interacting with Jason. The letters give a one-sided look at the department and the successes and failures of students, faculty, and colleagues.

In the text of the initial letter regarding the residency for Darren, it is acknowledged that there was a major change in who is running the residency because of Mike's death. This sets up the changing landscape in the university that will reach into other departments.

Jason's second letter introduces Ted Boti, the current chair of the English Department. In contrast to his recommendation of Darren Browles, Jason reveals his view on the current state of the department and how he factors into it. He is aware of his reputation. He might be considered boastful when he shares in the letter that he is viewed as "unpleasant" (94). This prepares the reader for the comments Jason will make in the letters to come. His awareness further separates him from the rest of the school. If his reputation already places hardships on how he is perceived, he actively refuses to change anything to remedy it. His comments on the department introduce the theme of the State of Liberal Arts. Jason is aware of the changes around him. In order to find a constant, it is as if his decision not to change provides that for him.

His comments on the department, however, are not without merit. He understands the consequences of relying on adjunct faculty. Yes, adjuncts serve an affordable purpose in the department, but at what cost to the health of the department.

Other letters reveal the wide variety of letters he is tasted with writing. They are not limited to faculty recommendations or students applying to graduate school. He spends



his time trying to correlate his experiences with students in the classroom to jobs that are far removed from anything the students may have studied. Such is the case with John Leszcynski in Letter 3. If John is applying for a job in food service, why include how someone conducted themselves in a creative writing class? Jason makes the best of it. He uses his observations of student behavior, such as John's punctuality and attentiveness in class, to recommend him. He cannot resist the urge to point out John's preference for writing in the horror genre, as if to alert the potential employer that what he studied has little influence on the job at hand.

When Jason recommends Vivian Zelles for the same residency that he recommended Darren Browles, it addresses the competition for funding and how the selection process is subjective. Jason's recommendation of Vivian is shown by his own subjectivity. It is clear that he would prefer Darren have the residency. He reminds the committee that he has previously recommended Darren and also points out that Vivian waited until the last minute to request the recommendation.

Jason continues to advocate for Darren. He makes yet another recommendation for him, this time addressing the letter to Eleanor Acton, who has taken over the directorship of the residency. Jason makes it known to the reader that he and Eleanor have a past together, but also that he was once married to a woman named Janet. He uses the postscript to start a personal dialogue with Eleanor, commenting about getting together with Janet. It is possible that he is using this opportunity to assuage his reputation to benefit Darren in the recommendation. He may be fearful that his past may work against Darren's future. Conversely, he may simply be trying to get across information to Eleanor to try and make him look better in her, and by extension Janet, eyes.

The other letters in this section continue to recommend students and address issues in the department. Jason continues to recommend Vivian to both medical school and law school. It is clear that Vivian is both bright and ambitious. She clearly has potential and opportunity. Vivian appears to be a symbol of success. Jason also indicates the downfall of the graduate fiction program. He mentions it in the context of recommending Vivian. Just as her success becomes more apparent, it is as if Jason is faced with a failure of the job he cares deeply about. While he recommends Gunnar Lang, he takes the opportunity to further address his job with Ted by requesting that the graduate program keep its funding.

Jason also recommends Gunnar Lang to Carol Samarkind. It is clear that the two have a relationship that goes beyond academic colleagues. He apologizes for an e-mail that he sent which has caused some unknown problem. Jason has situated himself as the person who has made mistakes and is trying to set things right, even if he may be going about it in the wrong way.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jason write a recommendation for Vivian Zelles?





## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jason remind Janet that they used to be happy before *Transfer of Affection* was published?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do Jason and Janet continue to get together?

## Vocabulary

camaraderie, eponymous, echelon, adjunct, disenfranchisement, en fin, forbearance, aesthetic, parity, aegis, usurping, bureaucratic, abyss, somnambulist, deigns, tenacious, inane, supplant, tantamount, acumen, sibilant, missive, vitriol, apropos



# Letters 17-29

## Summary

Letter 17 opens with an apology to Anna Huston, the director of Annie's Nannies Child and Play Center. He indicates that while Shayla Newcome received a B in his class, he is not sure whether that indicates she would be trustworthy with children. He indicates that Shayla was having a difficult time personally while in his class. However, she made progress over the semester. He recommends her. In a footnote, he reveals he has written more than 1300 letters of recommendation.

Letter 18 recommends Professor Martina Ali for tenure. Jason lauds Ali's scholarship and publications in a reputable scholarly journal, as well as her growing national reputation in her field of film studies. He goes on to discuss the dripping pipe in men's room in Willard Hall. He references a memo on "financial prudence" (43) and reminds Associate Vice Provost Millhouse that the retiring faculty in the English Department are not being replaced, two graduate programs are closed to new admissions, and a sociologist is running the English Department.

Letter 19 is another recommendation of Darren Browles to the literary residency because one of his three letters of recommendation has not been received. Jason indicates that he and much of the literature faculty are not speaking, while others have been relocated during the construction. He has contacted Martin Glenk, who was supposed to send the third letter, but he cannot get him to comment on whether he actually sent the letter or not. In the postscript, he address Eleanor, telling her that he received a letter from Troy Larpenteur asking for a letter of recommendation. He asks Eleanor if she knows if Madelyne TV would know about how Troy has been over the years.

Letter 20 recommends Duffy Napp to ITech Solutions. Duffy is the last of the Tech Help team in the department. Jason comments on Duffy's preference for interacting with machines over people.

Letter 21 is Jason's recommendation of Troy to Zentex Corporation, explaining that they have known each other since graduation school. He explains that Troy wrote a brilliant novel, which is now out of print. Troy's manuscript for his second novel was lost, along with his pregnant wife Navia, when lightning hit a cabin they were staying in. Afterwards, Troy traveled to India where his wife lived as a child. He goes on to state that Troy was caring and supportive during their time in graduate school and recommends that Troy be hired. He signs off the letter with a list of his own publications.

Letter 22 recommends Pa Vang for a fellowship at Payne. The letter is addressed to the committee as well as Carol. Before closing the letter, Jason asks Carol to have lunch with him. In the post script he explains that he heard about what happened at the diversity committee between Carol and Janet and that he warned Carol.



Letter 23 is another online recommendation form. Jason is recommending Cynthia Goldberg, continuing the letter through the prompts. When Jason does not get the room to finish addressing one question, he continues to do so in the next section, with increasing agitation and swearing. The form does not allow for him to complete what he would like to say about Cynthia.

Letter 24 is a recommendation to a Neologisms Conference on behalf of Rowena Handel, who submitted the application without realizing she would also need a recommendation. Jason never taught Rowena, but he did meet her on campus before Thanksgiving break when she was desperate to find someone. In the postscript, he takes the opportunity to recommend Darren Browles again, indicating that Darren has not received a positive reply. He requests Harold's help, suggesting that Eleanor's experience in the business world is working against creative types in the residency.

Letter 25 is to a catering company, recommending Seth Padoman. Jason comments on the job market and how he would have hoped for better prospects for Seth. He goes on to reveal that he received food poisoning from an event the company catered.

Letter 26 is a letter to Carol, recommending Lee Rosenthal for a semester job. Jason asks about what Janet may have said during the diversity committee meeting. He tells her that he will not call her office more than once a week and not pop in for lunch. He asks her to confirm if she is looking for employment outside the campus and offers to write her a recommendation.

Letter 27 is addressed to Ted, nominating Gwendolyn Hoch-Dunn for an undergraduate thesis award. Jason admits that Albert Tyne is the Wharton specialist in the department and Gwendolyn is writing about Wharton. Because Tyne is regarded as a "lecherous eyesore avoided" (63) avoided by female students, Jason became her advisor. He finds her to be a strong student and deserving of the award.

Letter 28 is to Torreforde State University's MFA program, recommending Iris Temple. Jason reluctantly recommends her because the program offers no funding for the graduate students. He then begins to detail his own publication history. His first novel "Stain" sold better than his subsequent novels. With "Alphabetical Stars" and "Save Me for Later" he tried to prove he was not a "gossipy satirist" (67), but the books were not well-received critically or publicly. His fourth novel "Transfer of Affection" was about an affair with an academic backdrop. He closes the letter by suggesting that tuition be covered and that the students be informed about the lack of job prospects after graduation, the publishing world, and lack of support for the arts.

Letter 29 recommends Malinda Heisman for an unpaid internship in a senator's office. Jason states that the internship will not help her repay the "\$38,000 in debt" (70) students incur on average upon graduation.



## Analysis

The theme of success and failure continues to develop as Jason recommends Martina Ali for tenure. Jason cannot imagine why Martina would not be granted tenure. She has proven herself an asset in her field, both through scholarship and national reputation. She is someone who would bring positive recognition to the university. For Jason, he uses this recommendation to address failures in the building and the department. Just as Martina rises, the department is failing. There are issues with the pipes in the men's room and the department is beginning to suffer from programs no longer admitting new students and retiring professors not being replaced. The building issues make Jason feel ignored and inconsequential. If programs are denying applications from new students, then the programs are destined to fail. There is no need to replace the faculty because the university is not invested in keeping the department viable. Further, the chair of the English department is not even part of the English department. Instead, Ted is a sociologist. It is in the university's interest to allow the English department to have a voice. If there is no one to represent them, then how can the English department survive?

Jason also sees the disinterest in the English department in the way that in the IT Help are moving on. Jason writes a recommendation for Duffy Napp, the last of the people in the department dedicated to the English department. Jason comments on how Duffy prefers interacting with machines over the English faculty. This may be the personality of one man, but ultimately it reflects how Jason views his place in the university. People are looking in other directions; and they are not interested in the department.

Troy Larpenteur has requested that Jason write him a letter of recommendation for a corporate job. Troy and Jason went to graduate school together. They both achieved some literary success, having both published novels following their graduation. While Jason went on to publish three other novels, albeit with decreasing success, Troy only published one. It was met with critical acclaim, but Troy's personal life also suffered. While he was working on his follow up novel, his pregnant wife was killed in a freak accident in which he also lost his manuscript. In a way, Troy represents a heightened version of Jason. While Troy left the country to be off the grid in India, Jason sequestered himself in academia. Their personal lives suffered. While Troy's personal backstory is tragic, the reader suspects that Jason has made some dire mistake that has cost him relationships with other.

Through his letters, it is not yet known what Jason has done to alienate and cause rifts between Janet and Carol. What is known is that the two women are serving on a diversity committee and that there was some kind of altercation between the women during one of the meetings. Jason is apologetic about it, but his efforts to connect with the women appear to be falling on deaf ears. The focus of his recommendation letters continues to move away from the actual recommendations to figuring out what has happened. It bothers him that he does not know for sure what was said. He is isolated from the information.



At the conclusion of Jason's recommendation of Troy, he lists his own publications. There is vanity in this. Perhaps there was rivalry between Jason and Troy when they were younger. Perhaps Jason is afraid that if Troy is looking for a corporate job, then he may have to face the reality of his position in the university and look elsewhere as well. He does not know. Like not knowing what was said between Carol and Janet, Jason struggles with the unknown. Listing his publications reaffirms his accomplishments. It reminds him that he has had success even if failure is on his mind.

To that end, Jason appears to be looking for reasons to find success for Darren. He writes a letter of recommendation for Rowena Handel in spite of not knowing her or having taught her. Rowena is in a bind, trying to find someone to write her a recommendation. She was unaware that she needed one and given the timing of Thanksgiving break, she is left with limited options. Given another time, she may have reached out to someone who was familiar with her work, instead she convinces Jason to do so. Jason does and points out to the committee how he came to write the letter. Ultimately, this cannot work in Rowena's favor, unless the letters of recommendation are perfunctory and not something that is used in the final determination of the application. What Jason does with the letter is to turn it into another opportunity to recommend Darren. It is clear from the text of his letter that Darren has been turned down for the residency and this is Jason's way of trying to persuade the committee.

Jason references Eleanor's past in the business world and how it may be shaping her decisions with the residency applications. He does not address the personal history he has with Eleanor. In order to deflect from what influence that personal history may play in Eleanor's decision, he questions Eleanor's decision-making skills in light of her past employment. This foreshadows how the reader can expect that what is going on behind the scenes with Eleanor, Janet, and Carol will come to light and how Jason plays a part. He is concerned with decisions of the past influencing the future. The reader is given some insight as to what transpired when Jason details his publication history in one of the recommendations, suggesting an affair.

Jason's recommendation of Iris Temple is with reluctance. He is aware of the financial hardships in pursuing the creative arts. Just as he will call out an unpaid internship in a senator's office in another recommendation, Jason recognizes the difficulties students will face with student debt upon graduation.

## Discussion Question 1

Why would Jason and the other members of the English faculty not be speaking?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Jason's decision to write letters of recommendation for Rowena after just meeting her reveal about his character?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jason refer to his own publishing history in his recommendation for Iris Temple?

## Vocabulary

dowsing, interstices, dossiers, obfuscation, fetid, encomiums, denigrate, sordid, aspersions, ebullience, cronyism, portmanteau, capacious, gregarious, poultice, succor, paucity, ennui, paroxysms, magnanimity, acquiesced, scintillating, abysmal, immured, proliferated, prescient, iconoclastic, scurrilous, rapaciousness, panoply, salacious, lecherous, extricate, unconscionable, grotesque, dexterity, milieu, nuanced, ergo, succubi, matriculate, pontificates, assiduous



# Letters 30-41

## Summary

Letter 30 is addressed to Madelyne Tort-Verona, aka MTV to her college friends. She is the director at the Caxton Retreat Center. Jason addresses that Caxton is known for helping people with PTSD, but asks Madelyne to consider Darren Browles and compares Darren's academic experience to PTSD. He explains that Darren was denied a residency at Bentham and Eleanor "slammed his project" (73). Darren did not show Jason the text of the rejection, but he suspects that Eleanor remains bitter about Jason's book, *Stain*. He explains that he enhanced the narrative when he wrote that book and that Eleanor did not care much for him before they slept together. He concludes by apologizing for rehashing the past, but asks her to consider letting Darren stay at the retreat for a month or two. In the postscript, he asks if she has heard from Troy.

Letter 31 recommends Alex Ruefle to Lattimore Community College as an adjunct professor, criticizing the school for hiring adjuncts instead of offering full-time, tenure-track positions. Jason suspects that Alex listed him as a reference because of the death of one and retirement of another on his thesis committee. He concludes by suggesting the school hire Alex at a "salary and rank" (79) higher than the job advertised.

Letter 32 is a recommendation for Tara Tappani for an editorial position with *Sellebritta Online*. Jason explains that he gave Tara an F for plagiarizing an Irwin Shaw story called "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses". Tara was unfazed when confronted with the plagiarism, suggesting that she must have copied the story in her notebook because she liked it and then mistook it for her own work.

Letter 33 is in reference to Karolyi Pazmentalyi from the Slavic Languages Department. Karolyi has written a "brilliant monograph" (83), but because his department is being cut, he is unable to be promoted. Jason explains that others are succeeding in the school with less academic acumen. He criticizes university expenditures, suggesting that departments are being cut, in addition to salaries, while funding is going through for heated yoga studios and climbing walls.

Letter 34 recommends Vanessa Cuddigan for a data entry position. While Vanessa was a strong student and participated in Teach for America, she is applying for a "soul-squelching" (87) job instead of applying to graduate school.

Letter 35 is addressed to Janet on behalf of Darren Browles, requesting Darren be offered a job to cover his tuition for the spring semester. Jason finds it unfair that Vivian Zelles was offered a six-month residency. He asks if Janet knows that Madelyne died and that the letter he wrote to her was returned marked deceased. He mentions Troy coming back to the States and then returns to possible funding for Darren. In the postscript he confirms their annual lunch.



Letter 36 recommends Steve Geng for a job at a liquor store.

Letter 37 is to Ken Doyle. Jason asks if Ken heard about Madelyn's heart attack. He also tells him that he has heard from Troy and asks if Troy has reached out to Ken. As the letter continues, he recommends Vivian Zelles to the agency and explains that she will be sending a sample of her novel in the coming week. He follows up on whether Ken has read Darren Browles' book.

Letter 38 is an email which opens with Jason explaining that he prefers to send recommendations via the postal service. He recommends Quentin Eshe for an assistant communications coordinator position. He explains that Quentin is not talkative and that people should not ask him about his family.

Letter 39 is a recommendation for Darren Browles to work at Xanadu Park RV's. In the postscript, Jason explains that the apostrophe in RV's is unnecessary because it is plural and not possessive.

Letter 40 is on behalf of Dr. Tamar Auden. The letter is addressed to Camilla Mayhew, who is the Chair of the English Department at DiCameron College. Jason wants to know why anyone would turn Auden down. She is an accomplished novelist whose novels have been turned into a successful film franchise. He begins to discuss his own difficulties in the publishing world and applauds Auden's ability to obtain a publishing contract. He congratulates Camilla on her tenure-track position and tells her that Payne is no longer hiring in the Liberal Arts program.

Letter 41 is a recommendation for Wyatt Innes to the Office of Mental Health and Wellness Intervention Team. This is the second time Jason has recommended him because of his behavior, including watching pornography during class and that Innes exhibits signs that he may "initiate a rampage" (108).

## Analysis

Jason's letter to Madelyne Tort-Verona is another way Jason is trying to secure Darren funding. Jason is reaching out to an old college friend. He makes the connection of Darren's collegiate experience to PTSD. This reads as hyperbole and even disrespectful to those with PTSD, but this attempt to find a place for Darren also cautions the reader that something else may be going on. It expresses Jason's concern for Darren, especially following Eleanor's reaction to Darren's project. Jason uses the phrase "slammed his project" (73), but admits that he has not seen the text of the denial of residency letter Eleanor wrote.

Jason's letters reveal the intimate relationship he once had with Eleanor, although he does not specify when this relationship occurred. It is clear that they were in a graduate seminar together, along with Janet, Troy, and Ken Doyle. It is possible that his sexual relationship with Eleanor predates his marriage to Janet. What the reader can ascertain from Jason's comments about his fiction is that he has a history of mining his personal life for his fiction. This has likely caused a rift in the group. But because Darren did not





show Jason his rejection letter, Jason may be projecting his own guilt onto why Darren was denied. It is easier for Jason to accept responsibility than to perhaps admit that he was wrong about the level of Darren's talent.

Depending on the extent of Darren's reaction to the rejection, it is possible that Jason is seeking help for Darren beyond just funding. He may be recognizing warning signs with Darren's behavior. Reaching out to Madelyne would indicate that a place that specializes in PTSD may be helpful for someone like Darren. It is unclear to the reader at this point. Jason has a history of reporting students to the Mental Health and Wellness Intervention Team.

Jason criticizes the building of a climbing wall and yoga studio in Letter 33 while advocating for a Karolyi Pazmentalyi to receive an award because he knows that Karolyi's future at the school is at risk. Department cuts are an immediate issue. Jason tries to help, but he also knows that he may be at risk as well, witnessing the cuts to his own department.

Letter 39 reveals that Darren has applied for a job at an RV park. Jason writes the recommendation, but is unable to let go of a grammatical error in the name of the company. His decision to dwell on this is likely to work against Darren securing employment at the RV park. Jason likely wants Darren to continue writing, and sees working in an RV park as a move away from his writing.

Letter 41 reveals a second recommendation for Wyatt Innes. If Jason is willing to reach out to the Mental Health Intervention Team on behalf of another student, why would he not do the same for Darren if there was a concern? What is special about Darren that Jason would look elsewhere? True, he is continuing to find Darren funding, but this does cast a shadow over Darren's state of mind.

The letter to Madelyne goes unanswered, and Jason learns of Madelyne's death. This information may also foreshadow a possible fate for Darren as well. He chooses then to contact Janet about Eleanor's rejection. Jason does not think it fair that Vivian, whom Jason also recommended for the residency, was awarded a six-month residency instead of Darren.

Jason continues to be frustrated with the state of academia. He writes a letter of recommendation for Alex Ruefle for an adjunct position. Jason views Alex as a qualified candidate, but takes issue with the position the college is offering. Jason recognizes that the job opportunities available to graduates are not good. He advocates for Alex to have a better position, but this is unlikely to change the given situation. How funding is being appropriated in the schools is changing and moving away from academics.

Jason continues to advocate for Darren in place of Vivian to Ken, Jason's former classmate and literary agent. Jason recommends Vivian to Ken as a client, indicating that he must see merit in her work. He is witnessing Vivian's success, but he cannot let an opportunity go without including Darren.



It can also be inferred that Jason is struggling with his own creative pursuits. Jason spends his time recommending others and reminding people of the success he once had.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jason apologize to Eleanor for rehashing the past?

## Discussion Question 2

What do Jason's comments about how school funding is being spent reveal about his character?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jason bring up Darren in his letters of recommendation for Vivian to Ken Doyle?

## Vocabulary

sordid, germane, rescinded, derivative, malignant, vicarious, capricious, ingot, libidinous, animosity, chagrined, dulcet, pestilent, demurred, discernment, verbatim, denizens, amenities, inextricably, fractious, heterogeneous, purlieus, despondent, ephemeral, moribund, non sequitur, implacable, confabulation, amalgam, sentient



# Letters 42-55

## Summary

Letter 42 is a letter on behalf of Duffy Napp to Maladin IT Associates. Jason states that while he is recommending Duffy, his colleagues have told him that Duffy is the last of the IT support staff for the English Department. He tells Maladin IT Associates that they can have Duffy.

Letter 43 is addressed to KBPZ Payne University Radio after learning that a generous benefactor has left the radio station a large sum of money. Jason requests that Darren Browles be considered for any upcoming expansions in their programs, suggesting Darren be hired by month's end.

Letter 44 is another online submission form. In the opening instructions is a typo, using it's instead of its. While recommending David Cormier, Jason explains how to properly use it's versus its.

Letter 45 is to Eleanor about an essay about Troy's latest work in the New York Review of Books. Jason asks if Eleanor has plans to offer Troy a residency. He tells her that he knows that Troy is working hard on a new novel and assures her that she need not worry about Troy taking too long with the novel. He informs her that Vivan Zelles will be turning down the six-month residency she was offered because she sold her memoir for a six-figure sum. In the postscript, he tells her that he sent a card to Madelyn's husband offering his condolences, but the card was returned.

In Letter 46, Jason explains that he has been asked by Franklin Kentrell to recommend Franklin for the Galloway Foundation Research and Travel Award. He recommends Franklin in spite of knowing that he will not "survive round #1" of consideration, but is writing because Franklin wrote a recommendation for Jason in the past, but Jason did not receive the award either.

Letter 47 is addressed to Ken on behalf of Daniella Macias, who is applying for a summer internship. Jason criticizes the agency for not paying the interns. He discusses Vivan Zelles six-figure sale and the possibility of Troy getting a residency at Bentham.

Letter 48 is addressed to Shepardville College on behalf of Carol Samarkind, who is applying for associate dean of students. Jason details Carol's work performance and their personal relationship. He explains that they met via a series of letters of recommendation and that they began an affair, which lasted years. He apologizes for discussing the affair in a letter to a Bible college. He laments that he should not have allowed Carol to read his book *Transfer of Affection*, claiming that he was "disloyal and selfish" (124). He copies the contents to Carol at the end of the letter and tells her that she can hate him for the letter, but that she is too good for the school.



Letter 49 is to Ted, recommending Arabella McCoy for a teaching assistant mentor position. Jason shifts the focus to the hole in the wall outside of his office and is concerned about the coils and tubes that are exposed.

Letter 50 is written on behalf of Dennis White, who is applying to the Emanuel Lutheran Seminary. Jason details Dennis' fiction about the "evil within" (129). Jason begins to discuss his own relationship with religion, how he was raised Episcopalian and ended up at a Unitarian church with his former wife. He suggests that literature offers as much to the soul as religion does. He concludes by highly recommending Dennis to the program.

Letter 51 is written on behalf of Louise Frame, who is applying for an administrative job in the politics and government department. Jason admits that Louise is seeking other employment because of the state of the English Department and witnessing an argument over the undergraduate curriculum.

Letter 52 is written to H. Reginald Hanf, Professor Emeritus on behalf of Darren Browles. Jason explains Darren's novel and how he has tried to secure him a residency. He sends Hanf pages from the manuscript to get a second opinion, wondering if he may be misjudging Darren's work after all the rejection. Jason asks that Hanf help Darren in any way possible.

Letter 53 is a recommendation for Abhinav Mehta to Armis and Portman Associates, but he does not know what position Mehta is applying for. Jason informs them that Mehta received a B+ and defends Mehta in light of Mehta's transcript. Jason explains that Mehta worked full-time and had difficulties with his student loans, resulting in his degree taking six years.

Letter 54 is addressed to Janet to recommend Louise Frame. Louise had taken the job in the Political Science Department, but her "meth-addict daughter" (139) left her with her two-year old son. Louise now needs time off to care for the child and the Political Science Department is not cooperating. He tells her that he also contacted Hanf about Darren. Jason reveals that he enjoyed their lunch earlier in the year and that they should try to get together more than twice a year. He also confesses that he was happy to hear that she was writing again. In the postscript, he asks how she came to have a copy of the letter of recommendation he wrote for Carol. He has tried to apologize to Carol, but she will not take his calls.

Letter 55 is an endorsement of Ken Doyle's recommendation for a reissue of Troy's debut novel, which is currently out of print. He asks to be kept in the loop on the publishing schedule so that he may order books for his department.

## Analysis

The theme of loyalty and infidelity is examined in Jason's letter of recommendation for Carol to a job at Shepardville College. While Jason finds Carol to be a competent candidate, he feels strongly that the job would ultimately not be a good option for her.



He agrees to write the letter for her out of his loyalty to her, but his decision to detail their affair, particularly to a Bible college, works against this loyalty. He explains that their affair began as they met via letters of recommendation. They conducted an affair that went on for years, which led to the downfall of his marriage to Janet. All of this was detailed in his novel "Transfer of Affection", which was how the affair came to light. He understands that what he did was wrong, but it did not stop him from doing so. Just as Jason knows that detailing the affair in a letter of recommendation is also wrong. It is clearly an attempt to sabotage Carol's chance at the job, but Jason justifies doing so because he feels that Carol deserves better. While Jason may have a strange way of showing he cares, he tries to come from a good place.

Throughout the collection of letters, Jason has had to contend with online submission forms for the letters. He does not like them and they appear to cause him great consternation. The forms are designed to keep the letter writer on task. Because Jason regularly goes off topic in his letters, these forms work against him. He rejects the modernization. He is vocal about how senseless he finds writing the letters, and likes to mention that he estimates he has written over 1300 letters of recommendation. He finds it all to be another part of the downfall of academia.

The theme of success and failure is revisited in Letter 45 in which Jason writes to Eleanor about Troy. While Troy's novel has been out of print, the New York Review of Books has written a favorable article about Troy's novel. Troy appears to be being reintroduced to the literary community. While Jason is likely pleased for his friend, he may also be jealous of the attention Troy is getting. This addresses the theme of Jealousy.

Jason writes to Eleanor about Troy and asks if she is going to offer Troy a residency. Jason takes this opportunity to make a passive-aggressive swipe at Eleanor for rejecting Darren. He tells Eleanor that Vivian will be turning down the six-month residency she has been offered. Vivian has sold her first book and gotten a six-figure deal for it, negotiated by Ken. Vivian's career appears to be going well and she does not need the residency offered to her. It is possible that Jason is telling Eleanor this as a way of illustrating that the residency was offered to someone who did not need it, while someone he believed did – Darren – was denied. What is different about this letter is that Jason does not mention Darren directly. He knows that Eleanor has no intention of offering a residency to Darren, so he mentions Troy. It points out to Eleanor that he knows she will offer the residency to someone he feels does not need it. If Troy is being lauded in the "New York Review of Books", he may not have a need for a residency at Payne University.

The theme of hope can be seen in Jason's letter to Emanuel Lutheran Seminary. Jason is recommending Dennis White to the seminary and lauds Dennis' ability to confront with "evil within" (129). He comments about how literature has likely saved as many as religion has. Jason maintains hope that there is a place for literature and creativity and how it is something that people can turn to.



Hope can also be seen in Letter 55. Jason writes to Ken on behalf of Troy and the reissue of Troy's debut novel. It is as though Troy is getting a fresh start. He is able to revisit and celebrate his past, while others, including Jason, seem to be at the mercy of theirs. Jason wants good things for Troy, and expresses interest in making an order of the reissued books.

Perhaps, thinking about the past and the success of others, including second chances, is what prompts Jason to send Darren's work to Hanf, his former professor. Hanf was instrumental in getting Jason started in his writing career. If Jason sees promise in Darren's work, it is likely that Hanf would also see the potential, given that he advocated for Jason when he was younger. Reaching out to Hanf demonstrates the strongest evidenced that Jason sees himself in Darren. Helping Darren helps Jason. But Jason is also having doubts. Darren has been repeatedly rejected by others in his circle: Janet, Eleanor, Ken. Reaching out Hanf is the piece that connects them all together.

Jason also appears to be more desperate in his search for funding for Darren. Jason reaches out to the campus radio station after learning that the station has received a large endowment. The far-reaching nature of Jason's efforts offers insight into how Jason views Darren's needs. Yes, it humorous that Jason is continuing to find something for Darren. The radio station is a strange choice, but Jason continues to make the effort. Sending Darren's work to Hanf demonstrates Jason's level of doubt. Combined it begins to send a message that Jason may have misjudged Darren's ability, but the consequence of his judgement remains to be seen.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jason tell Eleanor that Vivian will be turning down the residency?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jason compare literature and religion?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jason tell Janet he is happy that she is writing again?

## Vocabulary

tenuous, palavers, consign, burl, desultory, reverence, font, macabre, turgid, anachronism, assuage, bilious, myriad, dissolution, recidivists, whetstone, ruminative, churlish, despotic, vestigial, pedagogy, euphoria, maudlin, connubial, ersatz, ineffable, tirade, emeritus, panegyrics, cabal, aphasic, vicarious



# Letters 56-67

## Summary

Letter 56 is a letter to the Office of Mental Health and Wellness Intervention Team on behalf of Ida Lin-Smith, who was turned away for help earlier. Jason begs that they admit her to the program.

Letter 57 is to Ted with a recommendation for Gunnar Lang to receive a summer fellowship, which pays \$400. In the postscript Jason asks if it was a joke to suggest that he become the associate chair of the department.

Letter 58 is addressed to Flanders Nut House on behalf of Oliver Postiglione for a summer job. Jason remembers spending a summer at Glass Lake and going to Flanders Nut House. He asks that they hire Oliver so that he may one day have memories of “sun-washed tedium and a loss of innocence” (150).

Letter 59 is addressed to Dean Hinckler, recommending the renewal of Ted Boti’s position at English Department chair. Jason uses the letter to address the hiring freeze and the problem with writing being taught by geologists. He suggests that Ted be retained for two more years and that the university should not consider Jason as a viable replacement.

Letter 60 is a letter to Ted about a recommendation for Franklin Kentrell. Ted has asked for the recommendation three times, requesting that Jason not include any information that does not pertain to the recommendation. Jason leaves ellipses in place and thanks him for the opportunity to offer his feelings.

Letter 61 is to Ken. He tells him that Vivian’s six-figure sale has prompted “every novelist I’ve ever known – along with a few I’ve never met” (157) to ask for recommendations. He recommends Eileen Tolentino and Carlos DaFoy without explanation of their work because Ken did not take his recommendation for Darren. He tells Ken that Hanf gave an interview and discussed working on a project that was a retelling of *Bartleby*, the description of Darren’s novel. He discusses his marriage and how Janet is “healthier without me” (160).

Letter 62 is addressed to Carol, asking for funding for Darren Browles. Jason explains that he sent part of Darren’s manuscript to Hanf and that he is claiming from the confines of his nursing home that it is his next project. Jason is worried about Darren and asks that Carol offer funding.

Letter 63 is address to Dean Hinckler, writing a recommendation for Franklin Kentrell. Jason admits that Franklin is likely insane and eccentric. He mentions that Ted Boti is going to refuse to continue with the position of chair of the English Department. With regard to Franklin, Jason believes that he is the reason people avoid the English



Department and suggests that Franklin have a committee invented for him to keep him busy.

Letter 64 is to Thomas Schaffeler at the Forest Service, recommending Simone Barnes to a position of wildlife observation specialist.

Letter 65 is addressed to Carole informing her that Jason wants to establish a scholarship in Darren Browles name. Jason is offering \$30,000 to establish the scholarship from his own savings. He recalls the last time he saw Darren and how he talked about working on the novel. During their discussion, he confessed to Darren that the novel might not be very good and that it was as much his failure as well. Jason admits that this is the last recommendation he will write for Darren. He explains that one thing that was omitted from the obituary was that Darren burned his work before killing himself. He tells her that he will miss her as she moves on to her new job with one of Big 10 schools.

Letter 66 is a ballot for Faculty Senate in which Jason votes for Franklin Kentrell.

Letter 67 is addressed to Eleanor, recommending Max Wylie-Hall for a writer's residency. Jason thanks her for her donation to the Darren Browles Memorial Fellowship. He acknowledges that she was not the first to suggest that Jason saw himself in Darren. He talks about a reunion weekend and wishes that they had thought to have one before Madelyne died. He offers how he will feel reading Troy's new book and how the start of a new academic year offers a sense of promise.

## Analysis

Letter 56 has Jason once again recommending a student to the Mental Health and Wellness Team. It is the last couple weeks of school and the student in question has been turned away. He is concerned for her wellbeing. Jason appears to be able to identify students who have a need, yet as the remaining letters unfold, it is clear that Jason was not able to help one student: Darren Browles.

Jason has continued to try and secure funding for Darren. Having sent Darren's manuscript to Hanf backfired as Hanf gave an interview in which he claimed the idea as his own. He tries again to get Ken Doyle to reconsider representing Darren to no avail. Jason is getting shut down no matter what he tries.

By Letter 62, the reader learns that Jason is worried about Darren. Perhaps, he is worried solely about Darren creative endeavors and has missed any mental health problems he may be experiencing. Jason understand rejection is part of being a writer, but he seems to miss how dire the situation with Darren is.

In Letter 65 it is revealed that Darren has committed suicide. Jason remembers talking to him about working on the novel. It is possible that Jason's hope and optimism that something will work out for Darren clouded any clues Darren may have given him. With all the recommendations Jason makes, he does not make one to the Mental Health and





Wellness Intervention Team on behalf of Darren. While Jason may have clarity in hindsight, this was a recommendation Jason should have made.

Instead, Jason is thinking about how they talked about working on the novel. Perhaps, Jason was championing him on, but Darren reached a breaking point. That he chose to burn his manuscript before taking his own life demonstrates the anguish that the writing brought him. He may have been able to have been a successful author, but the odds were stacked against him.

Darren's fate is mentioned in a letter to Carol, the woman with whom Jason had an affair. It is fitting that he would choose to reveal this information in a letter to her. Carol becomes a symbol for his own failures, particularly his marriage.

Jason's decision to start a scholarship fund in Darren's name indicates, not only his guilt, but also hope that he may be able to help someone else in the future. Where Darren failed, the scholarship may help prevent that in someone else.

Jason acknowledges in a letter to Eleanor that he did see himself in Darren. It is not a stretch to make that connection. Through his letters, Jason had been advocating for Darren at the same time reminding people of the writer he had been in the past. Without Hanf recommending him, he may never have had any success as an author at all. It is possible that Troy was the one from the creative writing seminar who was the equivalent to Vivian Zelles. Regardless, Jason seems to crave the past. Perhaps, he is trying to gain some clarity on where he once was compared to where he is now. He suggests the reunion, knowing that with Madelyne dead the group can never get back together in its entirety.

Jason also understands that he has completely lost Janet. She has told him that she is healthier without him. Jason is forced to confront some of the toxic aspects of his personality. Darren's death appears to slow, if not halt, Jason's acerbic commentary in his letters. They remain personal, however, as is seen with his letters to Carol and Eleanor.

Changes in the department continue and it is even suggested that Jason is a candidate for chair of the English department because Ted Boti is stepping down. This gives Jason an opportunity to stop complaining through his letters and make an effort to create change in the department. He would certainly understand that doing so would not be an easy task, but as the novel concludes, Jason ends his letter Eleanor talking of hope for the new academic year.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jason not consider himself a viable replacement for chair of the English department?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jason start a scholarship in Darren's name?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jason suggest a reunion?

## Vocabulary

malady, lachrymose, enigmas, exegesis, tedium, abstruse, incipient, gesticulations, acolyte, prurience, umbrage, banal, coterie, miasma, senescence, conflated, vertiginous, ardent, caveats, debauchery, ingenuous, hyperbolic, ascetic



# Characters

## Jason T. Fitger

Jason T. Fitger is a tenured professor of creative writing at Payne University. The novel is told through the lens of his letters of recommendation for various students and colleagues.

He has published four novels, but none of his subsequent novels were as successful as his first. He is divorced from Janet and had affairs with Eleanor and Carol.

Frustrated by his creative and professional life, he is unable to filter his thoughts on the state of the university. He uses the letters as a way to speak to a captive audience.

He wants to reconnect with his ex-wife Janet, see Darren succeed, and advocate for the English Department and students. He thinks the graduate program should continue, that students should be adequately prepared for what awaits them in the job market after graduation, and that internships should be paid.

## Darren Browles

Darren Browles is one of Jason's students and advisees. He has written a novel which is a reinterpretation of Melville's *Bartelby the Scribner*.

He is in need of funding and has Jason write letters of recommendation on his behalf.

He is repeatedly turned down for residences. He ends up committing suicide and burns his manuscript before doing so.

A scholarship is set up by Jason in Darren's name.

## Janet Matthias

Janet Matthias is Jason's ex-wife. They meet for lunch twice a year, on their wedding anniversary and on the anniversary of their divorce.

She works in the admissions office of Payne University Law School. She also serves on the Diversity Committee with Janet. Jason attempts to make amends with Janet through his letters, but she knows she is better off without him.

She attended the same creative writing seminar as Jason, Ken, Troy, Eleanor, and Madelyne. By the end of the novel, Janet has told Jason that she has started to write again.



## **Eleanor Acton**

Eleanor Acton is the director of the Bentham Literary Residency Program. She also serves on the Diversity Committee with Janet. She also knows Jason from the creative writing seminar when they were in graduate school. She and Jason had a sexual relationship at one time.

She donates to Darren's scholarship. She repeatedly denied Darren a residency and called his work derivative. She suggests that Jason may have seen himself in Darren.

## **Carol Samarkind**

Carol Samarkind works as the Associate Director of the Student Services/Fellowship Office. She and Jason had an affair, as suggested in Jason's novel *Transfer of Affection*, which led to Jason's divorce from Janet.

Jason sabotages Carol's chance for a job at a Bible college. Later, Carol takes an administrative job at a Big Ten school.

## **Theodore Boti**

Theodore "Ted" Boti is a sociologist and the current chair of the English Department.

## **Ken Doyle**

Ken Doyle is Jason's literary agent, working at Hautman and Doyle Literary Agency. He also attended the creative writing seminar with Janet, Eleanor, Troy, and Jason. He negotiated Vivian Zelles' book sale. He does not accept Darren as a client.

## **Vivian Zelles**

Vivian Zelles is a student who applied to both medical and law school. She becomes one of Ken's clients and sells her first book for a six-figure deal. She is given the Bentham Literary residency, but is expected to turn the residency down.

## **Franklin Kentrell**

Franklin Kentrell is a member of the English faculty. He is not well-liked. Jason suggests he be put on a committee of his own to get him away from the rest of the department.



## Troy Larpenteur

Troy Larpenteur is another member of the creative writing seminar group. His first novel was well-received critically, but it is out of print. His pregnant wife was killed in a lightning strike, which prompted him to move to India for twelve years. He has not returned to the United States. He is working on another novel.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Darren Browles

Darren Browles symbolizes Jason's frustration with his academic career and how his literary career has stalled.

## Letters of Recommendation

Letters of Recommendation symbolize possibility and hope. Jason hopes to get his points across through the letters, which he would otherwise consider a waste of time.

## Construction

Construction symbolizes the changes taking place in the English Department from the hiring freeze, department cuts, and search for a new chair. They all represent the disarray.

## A Literary Agent

A Literary Agent symbolizes the possibility that a voice is able to be heard. The voice comes from writers such as Darren or Vivian. Jason's voice now comes from getting his points across in his letters.

## The Affair

The Affair symbolizes Jason being torn between his academic work and his creative work. Carol represents the university taking him away from his creative work, which is represented by Janet.

## Jason's Novels

Jason's Novels symbolize his body of work outside of the academy. As his books declined in how they were received, his body of creative work has shifted to letters of recommendation.

## The Scholarship

The Scholarship symbolizes Jason's furthering of Darren's writing career after Darren's death. Jason was unable to help Darren's literary career while Darren was alive.

## **Troy**

Troy symbolizes Jason's past and how he is reflecting on when they were all in seminar together, the publication of his novels, and his relationships with Janet and later Carol.

## **Reunion**

Reunion symbolizes how Jason cannot get back what was lost. He regrets not doing it before Madelyne died. Now that she is gone, the group can never truly reunite.

## **Online Forms**

Online Forms symbolize Jason's reluctance to move forward. Instead of embracing the new technology and what the future may bring, he is stuck in the past.

# Settings

## Payne University

Payne University is where Jason is a full-time professor. While working there, he writes his letters of recommendation.

## Hautman and Doyle Literary Agency

Hautman and Doyle Literary Agency is where Ken Doyle works as an agent. He represents Jason and later Vivian. It is located in New York City. Jason refers the writing students with potential to the agency.

## Bentham Literary Residency

Bentham Literary Residency is part of Payne University. It is run by Eleanor Acton. It is where Jason tries to get Darren funding to finish his novel.

## Williard Hall

Willard Hall is where Jason's office is located. It is under construction and once housed the Economics Department.

## Office of Mental Health and Wellness

Office of Mental Health and Wellness is where Jason recommends two students, Wyatt Innes and Ida-Lin Smith.





# Themes and Motifs

## Hope

The author uses the theme of Hope as an undercurrent in the novel as a reflection of the unbridled optimism a writer must maintain in order to achieve success.

Hopeful or optimistic may not be the first words that come to mind given Jason's character. His comments can be cutting and inappropriate and be more apt to cause problems than help. At his core, Jason needs to be optimistic, even if he maintains a healthy dose of reality.

Were it not for Jason's hopefulness, he would never have spent so much time writing recommendations for Darren. Yes, writing letters of recommendation are part and parcel for his job, but he still has the discretion as to whom he is going to write them for. When Jason writes about Darren, he believes in whom he is recommending.

He also believes in giving people the opportunity to be helped. He recommends two students who have exhibited questionable behavior to the Mental Health and Wellness Intervention Team. He is hopeful that they will get the help needed to get them back on track. The student likely most at risk and in need of an intervention is, ironically, Darren. Jason may feel that literary success is what will help Darren overcome whatever difficulties he is experiencing or exhibiting to Jason. In this way, Jason's recommendations are how he is trying to help Darren, instead of recommending him to the Mental Health Office.

His hope for Darren's success clouds his view of Darren's work. Jason convinces himself that his relationships with others, including Eleanor, Janet, Carol, and Ken, have influenced their decisions against Darren. Further, Jason's hope for Darren inhibits his ability to see Vivian's potential, which plays out over the course of the novel.

Following the news of Darren's suicide, Jason decides to establish a scholarship in Darren's name. Doing so provides hope for future students. At his final letter comes to a close, Jason remarks that "there is nothing more promising or hopeful than the start of the academic cycle" (180). He sees a chance for renewal and improvement and maintains the mindset to accept its possibility. That is not to suggest that Jason will not continue to complain and make inappropriate comments, but he is capable of acknowledging the possibility of change.

## State of Liberal Arts in Academia

The author uses Jason's letters of recommendation as a platform to address ongoing issues in academia with regard to liberal arts programs and, in particular, English programs.



Jason has been in the academic world long enough to understand that drastic changes are happening. He witnesses two graduate programs being closed to new students, and suspects that the graduate creative writing seminar he is currently teaching will be the last time it is taught. This is in spite of the Vivian Zelles being one of the students in the class, who is clearly poised for success, which would bring good attention to the program.

From the outset, Jason is aware that the over-reliance on adjunct faculty is causing “disenfranchisement” (94), as well as retiring faculty. While it is not known if enrollment figures are down, the university is not investing in what the English department has to offer. It has gone so far as to put a sociology professor in the position of chair of the department. Having someone outside of the discipline does not bode well for the department. An outsider might not recognize shortcoming in the department or be equipped to advocate for changes that need to happen.

Jason estimates that he has written over 1300 letters of recommendation during his academic career, but does not know to what end. He sees them a *de rigueur* for the job, but does not see that they benefit the student. Instead of teaching or researching or writing, faculty are left writing perfunctory letters instead.

He also believes that students are being done a disservice by not being informed of what awaits them beyond the academy. Being inside the academic bubble gives the false impression that life in academia or in creative writing may be an easy path. Instead, what awaits students are unpaid internships, teaching assistant positions, a saturated job market, and a floundering publishing industry, all with the burden of student debt. Jason thinks this needs to change, but he is not sure on how to make these changes. This may speak to why he is reluctant to take on an administrative role in the department.

## Loyalty and Infidelity

The author uses Loyalty and Infidelity to demonstrate the conflicted nature Jason has about his role in making recommendations.

Jason spends the entirety of the novel attempting to find funding for Darren Browles. He tries the obvious resources, such as the Bentham Literary Residency. The Bentham Literary Residency is where he begins his search for Darren, and this is likely at Darren’s request. As Darren’s advisor, Jason may have made a case for him to apply, but this is likely the recommendation Darren requested. Beyond that, Jason takes every available opportunity to advocate for Darren. As his attempts prove unsuccessful, he tries more creative ways of finding funding, such as when he contacts the treatment center for people with PTSD and the radio station.

While he is faithful to Darren, he also recommends others to the residency, including Vivian Zelles, who ultimately receives the residency, only to turn it down. He



recommends both students to his agent Ken Doyle, who accepts Vivian, but rejects Darren.

An obvious way in which Jason's actions express the theme of Loyalty and Infidelity is in his personal relationships. Jason and Janet were once married. Their marriage ended after Jason's affair with Carol was discovered. While he was unfaithful to Janet, he tries to maintain, if not rekindle a relationship with her. His affair with Carol may have ended, but he is dedicated enough to her to write her recommendation when she is trying to find new employment. What is peculiar about his loyalty is in how he sabotages her chances for getting the job by detailing their affair in the letter. He does not do so behind Carol's back, so to speak. He cc's her in the letter and leaves a post script for her explaining that it okay for her to hate him because she deserves a better.

Jason also shows loyalty and infidelity to the English department. He cares enough about the state of the department that he takes whatever opportunity to address the powers that be about the issues at hand, whether it is construction, funding cuts, or cutting off graduate programs. He may not get along with many people in the department, or even the university, but his intention is to better the school and the opportunities for students. He believes it is wrong that interns and teaching assistants are unpaid and that students are graduating without a clear sense of the job market they are facing. Also, they are graduating with the burden of high debt for their education.

## Success and Failure

The theme of Success and Failure is used to illustrate the unpredictability of success in academia and authorship.

The collection of letters demonstrates a multitude of successes and failures. Over the course of Jason's academic career, he has seen his own success and failure. He published his first novel early on and had three subsequent novels published. His first novel was the most successful. He tried to stretch himself creatively with his second and third novel, but those books were critical failures. He returned to the subject of his first book and mined his personal experiences to try and recreate what he had in the first novel. The novel was not successful, but it came with a further price: the failure of his marriage.

He is in frequent contact with his literary agent, but it rarely involves his own writing. Instead, he is recommending other for possible representation. Two people of note that he recommends are Darren Browles and Vivian Zelles. Darren is rejected and Vivian represented, resulting in a successful book deal.

It is no secret that Jason would prefer that Darren be the success story of the two. He takes every opportunity available to him recommend Darren for a residency, funding, or representation to help support his burgeoning writing career. Darren is repeatedly rejected and Jason takes some ownership in it. He believes in Darren, but the others do



not seem to see the same remarkable qualities in his work. Jason sees the rejections as pointed at himself instead based on the merit of Darren's writing.

Jason also believes that the university is failing students by not preparing them for what awaits them after college. Outside of telling students outright that things may seem bleak, he offers no suggestion for how to remedy the situation. Complicating this is Vivian's success. Getting published is difficult for an unknown author, but landing a six-figure deal for a first time author is almost impossible. Vivian appears to have done so with relative ease. This will likely attract more students to the university, but the graduate writing program is being shut down.

## Jealousy

The theme of Jealousy is used by the author to illustrate how competition affects success in a field that is totally subjective.

Jealousy can be obvious reaction. Jason sees funding being spent on other departments, while budget cuts are affecting his own. If the money is being routed to the Economics department because they are generating more revenue, this makes sense from a business perspective. However, Jason feels that the English department should be more than about being money.

Jason understands that writing carries over into other disciplines, but he is watching as adjuncts are being brought in to teach classes. As part-time employees, they are not seen as being invested in the health of the department outside of funding for their positions. The adjuncts may be jealous of the tenure-track positions of the full-time faculty.

Jason sees the construction of the new offices wing for the Economics department as the school treating the department as more important. Jason complains about the plumbing and the potential dangers of exposed wires, but his complaints fall on deaf ears. Jason may be viewed as exhibiting jealousy for what others are getting.

Just as Darren and Vivian were likely rivals in their creative writing class, Jason and Troy were probably in competition when they were in a graduate seminar together as young students. Both men ended up publishing novels after graduation, but Troy achieved higher critical acclaim. While Jason went on to publish other novels, Troy was sidelined by personal tragedy. Now that Troy has returned to the States to try and reestablish himself as an author, Jason is conflicted about cheering Troy on and being jealous that Troy is doing something he is not. Jason spends most of his time writing letters of recommendation. He reflects on his past accomplishments as an author, but he does not appear to working on anything new. Troy's return may be stirring up feelings of an old rivalry.



# Styles

## Point of View

Dear Committee Members is written from the point of view of Jason Fitger, a middle-aged male narrator. He is expressing his grievances against the world of academia through the medium of letters of recommendation. The novel is a first-person narrative in the epistolary style. Jason is a well-educated college professor and published author.

Jason is filled with frustration, regret, guilt, hope, and desperation. All of these emotions can be seen in the series of letters. Jason is self-aware and sometimes uses the letters as a confessional. He also uses the letters to intervene on the behalf of others, such as his repeated attempts to find Darren Browles funding. In contrast, he writes a letter that will assuredly prevent Carol from being hired for a job that he thinks is a bad fit for her.

Jason is a reliable narrator, but his motives are questionable. He does advocate for his students and sometimes for students whom he has just met. He is quick to point out these bits of information, which will surely shape how the letters are received. He also uses the letters to communicate with his ex-wife and his ex-lover. The letters offer him a platform to communicate with them when they may otherwise not take his calls or see him.

Jason's worldview is well-established in academia. He has distanced himself from relationships with others. He is isolated. Throughout the novel, he does not interact directly with anyone.

## Language and Meaning

Since the novel is told strictly through letters, there is no dialogue. Jason does take a sarcastic tone, however, and makes smart remarks throughout his letters. His tone is apt to be taken as biting and playful.

The language is accessible, but it is indicative of one who has spent the better part of their career in academia. His vocabulary is appropriate for a college-educated individual. Some academic jargon is used, such as pedagogy.

The novel takes a confessional tone. Jason's past interferes with his present. He expresses anger, sarcasm, and bitterness throughout. However, at times he is apologetic. He regrets not keeping in touch with the others he went to graduate school with and regrets his affair.

The novel is a one-sided conversation. However, Jason's decision to use other people's letters of recommendation suggest that he is not creating a narrative that makes him look good. In fact, the letters make him look bad. Yet, what has transpired in the past is



viewed only through Jason's lens and the reader must infer other events and how individuals have reacted.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is a series of sixty-seven letters composed over the course of one academic year.

Of the sixty-seven letters, which are numbered for the purposes of this study guide and are not numbered in the actual novel, most letters average two pages. Some are less than one page, others are longer.

Jason signs off his letters in a variety of ways: Jason T. Fitger, Jason Fitger, Jay, etc. These vary based on the type of letter he is sending and to whom. The address blocks also contain sarcasm. He notes that it is Groundhog Day on a letter dated February 2 and notes the Ides of March on the March 15 letter.

Several letters have postscripts. A few have footnotes. Some of the letters are online forms. The questions from the forms are provided along with the text of Jason's response. Typically, he responds in letter form, rather than conforming to the style of the online tool.



## Quotes

You'll soon find that I make myself unpleasant enough to be safe from nomination."  
-- Jason (Letter 2 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jason presents himself to others and manages to keep his distance.

The LOR has become a rampant absurdity, usurping the place of the quick consultation and the two-minute phone call – not to mention the teaching and research that faculty were supposedly hired to perform."  
-- Jason (Letter 4 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The quote gives insight into how Jason senses that the recommendation letters are more formality than functional.

And to begin this recommendation on the proper footing: no, I will not fill out the inane computerized form that is intended to precede or supplant this letter;"  
-- Jason (Letter 7 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote shows Jason's unwillingness to adapt to the changes in the department, from the construction to the online forms.

Mr. Trent received a C- in my expository writing class last spring, which – given my newly streamlined and increasingly generous grading criteria – is quite the accomplishment."  
-- Jason (Letter 10 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote addresses how Jason has had to adapt to student performance, rather than students rising to the challenge of the curriculum.

Eleanor Acton – the new director – and I are long-ago classmates and onetime friends, and I've sent her several recommendations on behalf of a student novelist, Darren Browles, but have received no positive reply."  
-- Jason (Letter 24 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jason is calling into question whether his personal relationships have any influence over the efficacy of his recommendations.

Alphabetical Stars' and 'Save Me for Later' manifested my attempts to 'stretch myself' and to demonstrate my range as a writer: I didn't want to be typecast as a gossipy satirist limited to the material in his own backyard."  
-- Jason (Letter 28 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The quote shows Jason's self-awareness as a writer, acknowledging the problems writing about personal experiences can bring.



Eleanor goaded and disliked me even before she slept with me.”  
-- Jason (Letter 30 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** The quote alludes to an intimate relationship with Eleanor that indicates Eleanor’s difficulty dealing with Jason.

Where do poets – with the readership in the low double figures – get off exhibiting that kind of flagrant self-regard?”  
-- Jason (Letter 37 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** The quote shows how Jason marginalizes an even smaller part of the writing community even as he is frustrated with the marginalization of the English department at large.

In short, I was disloyal and selfish.”  
-- Jason (Letter 48 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The quote alludes to Jason’s willingness to admit he was wrong.

Literature has served me faithfully (no pun intended) as an ersatz religion, and I would wager that the pursuit of the ineffable via aesthetics in various forms has saved as many foundering souls as a belief in god.”  
-- Jason (Letter 50 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jason values literature and how he believes it should be regarded by others.

As for me, I am probably the least likely associate chair you could find. No one would listen to me; I seldom listen to myself.”  
-- Jason (Letter 57 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** The quote deflects Jason as a candidate for an administrative role because he may fear he would not be able to handle the responsibility.

I have missed her terribly every day and have told her so (proclaiming my continued affection inadvertently once, in a public e-mail), but she claims she is healthier without me and remains unmoved.”  
-- Jason (Letter 61 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The quote illustrates how Jason maintains feelings for Janet and that despite his efforts to reconnect with her, she knows what is best for her.