

Dope Sick Study Guide

Dope Sick by Walter Dean Myers

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Plot Summary

Dope Sick is a novel by acclaimed writer Walter Dean Myers. In this novel, Lil J is running from the police because he has been involved in a drug deal that ended with the shooting of an undercover cop. Lil J's partner in crime, Rico, has told police that Lil J is the shooter. This leaves Lil J convinced that his life is over as he knows it. However, when Lil J hides in an abandoned apartment building, he meets a man named Kelly who suggests that he might be able to go back and change something about his life, to prevent him from facing life in prison as a cop killer. Dope Sick is a novel about a disadvantaged life and the choices made that can lead to prosperity or prison.

Lil J is shot in the arm and hurting. As he walks on the street, a cop takes notice of him. Lil J runs away and takes refuge inside an abandoned apartment building. Lil J wants to make his way to the roof, thinking he could out wait the cops there. Lil J is a wanted man, having been involved in a drug deal gone wrong the day before that ended in the shooting of an undercover cop. Lil J's partner, Rico, has already been picked up by police and he has fingered Lil J as the shooter even though Rico is the one who pulled the trigger. For this reason, Lil J knows that his future is pretty much set in stone unless he can somehow escape the net the police have cast for him.

Lil J is unable to open the door to the roof in the abandoned building. He retreats to an apartment a floor below where he hears the noise of a television. Inside the room, he meets a man named Kelly who appears to have some sort of special television that allows him to show Lil J's flight from the police just moments before. Kelly asks Lil J what one thing he would change about his past in order to avoid the mess he is now facing. Lil J insists that he would change what happened in the drug bust. Kelly shows Lil J a scene on the television that appears to be the future. It shows Lil J on the roof of that very building, preparing to commit suicide as the police storm the building.

Kelly begins asking Lil J questions about his past. Reluctant at first, Lil J finally tells Kelly about the drug bust and how it went wrong when he realized there was something not quite right about the man buying the drugs from them. Rico, who had been high on drugs siphoned off of the product they were selling, had gone back and shot the man, whom they had discovered was a cop, after he and Lil J were already free and able to walk away. Then, as they fled the area, another undercover cop in the yard of the building where the deal had gone down shot at them, hitting Lil J in the arm.

Kelly asks Lil J repeatedly if he is a drug user and Lil J finally admits that he has been using drugs for a while. Then Lil J tells Kelly about his girlfriend, Lauryn, and the child they have together. Lil J is happy about the baby and willing to be a father to him, but Lauryn's mother will not allow Lil J in her apartment, effectively keeping him from seeing the child. Not only this, but Lauryn's mother is trying to marry her daughter off to an older man who has a good job. It seems Lauryn understands her mother's efforts and is contemplating going along with them.



Lil J then tells Kelly how he spent time in jail in Houston for a botched attempt to rob a convenience store with Rico. Lil J also talks about Lauryn's unhappiness with his drug problem and how the alcoholism of Lil J's mother has had a profound effect on his life. In the end, Kelly pushes Lil J to make a decision about what one thing he would change in his life. When Lil J continues to insist he would only change the drug deal, Kelly suddenly fires on the cops in the street below them and rushes out the front door, getting himself killed in a gunfight with police. Lil J is suddenly free to go home and continue his life.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Chapter 1. Lil J is in terrible pain from a gunshot wound in his arm. Lil J is pretty sure the bone is broken and that he might suffer an infection if he does not go to a hospital soon. However, the police are searching for him in connection with a drug deal gone bad and the shooting of an undercover cop. Lil J's partner in crime, Rico, has already been arrested and is claiming Lil J is the shooter.

At the moment, Lil J is quickly walking away from a cop who tried to approach him on the street. Lil J slips into an abandoned building and makes his way up the stairs, a gun in his hand. Lil J thinks if he can make it to the roof he will be okay. However, the door to the roof will not open. Lil J turns around and goes to an apartment where he heard the sounds of a television, hoping the homeless guy inside will know how he might get to the roof or some other way out of the building. Lil J holds his gun on the homeless man, but instead of being afraid or answering his questions, the man shows Lil J himself on the television, struggling as he walks down the street toward that very building. The man, Kelly, then shows Lil J the local news on which the announcer claims that Lil J is wanted in the shooting of a cop. Then Kelly shows Lil J what appears to be the future, Lil J on the roof preparing to commit suicide as the police storm the building.

Chapter 2. Kelly shows Lil J on the television the morning of the day before, the one day Lil J claims he would like to change in order to change his life. On the television, Lil J's mother wakes him early and asks him to go to the clinic to pick up her medications. Lil J is planning to go to the Home Depot to apply for a job with his friend, Maurice. Lil J wants a regular job so that he can give his mother some money and send her to North Carolina to live with her mother. Lil J sits with his mother for a few minutes, then goes and meets Maurice. When they arrive at the Home Depot, there is such a long line waiting to interview for six or seven positions that Lil J becomes disillusioned. Lil J decides to leave, but Maurice stays.

Lil J calls a friend of his, Rico, who had offered him a job to make quick cash. Rico meets Lil J a few hours later and they go to see a local drug dealer, Dusty. Dusty gives them some drugs and tells them to meet a buyer that afternoon and bring back the money. Since they have time to waste before the deal, Rico and Lil J go back to Rico's apartment where Rico opens the drugs and takes some off the top for himself. Lil J also takes a little, even though he claims to Kelly that he is not a heavy drug user.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The author introduces the main character of the novel, Lil J, in the first chapter of the novel by showing Lil J in the worst circumstances of his life. Lil J is shot and hurting, running from the police for a crime in which he is only partially involved. Lil J claims he



should not be running from the police as a cop killer because he did not shoot the cop, his partner Rico did. Right away the reader sees Lil J as the kind of person who feels that life is against him; therefore, he becomes a victim rather than a fighter. Lil J blames everyone else for his problems and feels he is simply a victim of circumstances.

As Lil J runs from the police, he comes into contact with a man who seems to have a magic television that can show Lil J segments from his past or his future. As Lil J desperately searches for a way out of his situation, this man, Kelly, shows Lil J images on the television of his future, which shows Lil J committing suicide as the police bear down on him, and his past, the day of the drug deal that has left Lil J in this situation. Kelly, who seems to represent a guardian angel or perhaps God himself, asks Lil J what he would change about his life to make his current situation better. Lil J claims the only thing he would change is the drug deal. So Kelly makes Lil J tell him the story of the drug deal, watching it on television at the same time Lil J tells it.

This novel seems to be one about redemption. Kelly seems to represent an opportunity at redemption for Lil J, if Lil J will simply recognize it for what it is and jump at the chance.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3. Kelly presses Lil J to continue his story of the drug deal. Lil J, however, is worried about the police on the street below and has Kelly show him the street once again. Finally, Lil J continues his story. Lil J claims that he was worried about Rico taking drugs from the bags for the sale, afraid of what would happen if Dusty found out. However, Lil J had not tried to stop Rico. Kelly interrupts, asking Lil J again about his drug habits. Lil J claims he was not high and that he does not shoot heroine like Rico did. Kelly clearly does not believe him, but he again tells Lil J he has the opportunity to change one thing about his past and asks what it would be. Lil J again insists on the drug deal.

Lil J tells Kelly how he and Rico had gone to meet the buyer for the drugs. Right away Lil J thinks there is something wrong because the guy looks too healthy to be a user. Lil J says something to Rico and Rico agrees. They decide to take the money and the drugs. They handcuff the cop to the banister in the abandoned building with his own cuffs and turn to leave, but Rico decides to go back for the guy's wallet. Lil J hears the shots. Then they run out the back of the building and run into another cop in the yard. They exchange gunfire and Lil J is shot in the arm. They separate, but later Rico calls Lil J to give him his cut of the pay off. Finally Lil J admits to Kelly he had been using that day, but insists it was not much. Kelly then asks again what Lil J would change about that day. Lil J says he would change calling Rico for the job. Then Lil J tells Kelly he has a child.

Chapter 4. On the television, Lil J sees himself and Maurice standing outside a jujitsu studio, watching a class. They had wanted to join the class, but Lil J changes his mind when he sees how good they are. As they walk away, Lil J tells Maurice how his baby's grandmother will not allow him into her apartment, effectively cutting him off from his infant son, Brian. On the day the grandmother said that, Lil J and his girl, Lauryn, had a fight. Lauryn's mother wants her to marry an older man with a steady job at the same grocery store where Lauryn's mother works. When Lil J had not objected to this idea, Lauryn had become angry and had not defended Lil J to her mother.

Lil J and Lauryn had talked about having a family during their relationship, before the pregnancy, but it was always in the future in a time when they could take care of themselves. Despite this, Lil J still recalls being happy when he learned Lauryn was happy, and beyond ecstasy the first time he held his infant son. Lil J does not tell Kelly that he used drugs that day, the day he had been banned from his child, dealing with the stress in his life the only way he knew how. He does tell him how he wanted to buy his son a bassinette, but could not afford it.



Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, Lil J finishes telling Kelly how he spotted that the drug buyer was a cop and told Rico. He also claims that Rico had gone back and shot the cop. However, Lil J also reveals belatedly that he did do drugs that day, leaving the reader wondering just how reliable this narrator truly is. The reader must wonder if it is possible that Lil J really did shoot the cop and is simply confused because of the drugs he used before the deal.

Lil J then tells Kelly about his child. Lil J has a girlfriend, Lauryn, who appears to be a strong, intelligent young girl who could have made something of her life. Instead, Lauryn fell in love with Lil J and now has an infant son to care for. Lil J has been banned from the baby's life by Lauryn's mother and Lauryn's mother is trying to get her daughter to marry a man who is more responsible and has a job. Lil J has already admitted to difficulties in finding steady work in his life, hence his decision to take the drug deal. The reader has to sympathize with the mother of a teenage daughter who sees her daughter ruining her life with a boy who is a drug user and who refuses to get a full time job. The reader will note, however, that Lil J takes the grandmother's refusal to see his own child as just another excuse to use drugs.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter 5. Kelly asks Lil J if he would change having his baby, but Lil J quickly refutes that idea. Lil J becomes angry and threatens Kelly, but a trip to the bathroom and some alone time helps Lil J calm down. However, Lil J then begins to worry that Kelly might be calling the police, so he rushes back to the room. Kelly asks Lil J if he wants to call Maurice and find out about the Home Depot job. It is then that Lil J admits he left the Home Depot not because of the long line, but because he is afraid that a juvenile record in Texas might have kept him from getting the job and he did not want Maurice to find out about it. When Kelly presses Lil J about the record in Texas, Lil J tells him how he once wanted to be someone else for a while, to remake his life.

Lil J is told by the principal of his school that he will not graduate with his class because of failing grades. Depressed and determined to find a new path, Lil J decides to go with Rico to Texas instead of sticking around to watch his class graduate without him. They take the bus to Texas, harassing other passengers and getting kicked off one bus. Once there, Rico takes care of some business and then they party for a while. However, they run out of money for the return trip to New York, so Rico comes up with a plan to rob a convenience store to get money for plane tickets. However, Rico, high on drugs, discharges his gun as he walks through the door of the store. A couple of customers grab both Rico and Lil J before they can escape. Lil J tells the court officials he is sixteen and gives a false name. Lil J is sentenced to one hundred and eighty days, ending up serving one hundred and twenty days for good behavior. Then, on the way home, Lil J meets a girl who teaches him how to shoplift and get a high from almost anything.

Chapter 6. Lil J worries about the police on the street and the game that Kelly is playing. Kelly accuses Lil J of feeling sorry for himself and Lil J insists no one can understand unless they are in his place. Kelly then pushes Lil J to finish his story. Lil J tells Kelly that when he had come home from Texas, it was like his mother had not noticed he was gone. Kelly gives Lil J his cellphone and invites him to call his mother. When he does, Lil J's mother tells him how the cops had searched their house and she is worried about cleaning up after them. Lil J's mother then tells him to get a lawyer before giving himself up. Lil J then tells Kelly he was once a rapper.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Lil J tells Kelly how he failed high school and did not graduate with his class. Again Lil J goes into a speech about how the establishment holds back black men and how if he does not graduate he will just become another one of those men who stand out on the corners, using drugs and watching their lives pass them by. To avoid this, Lil J had gone



to Texas with Rico to change his life. Instead, Lil J ended up spending six months in juvenile detention.

Lil J continuously talks about how society holds him down, how he cannot get a break. However, the reader sees through Lil J's victim identity and sees that quite often his choices are what keeps him down, not the establishment — like the fact that Lil J once served time after going with Rico to Texas and attempting to rob a store. The reader might think that Lil J would have learned from that experience, but instead he decides to do a drug deal with this same accident prone crook. Lil J's choices leave much to be desired.

In Chapter 6, Lil J calls his mother. Lil J has already revealed that his mother is a sickly woman who seems to avoid reality. In this phone call, the reader can see motherly concern in the woman, but it is numb as though she is seeing things from a great distance. However, the reader cannot deny Lil J's deep affection for his mother. His mother is the only family Lil J appears to have and the only family, besides his girlfriend and son, who matter to him. This seems to be a redeeming factor in Lil J's personality, but the situation also leaves the reader wondering how much responsibility the alcoholism of Lil J's mother bears for his current situation.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Chapter 7. Lil J is seen on the television rapping a rap song he has written that is filled with anger against the white establishment. Lil J is part of a rap group at school that is supposed to present the school with rap songs filled with hope and optimism; therefore, the group is unhappy with what Lil J presents. When they offer their objections, Lil J storms out. Lil J runs into Lauryn and she correctly guesses that Lil J is going to buy drugs. Lauryn insists on going with him even though she is something of a straight arrow, a straight A student who has never used drugs. However, Lauryn hopes to discourage Lil J from using by forcing him to use in front of her. It does not work. Lil J buys the drugs and does them in Lauryn's kitchen. As his high comes on, Lauryn announces she might be pregnant.

Chapter 8. Lil J tells Kelly how he kind of broke it off with Lauryn after the day in an attempt to break his drug habit. Lil J insists to Kelly that someone cannot understand a drug habit unless they have had one. Then Lil J tells Kelly how he had quit the rap group, but planned an ambush at their first concert at the school. Lil J tells Kelly that he and another boy had begun their own rap in the middle of the concert. However, the teacher mentoring the original group had thrown Lil J and his partner out and sent them to the principal.

Lil J hears a siren outside and begins to worry about what is happening. Kelly shows him the future on the television again, and Lil J becomes upset at seeing himself preparing to commit suicide. Kelly then questions Lil J on his drug use again and Lil J admits to injecting heroine despite his earlier denials. Lil J then talks about how he has always had this feeling of deep fear, something that began when he had been a small child with no clear cause. Lil J says he thinks his mother felt the same way, perhaps explaining her alcohol use.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Lil J talks about how he had created rap songs filled with rage that discussed his feeling of being forced into the gutter by the establishment. When not allowed to rap these songs at school, Lil J had turned to drugs. Lauryn is clearly an intelligent, strong girl who could have been a lawyer, but instead fell in love with Lil J and had tried to help him overcome his drug addiction. Lil J admits to wanting to stop the drugs, but instead he had become more and more addicted, finally injecting heroine directly into his veins despite his determination to never become that person. The author is showing the progression of drug addiction at the same time he shows the denial in which Lil J lives as a drug addict.



As the narration continues, Lil J reveals how he really reacted to Lauryn's news of her pregnancy. At first Lil J claims that he had been happy, but now he reveals that he had been high when Lauryn had given him the news. It is an ominous beginning for the child and for Lil J's future. Lil J could have changed then, could have stopped the drugs, given up his anger and rage against an entity he cannot even define, but he had not. This is what led him to his current situation. However, Lil J remains determined not to change any of this.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Chapter 9. Kelly takes Lil J back to when he is thirteen and the principal tells him that his previously good grades are suddenly failing grades. The principal asks what is happening and offers help, but Lil J becomes angry and refuses to answer. However, Lil J reveals to Kelly that the night before this meeting Lil J had had to help his drunk mother, who had been passed out in the entry way to their building leading up to their apartment. That morning, his mother had not even remembered coming home. After school that day, Lil J decides not to go home.

Chapter 10. Lil J asks Kelly if he has any drugs. Kelly questions his desire to do drugs. Lil J tries to explain to Kelly why he needs the drugs, but Kelly loses interest and goes to the bathroom, leaving Lil J alone with the television remote. Lil J is frightened by the remote and of making the television show him something he does not want to see, so he puts it down and calls for Kelly to come back. When Kelly comes back, Lil J apologizes for his anger. Lil J then tells Kelly how that night, when he was thirteen, he had wanted to sleep in the park, but had gotten scared so he had gone to sleep on the roof of the building where he had lived with his mother. However, he had gotten cold there and had finally gone to bed.

Lil J and Kelly hear a helicopter outside and Lil J notices that sunlight is beginning to filter through the window shades. Lil J asks Kelly to see what is happening. They watch the news and learn the cop is still struggling to survive and see his wife talk about the impact of the shooting on their family. Lil J cries and Kelly accuses him of being a hypocrite. Lil J then asks to see himself on the roof again, but becomes upset as he watches himself prepare to commit suicide.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

The reader finally gets some real insight into the events that put Lil J on the path to self-destruction. Lil J's mother is an alcoholic who often drinks to the point of blackout causing him, as a child and barely able to care for himself, to become her caretaker. It is a difficult situation that causes Lil J to begin failing in school. However, rather than accepting the help of his principal and teachers at school, he hides the truth in fear of further hurting his mother. This is where Lil J's anger toward the establishment began, the root of many of his problems, and perhaps the root of his own addiction problem.

The night is almost over and it is becoming urgent for Lil J to decide what to do about his current situation. Lil J continues to claim that he is not the shooter and that he did nothing wrong, despite being in on a drug deal. Lil J also claims that he does not want to change anything about his life but rather his participation in the drug deal. This leaves

Lil J with few choices and it seems that the future Kelly has shown him of himself on the roof with a gun to his head, is almost a certainty.



Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary

Chapter 11. Kelly tells Lil J about seeing a guy commit suicide by cop on television once. Lil J then gets them a couple of sodas and he and Kelly begin to talk about Lil J's options. Lil J recalls a time when he was in third grade and on top of the world. What Lil J had made had gotten gold stars in class that day, but when his father had picked him up for a birthday dinner, he had had his other son with him. Lil J's father had had his other son show off some award he had gotten to Lil J. No one had ever looked at Lil J's gold stars and his father seemed to have forgotten it was Lil J's birthday.

Chapter 12. Kelly again shows Lil J the news and they see the cop's wife make a statement with one of her children at her side. Then Kelly shows Lil J his mother at home, asleep on her bed. At first Lil J worries she is dead, but she is only resting. Kelly again asks Lil J what he wants to change about his life, what he sees when he looks in the mirror, how he might make his life better. Lil J continues to insist all he wants to change is his involvement in the drug deal. Then Kelly gets angry with Lil J, hands him the remote, and tells him to deal with it himself.

Kelly eventually comes back and Lil J gives him back the remote. Lil J then tells Kelly how he had gone to Rico's the day of the drug deal to get his money and to find out if Rico really had shot the cop. When Rico had admitted he had shot the cop, Lil J had gone into the bathroom to vomit. Lil J thinks that Rico switched their guns then, leaving Lil J with the gun used to shoot the cop.

Chapters 11-12 Analysis

Kelly tries to get Lil J to see that he is responsible for his own life, for his own choices, but Lil J continues to blame everything and everyone but himself. Lil J tells a story about his father, of how uninvolved and unconcerned he was. This could suggest, just like Lil J's role as caretaker in his mother's life, why Lil J feels he has to be afraid all the time.

Lil J is a perpetual victim and his time with Kelly has not taught him anything different. The reader can only hope, as the novel continues to develop, that Lil J will eventually realize he is the master of his own destiny and do something to change the direction of his fate.



Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

Chapter 13. Lil J says he wants to change the moment he had gone into the bathroom and Rico had switched the guns, but Kelly suggests that Rico did not switch the guns or the police might not know yet which gun shot the cop. Kelly pushes Lil J to make a decision, but he continues to hesitate. Finally Lil J gives Kelly the gun and asks him to hide it. Instead, Kelly takes the gun to the window and begins to fire into the street below where several cop cars are sitting.

Chapter 14. Lil J panics, demanding to know what Kelly is doing. On the television, Lil J can see the police storming the building. Kelly tells Lil J to lay down and sleep as he goes running out the door. Lil J lies on the floor in a prone position so the cops will not shoot him when they come in. Lil J can hear shouting and gun fire downstairs, but then the noise goes away. Lil J lies on the floor for hours, waiting until the following day before he finally moves. Finally, Lil J leaves the building and begins to make his way home. On the street, Lil J sees a newscast on someone's television and learns that the police had shot and killed Kelly, convinced he was the cop killer. The cop, Lil J learns, is going to recover.

Lil J goes home and it is like nothing has happened. Lil J still has the drugs that he had taken from the drugs he and Rico were to sell the day before. Lil J flushes them down the toilet. Unable to sleep that night, Lil J watches television. On the television he sees himself sitting on the roof of the abandoned building. Lil J knows that this is an image of him talking with Kelly, just like he knows he will see Kelly again someday.

Chapters 13-14 Analysis

Kelly pushes Lil J again and again to make a decision about what to do with his life. Kelly wants Lil J not only to decide what he might change about his life, but to decide what to do about this immediate situation. Lil J is frightened and refuses for a time, but finally insists that the only thing he would change is the drug deal gone bad. Kelly then begins firing at the police, using the gun Lil J carries. Then Kelly seems to sacrifice himself for Lil J by charging at the police with the gun.

Lil J is given a second chance. It seems that he has decided to take advantage of this second chance by ridding himself of the drugs that he had taken the day of the drug bust. The reader can see that nothing else has changed in Lil J's life but his attitude and hopes that this might be enough to make life better for Lil J as he faces an uncertain future.



Characters

Jeremy 'Lil J' Dance

Lil J is the street name for Jeremy Dance, the main character of the novel. Lil J has had a difficult life. Lil J has been essentially abandoned by his father and lives with an alcoholic mother. From the time Lil J was a young child, he had to take responsibility for his mother, attempting to hide the disgrace of her alcoholism from the world. Due to this, Lil J has found it difficult to keep his grades up and fails to graduate with his class.

Lil J allows the hardships of his life to dictate his behaviors. When Lil J is unable to use his own compositions in a school rap group, he quits and gets high. When Lil J learns he will not graduate with his class, he quits and goes to Texas where he is arrested for trying to rob a convenience store. When Lil J has a son and his girlfriend's mother will not let him see the child, Lil J sits back and allows his child to be kept from him.

Lil J is a young man who is filled with rage due to all the things he cannot control. However, when he is involved in a drug deal gone wrong and a cop is shot, Lil J finds himself at the end of his rope. Lil J does not want to go to jail, so he flees the police. However, Lil J knows he cannot run forever. Then Lil J meets a man who gives him the opportunity to change one thing in his life. Lil J chooses to change the drug deal. For this reason, another man goes down for the crime and Lil J is given a second chance.

Kelly

Kelly is a strange man who appears to live in an abandoned building. Kelly has a television that allows Lil J to see things that have happened in his past and might happen in his future. Lil J is unclear how this television works.

Kelly forces Lil J to relive important moments in his past that seem to define who he is and how he has gotten to where he is in life. Kelly tells Lil J he can change one thing about his past and pushes him to choose a moment that will change everything for Lil J. However, Lil J refuses to choose to change anything in his life except the drug deal that landed him on the run from the police as a cop killer. For this reason, Kelly gives his own life in order to allow Lil J a second chance.

Rico

Rico is a guy from Lil J's neighborhood. Rico is a drug addict who is often after the next big deal that will help him score more drugs. When Lil J learns he is not going to graduate from high school, he wants to reinvent himself, so he goes to Texas with Rico. Instead of reinventing himself, Lil J ends up spending six months in jail for attempting to rob a convenience store. Lil J apparently does not learn from this mistake, because he later agrees to help in a drug deal with Rico.



Rico and Lil J get high on stolen drugs from the supply they are supposed to sell to a new buyer. When they get to the buy, Rico is too high to notice the buyer is not right, but Lil J notices. They handcuff the buyer, and discover the buyer is a cop. Rico goes back and shoots the cop. Later, when Rico is arrested, he tells the police that Lil J is the shooter.

Lauryn

Lauryn is Lil J's girlfriend. Lauryn is an intelligent girl who wanted to be a lawyer before she found herself pregnant. Lauryn gives birth to Lil J's son, but Lauryn's mother refuses to allow Lil J to come to her home, thereby making it impossible for Lil J to see his son. Lauryn is smart enough to realize that Lil J, who is a known drug addict, will not be good for her or her son and she does not support Lil J's desire to see his child.

Maurice

Maurice is a friend of Lil J's. On the day of the drug deal gone wrong, Lil J is supposed to apply for a job at the Home Depot with Maurice. However, when they arrive they discover that the line is too long for them to possibly have a chance. Maurice decides to stay and take his chances, but Lil J leaves. Towards the end of the novel, the reader learns that part of the reason Lil J left was that he was afraid Maurice would find out about Lil J's stint in jail in Texas.

Lil J's Mother

Lil J's mother is a single mother who has allowed herself to become overwhelmed with the stress of living in poverty and raising a child alone. Lil J's mother has become an alcoholic, forcing Lil J to become something of a caretaker to her. To add to the trouble, Lil J's mother appears to have begun to show signs of liver damage due to her alcoholism, causing her to suffer from terrible stomach pain.

Officer Anthony Gaffione

Officer Anthony Gaffione is the undercover police officer whom Rico shot during the drug deal gone wrong. Officer Gaffione has a wife and two children. As Lil J waits with Kelly for his fate to unfold, they watch multiple news stories about Officer Gaffione, each suggesting that he is not going to survive the gunshots. However, after Kelly takes Lil J's place and is killed by police, Lil J learns that Officer Gaffione is expected to have a full recovery.



Mrs. Gaffione

Mrs. Gaffione is married to Officer Gaffione. As Lil J spends the night with Kelly and struggles with what to do about his situation, he sees Mrs. Gaffione on the television news several times talking about her husband and the impact of the shooting on her family. Seeing Mrs. Gaffione and her child on the news makes Lil J feel terrible guilt for his participation in the drug deal.

Dusty Phillips

Dusty Phillips is the drug dealer who assigns Lil J and Rico the drug deal that eventually goes bad. Dusty is a ruthless drug dealer who will kill sooner than help anyone. Lil J is frightened of Dusty and therefore continues with the drug deal even after Rico steals some of the drugs and becomes too high to function properly.

Brian Dance Alexander

Brian Dance Alexander is Lil J's infant son. Although Lil J is not allowed to see his son, he professes a great love for the child and hopes to one day be able to straighten out his life enough to give Brian a good life. The reader suspects that Brian is the main reason why, when given a chance to change the entire course of his life, Lil J chooses to simply change the most recent mistake.



Objects/Places

Television Remote

Kelly uses a television remote to show Lil J images from his past and a possible future on a magical television.

Television

Lil J spends most of the novel watching images from his past and news reports on a television in an abandoned building. At the end of the novel, Lil J sees images from that night on his own television at home, showing him the reality of what happened to him in his moment of greatest need.

Bassinette

Lil J wants to buy a bassinette for his son, Brian, in order to earn his girlfriend's love and trust, but does not have the money to do so.

Handcuffs

Rico and Lil J use Officer Gaffione's own handcuffs to handcuff him to the banister of the abandoned house where the drug deal goes down.

Nine

Lil J carries a nine millimeter automatic handgun that he refers to throughout the novel as a Nine.

Drugs

Rico and Lil J are given a bag of drugs to sell by Dusty Phillips. Rico steals from this bag and uses the drugs, causing his judgment to be impaired during a drug deal that goes terribly wrong. Lil J admits to taking some of these drugs as well, but he flushes most of it down the toilet at the end of the novel.

Painkillers

Lil J's mother takes painkillers for her stomach pains. Lil J steals a few of these pills at the beginning of the novel.

Bus

Rico and Lil J take the bus to Texas, but party so much in Texas that they cannot afford the tickets home.

New York City

Lil J lives in the Harlem borough of New York City.

Houston, Texas

Houston, Texas is where Lil J travels with Rico and ends up serving six months in juvenile detention for an attempted armed robbery.



Themes

Unfairness of Life

Lil J spends a great deal of this novel blaming everyone but himself for his troubles. Lil J blames society for causing him to fail out of school and for using drugs. Lil J blames the anger that unfairness in life causes him, the fear that often overwhelms him, and his decisions based on both this anger and fear.

Lil J tells Kelly that he had been angry that he was failing school because he knew it would mean that he would become one of those men who sits on the street corner and watches life pass them by. For this reason, Lil J decides to redefine himself by going to Texas, but ends up getting arrested for attempted arm robbery. Lil J then blames this arrest on his inability to get a job.

Life is unfair at times. It is unfair that Lil J's father abandoned him in favor of another child. It is unfair that Lil J's mother is an alcoholic and he has to take care of her to keep others from knowing what is happening at home. It is unfair that Lil J has to spend so much time caring for his mother that he does not have the time or a calm place to study and get good grades in school. It is for this reason the unfairness of life is a theme of the novel.

Choices

When Lil J meets Kelly and Kelly begins showing him his life on the television, Kelly stresses to Lil J the choices he has made in his life. As they talk, Kelly guides Lil J to turning points in his life as he tries to convince him that he can change one of these moments to make his future easier.

Lil J talks about many choices he has made in his life, starting with the choice to become involved in a drug deal. Not only did Lil J choose to be involved in the drug deal, but he chose to do drugs with Rico beforehand and to run off with the drugs and the money when they learned the buyer was a cop. Then Lil J tells Kelly about his drug use, his infant son, his arrest in Texas, and his decision to give up on school.

All of these choices are moments in Lil J's life where he could have made different choices, but did not. All of these choices are moments that Kelly wants to change for Lil J if only he will make the decision to change one of them. However, Lil J refuses to change any of these moments in his life, choosing to change only the moment that caused him to be on the run for his life.



Second Chances

The end of the novel leaves Lil J with a second chance. Lil J's life is not altered very much. Lil J still lives with his alcoholic mother, still has a son he is not allowed to see, and still has a criminal record that could stop him from getting a good job. However, Lil J is no longer wanted for shooting a cop.

Lil J knows now that most of his trouble stems from his drug habit. As a result, Lil J throws away the last of his drugs and vows to make a new beginning. Lil J now realizes that Kelly had been something more than just a homeless man with a magic television and that Kelly had saved his life. Lil J knows as well that he will one day see Kelly again.

The entire novel seems to be about the choices that change our fate and the second chances that can change everything. For this reason, second chances emerges as a major theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator is Lil J, a drug addicted teenager who is on the run from the police. Most of the novel takes place in an abandoned building where Lil J talks to an apparent homeless man who appears to have a magical television that he uses to help Lil J see the mistakes he has made in his past and find a way to make things better in the future. At the end of the novel the reader realizes most of the events are taking place inside Lil J's mind as he sits on a rooftop, desperately trying to find a way out of his situation that does not include suicide.

The point of view of this novel is interesting because the author uses the first person point of view, a point of view that is highly personal and rarely ever keeps secrets between the narrator and the reader. However, even using this point of view, the author finds a way to keep secrets from the reader. The author has a main character who is a drug addict, a person who is very adept at telling lies and therefore is able to lie to himself to the point where the reader is not even sure if the narrator is telling the truth or telling lies as he shares his story with Kelly. In the end, the reader is still unsure if Lil J is the shooter or not, but very clear on the fact that Kelly has given him a second chance.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in New York City, specifically the borough of Harlem. The area in which the main character lives is a poor area where a lot of crime is common. The main character ends up spending most of the novel inside an abandoned apartment building that is often used by the homeless and drug addicts. It is a sad, dark setting that underscores the main character's assertions that he is destined to be a drug addict because there are few chances for people like him.

The setting of the novel works well with the plot of the novel because it is the kind of place a character like Lil J would live. If the author had chosen another setting, such as Beverly Hills or Manhattan, the setting would not fit the character or his story, therefore it would be inappropriate to the plot. The setting of the abandoned apartment building in this novel is important to the plot because it gives the main character not only a place to hide, but it provides a perfectly spooky place where the reader might be more easily prepared for some of the magical aspects of the plot. For these reasons, the setting of the novel works well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English. Much of the dialogue of the novel is written in street slang, reflecting both the education level and the culture of the main characters.



The language also reflects the criminal aspects of the novel, giving the plot an authentic feel.

The language of the novel is important because the novel is written as though told in the first person point of view of a young man who has been abandoned, neglected, and left to live a life of crime to get by. Therefore, the language would not be authentic if the author used a formal language or ignored the street slang that is common in the setting that the author has chosen for his novel. For these reasons, the language of the novel works well with the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into fourteen chapters. Each chapter tells a small portion of Lil J's story, moving back and forth in time as Lil J looks to his past to find answers for how he managed to find himself in such a difficult situation. The novel is told both in narration and in dialogue, showing a full story rather than just telling it.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Lil J as he looks to his past to find a reason why he now finds himself being hunted by the police for shooting a cop. One subplot deals with Lil J's drug addiction and his denial regarding that addiction. Another subplot follows Lil J's relationship with his parents and his girlfriend. Each plot and subplot is satisfactorily concluded at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"My arm was hurting bad. Real bad."
Chapter 1, pg. 4

"Then the SWAT team had reached the roof landing. And then I was lifting the Nine, but my eyes were closed, there were tears running down my face, and I was holding the Nine against my own head."
Chapter 1, pg. 9

"Rico wasn't somebody you could rely on and he had messed me up before. But just the way Rico got dope sick, the way he turned into something that wasn't good to see, I was getting broke sick."
Chapter 2, pg. 13

"I'm sitting there watching the whole thing on television, watching my life like it was happening outside my body."
Chapter 3, pg. 17

"Sometimes when things got real bad, when I was dope sick like a mother, she would just hold me and ask me to dream with her."
Chapter 4, pg. 26

"It made me want to cry. Not the pain, but just the way my whole thing was, like, falling apart."
Chapter 5, pg. 31

"He stopped the screen image, but I couldn't take my eyes off the still picture. I was half standing, half crouched over. I saw the Nine still in my hand. I looked up at my face. My eyes were like something wild."
Chapter 8, pg. 53

"I thought there was more to me than he was seeing, too."
Chapter 9, pg. 60

"Sometimes Kelly seemed okay, but I didn't trust him completely."
Chapter 11, pg. 68

"And I could hear myself thinking that my mad wasn't working with him. It didn't make no difference to him, but it was making a difference to me."
Chapter 12, pg. 73

"He was shooting down into the street!"
Chapter 13, pg. 81



"On the screen I wasn't moving, just sitting there, my eyes closed, my face twisted, like something real bad was going to happen to me. Or maybe was going to catch up with me. I didn't know which. I reached for the remote."

Chapter 14, pg. 86



Topics for Discussion

Who is Lil J? How did he injure his arm? Why is he on the run from the police? Did Lil J commit a crime? Why does Lil J want to hide on the roof of an abandoned building? What does Lil J hope will happen if he finds a suitable hiding place? Does he find such a hiding place? What will happen if Lil J gives himself up to the police?

Who is Kelly? What is Kelly doing when Lil J finds him? Why does Lil J pull a gun on Kelly? What does Lil J want from Kelly? Does Kelly give Lil J what he wants? What does Kelly do on his television that surprises Lil J? How does Lil J feel about what he sees? Why does Lil J stay to speak with Kelly? What does Kelly offer Lil J?

Who is Rico? How did Lil J get involved with him? For what reason? What is the result? Why has Rico lied to the police about Lil J? Why does Lil J think Rico did it? What is Rico's drug of choice? Why does Rico siphon off some of the drugs from the bag he is supposed to sell? Why does Rico do a drug deal high? Does this have something to do with the results of the drug deal?

Who is Lauryn? What impact has she had on Lil J's life? Why does Lauryn encourage Lil J to do drugs in front of her? What is she trying to prove? Why does Lauryn's mother introduce her to a much older man? What does Lauryn want Lil J to do when she tells him about this man? Why does Lauryn agree with her mother about not allowing Lil J near Brian? Who is Brian? Why is Brian important to Lil J?

What is wrong with Lil J's mother? Why does she take pain medication? Why does Lil J steal the medication? Why does Lil J try to hide the truth of his mother's condition from others? How does Lil J's mother react when Lil J is sought by the police? Why does Lil J worry about his mother's circumstances in view of his own dire states?

Why was Lil J arrested in Texas? Why was he placed in juvenile jail? Why does Lil J think this will stop him from getting a good job? Why does Lil J need a good job? Why does Lil J trust Rico again after such a big fiasco? What did Rico do to get Lil J in trouble the first time? What does Rico do the second time?

What is drug addiction? What kind of addiction does Lil J have? Why does Lil J deny using drugs when he first talks to Kelly about it? Why does Lil J say he has to use drugs? Why does Lauryn try to make Lil J stop doing drugs? What happens when Brian is born? Does Lil J stop using drugs? What does Lil J do with his drugs after Kelly saves his life? Why?