

# **Down These Mean Streets Study Guide**

**Down These Mean Streets by Piri Thomas**

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# Plot Summary

John Thomas, known to family and friends as Piri, is a child during the Great Depression and grows up in New York. His mother is a light-skinned Puerto Rican and his father is very dark. Piri takes his dark coloring from his father and spends his life trying to balance the need to fit in with his need to acknowledge his African American background. From the time he is twelve, he knows his father treats him differently from his siblings and he attributes it to his own dark-skinned appearance.

Piri expends a lot of energy on his efforts to fit in. He puts himself in positions to fight in order to gain and maintain his reputation. When his family moves from Harlem to Long Island, Piri is caught up in a new culture but cannot seem to fit in. As soon as he is able, he leaves his family home in Long Island and returns to Harlem, largely living on the street. His two great loves are his mother and a girl named Trinedada, called Trina. Piri's heart is broken when his mother dies. He is soon estranged from his family, largely because of an argument with his father over a picture of his father's mistress.

Though Piri will get another girl pregnant while Trina is away, he claims to love her and they plan to marry. They even talk of the possibility of raising Piri's child as their own but that plan ends when Piri is shot during a robbery and is sentenced to prison. He spends six years there and the time in jail is made more bearable by the thought of Trina. Then Piri learns she has married someone else and when he runs into her, years later, he is struck by the thought that it is impossible to turn back the clock.

Piri begins dealing drugs in his neighborhood in order to feed his own budding drug habit. He says he kept a tight reign on his drugs, allowing himself to use heroin only once a week until the day he found himself shooting up seven times a day. He eventually joins three other young men and the four of them do a series of robberies. When Piri beats up an old man at a car dealership for four hundred and fifty dollars, they all seem to lose their drive and stop the robberies for awhile. They later start it up again though they plan to make one major score rather than a series of small-time thefts. They are not able to control the crowd in the large night club they hit and Piri shoots a police officer during the crime. He is shot himself and is given five to fifteen years in Sing Sing. He is later moved to Comstock State Prison where he serves the remainder of six years before his parole.

Piri turns his thoughts to religion while in jail. He briefly studies with some Muslims though he does not stay with that religion. He later prays a sincere prayer and begins going to church with his aunt after his release.



# Chapters 1 through 5

## Chapters 1 through 5 Summary and Analysis

John Thomas, known to family and friends as Piri, is a child during the Great Depression and grows up in New York. His mother is a light-skinned Puerto Rican and his father is very dark. Piri takes his dark coloring from his father and spends his life trying to balance the need to fit in with his need to acknowledge his African American background. From the time he is twelve, he knows his father treats him differently from his siblings and he attributes it to his own dark-skinned appearance.

At twelve, Piri is walking down a street thinking he is never again going to be in a position to be hit by his father. He walks and wishes he had decided to run away during the daylight hours rather than at night. He finally considers that his father is at work and will not even be worried. Instead, it will be his mother who is concerned about him. With that in mind, Piri returns home and it is his father who answers the door when he knocks. His father says only he will talk to Piri the following day and hardly seems to have realized the boy was not in bed.

Instead of a talk the following day, Piri's father is too concerned with the fact he again does not have a job. When the family moves to a new neighborhood, Piri is faced with the need to build a reputation all over again. This time, he is forced to fight his way into acceptance. He meets a boy named Rocky who is a threat to Piri. Finally, Piri fights him. During the fight, Piri is hit in the face with a handful of crumbled asphalt. Rocky and his friends are immediately worried they have gone too far and lead him home. Piri cannot see at all and his father rushes him to the hospital. His father offers to buy whatever Piri wants and he asks for skates. Piri stays in the hospital for a couple of days and his sight is restored when he returns home.

Over the following days, Piri's parents argue heatedly. His father has worked some for the WPA but the family is in serious financial trouble. Piri stays home from school one day to go with his mother to the Home Relief office where they apply for help.

Piri notes he does not have the same relationship with his father as his siblings. He blames it on his looks. Piri looks more like his father than the others. His father is dark-skinned and seems to exhibit more of the African American features than Piri's mother, who is light-skinned and exhibits the traits of her Puerto Rican ancestry. Piri's ideas of prejudice seem to begin at home, though it is possible he is conscious of his own appearance and is transferring those thoughts to his father. Piri will later ask his father if he had been prejudiced against him because of his looks and his father says he has tried not to be, but admits it could be true.

Piri talks at length about the way of life in Harlem—the barrio. He plays stick ball with his friends, "cops" girls drawers and works at gaining—and keeping—his "rep." He frequently reverts to street slang, including the words "baby," "stone" and "coolie."



# Chapters 6 through 8

## Chapters 6 through 8 Summary and Analysis

Piri and his family make another move, this time into Spanish Harlem on 104th Street between Lex and Park Avenue. He is almost immediately in the same situation, fighting for his right to be part of the neighborhood. This time, the gang is called the TNTs and the leader is Waneko. As soon as Piri decides he is going to have to fight, he tells Waneko he has heard there are neighborhoods where a guy cannot get a fair fight. In those places, an entire gang will jump on a single guy. The words seem to strike a chord in the gang members and there is a fair fight between Piri and Waneko. Piri holds his own but does not put everything he has into the fight because he does not want to show up Waneko in front of his boys. The fight ends abruptly and Piri is accepted.

One day, a young man called Crip—because he is partially crippled—comes running their way claiming to have had a problem with a rival gang called the Jolly Rogers. Piri, Wenko and the other challenge the Jolly Rogers and are doing well until backups from the Jolly Rogers chase them away. Piri runs home with Jolly Rogers members chasing him. He yells that he will bring out his "piece" if they do not leave and hears them racing down the stairs. He then unconcernedly asks his mother what is for dinner.

One day, Piri and the others are standing around on their stoop when a "stud" named Alfredo asks if they all want to go to the apartment of some "faggots" he knows. None of Piri's friends want to go but he says neither he nor the others want to be the first to "punk out." They arrive, drink a lot, smoke some pot and Piri rouses himself from his stupor to find one of the young men, named Concha, unzipping his pants. He tries to object but can only watch as his "pee-pee" disappears into Concha's mouth. He says his body has a will of its own and when it is over he just wants to leave.

Piri does not like school and often tries to get out of going by saying he is sick. When he does go to school, he sometimes slips out of class by crawling on his belly out of the room when the teacher is not looking. One day, he asks the teacher, Miss Shepard, if he can go to the bathroom. She refuses and Piri says he has to go so badly that he hurts. He stands up to leave anyway, Miss Shepard tells him to sit back down, he says "Fuck you" and is leaving when she grabs his shirt. He says all he could feel was the humiliation of the torn shirt (which left him only two) and the pee running down his leg. He shoves her and races from the room. She yells that he struck her and the principal gives chase. Piri is screaming for help when he enters his building and a neighbor, Miss Washington, steps out of her door. She pushes Piri behind her and stops the principal, demanding he leave Piri alone. Piri's mother says his father will accompany him to school the following day and Piri wishes it could be Miss Washington instead.

At fifteen years old, Piri shines shoes at the corner of Lexington Avenue though he sometimes has to fight for the corner. He has the shining down to an art and believes showmanship is required in order to get a good tip. When he's done, he adds just a drop



of lanolin cream to put a good finish on the shine—a fact he points out to the customer. He says it feels good to work. When he looks at the fifteen cents he charges plus whatever tip he might receive, he calculates how long until he makes a million dollars. He estimates he will be 987 years old and thinks it would be faster to steal it. There is plenty of theft going on in Harlem for Piri to understand the concept.

One day, Piri and his friends are reading comic books when one of them stumbles across a group of kids selling lemonade. The boys pool their money and come up with fourteen cents. Despite the heat, they don their jackets. They make their way to a local A and P grocery and each slips inside, takes kool-aid, lemons and five pounds of sugar. Louie also grabs a glass pitcher and the store manager sees him trying to leave with the pitcher. All five run, all making their getaway with what they have. They make eight dollars and thirty-seven cents on lemonade at five cents per glass—one sold a half glass to his girlfriend at two cents, prompting the new rule that any of them might sell a glassful to their girlfriends at two cents.

They go to another store for another round of stealing the ingredients when Piri sees a store owner stashing a sack of what he assumes to be cash money. Three of the teenagers go back that night, break into the building and plan to take the money. They are interrupted by a police patrol and run but Piri is the only one who escapes. He makes it home but expects the police will arrive any minute.

Belonging to a group seems vital to Piri. He talks of that need often. When he is faced with the need to fight with Waneko, it is because he wants to be accepted. He says having a "rep" is important. However, it is not enough to have that rep—a guy has to keep it. That means he must never be seen as weak. It is interesting Piri uses verbal arguments to convince Waneko they should have a fair fight. Piri admits Waneko might beat him but that it would be better than being beat up by a whole group of guys. It is also interesting Piri does not try to seriously beat up Wanko in order to put himself above the boy. Instead, he holds back, allowing Waneko to retain his dignity in front of his friends.

There is no real indication of Piri's sexual experience up to this point. He says he and his friends would stand around telling stories on the stoop and admits that many of those are lies. He talks about their "debs," or girlfriends, keeping watch for the "fuzz" or other problems during their rumble with the Jolly Rogers. He says that as Concha begins the oral sex, he continues to think he likes girls, not boys.

As Piri is racing down the hallway, he is yelling for help. When Miss Washington asks what is wrong, he says "they" want to beat him up at school and that the principal is one of "them." Miss Washington says Piri is a good boy but then qualifies her statement by saying "at least good for what comes outta this heah trashy neighborhood." Piri's mom arrives at the end of the altercation and he says everyone was trying to calm her down. Piri writes "I felt like everyone there was my family."

Piri often dreams of what his life will be like when he grows up. He plans to come back to the neighborhood often and to treat the children to cuchifritos. He says he will help



anyone in need—from the junkie to the priest. Piri says it does not cost anything at all to dream, even when the dreams are big—as his are. These same kinds of dreams are shared by Piri's friends. He writes they make the small money on lemonade and then plan to gather the supplies for another round. Someone mentions they have the eight dollars and can buy what they need this time but Piri says they should steal it rather than spending what was pure profit from the first round.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

Piri's younger brother Paulie dies during a routine tonsillectomy. The family is moving to a suburb in Long Island called Babylon. Piri is apprehensive about the move and does not want to leave Harlem but his parents feel there will be more opportunities and better schools in Babylon. He tries out for the baseball team and makes a home run, earning him applause from those watching. He acts as though he does not hear it and that it does not matter. One day, he goes into the school gym where music is being played. He asks a girl named Marcia to dance and she turns him down, citing her jealous boyfriend. As Piri is just outside the doorway, he hears Marcia and her friends talking about him. Marcia says she could not believe Piri had the nerve to ask her to dance and one of the boys repeats what his father has said about "those niggers." Piri takes off running and a young man named Angelo, who had planned to go to a soda shop with Piri, chases after him. When he catches up, Piri yells at Angelo as well, saying he hates "all you white motherjumps."

Piri begins spending time in Harlem though he takes a job as a kitchen attendant at Pilgrim State Hospital in Long Island. There he meets a white girl named Betty and they begin spending time together. They get stares and people whisper about them, though Piri's friends in Harlem make her feel at home. One night, a man on a train talks about "that nigger" and that "black son of a bitch." Piri jumps up to fight but Betty pulls him away. They have sex in a field and Piri says she understands his roughness. He never sees her again. He tells his mother he cannot remain in Long Island and leaves home with the intention of saving some money so that his mother and the children can return to Harlem with him.

There is one girl trying to stand up for Piri but she is cut short by her friends. It is interesting that Piri, who is very dark-skinned, has considered he might be his father's least favorite child because he is the darkest of the family. It is not clear whether he truly had not had a taste of prejudice before this encounter or if he had simply hoped it would not be an issue at this school. Piri had been warned that it would be this way, but seems to have been willing to give the situation his best until Marcia's comments and those of her friends. As is often the case, Piri lashes out at the white boy, Angelo, who has not done anything, simply because others of his race lashed out at Piri.

Piri's mother tells him his father is having an affair with a woman named Ruthie. Piri says he already knew it was true but that he lied in an effort to make his mother feel better. He says his mother has never been the same since Paulie's death and that both he and his mom know she is dying. He says the difference between the two of them is that he wants her to live and she does not care.





# Chapters 11 through 13

## Chapters 11 through 13 Summary and Analysis

After about three months on the street, Piri meets a man named Pane and his sister, Lorry. Pane gives Piri a drink from his bottle and they invite him to sleep at their place. He quickly slips into Lorry's bed though she is thirty and has two children. He stays only a short time because he says he does not have the same feelings as Lorry and is actually messing around with another girl.

Piri and his friend Louie answer an advertisement for salesmen. Piri goes in first, spends some time with Mr. Christian, who tells him the current territories are all filled but they will be calling him soon to work in a new area. Louie goes in directly behind Piri and is hired to begin immediately. When they discover this, Piri wants to know for sure whether he was turned down because of the color of his skin. The next white man to come out of the building says he was hired and the next black man says he is to be called when a new territory is available. A friend later tells Piri it should not be any surprise because black people have always dealt with that kind of prejudice. Piri answers he had not know because up until that moment he had been Puerto Rican.

Piri meets the cousin of his friend, Louie. Her name is Trinidad but she prefers to be called Trina. Piri is immediately infatuated and they begin to go out regularly. One day while Piri is waiting for Trina, he steps into a candy store and discovers several guys doing heroin. Piri says he smokes marijuana regularly but he does not do the hard drugs. He cannot resist the taunts of the others and snorts a large amount of the drug. He has a brief, violent nose bleed and he and Trina go on to a party. She drinks too much and they argue on the way home, at least partly about his dancing with another broad. The argument gets heated and Piri swings at Trina, missing her but putting his hand through a plate glass window. He goes to the hospital to have it sewn up and meets a junkie in the waiting room who has a similar injury. They snort drugs together and a Chinese doctor sees them. He asks Piri if he is "hooked," and Piri denies it, but admits it disturbs him that the doctor would know he had done the drugs.

Piri says racial slurs really bother him and notes it makes him mad when the "paddies" call the Puerto Ricans the same names they call the Negroes. His friend Crutch says some whites drove by him once and told him he should "crawl up out of that gutter" he was in. Piri says just hearing Crutch talk about it bothers him. Piri says Crutch has a good way of looking at things. According to Crutch, the black man in the south is so important that anyone with a drop of Negro blood is considered black.

Piri's friend, Brew, arrives and the two begin playing "dozens." It is a game among gang members in which insults are thrown. The game can become serious when someone hits the wrong tone. Piri calls Brew a "spook" and Brew says, "Look at this Negro calling out 'spook.'" Piri says he is not Negro, but is Puerto Rican. Brew says he sees a Negro. The insults become serious and though Piri tries to apologize, Brew leaves. Brew says



he realizes Piri is "fucked up with some kind of hate called 'white.'" Piri says he only hates whites because of their color. Brew says Piri thinks he gets to skip the racial problems because he calls himself Puerto Rican and that Piri is a black man with a "white man's itch." He says the problem is that too many black men—including the black Puerto Ricans—feel as Piri does. Piri says he has coming to hate the black man for his attitude as well. Brew says he is worried Piri is becoming a Negro with a "paddy's heart." Piri thinks to himself that is exactly what his father is. Piri decides he wants to go south and Brew says he will go with him on the condition that Brew does not start anything.

Piri's continues to learn about prejudice through his life experiences. It is interesting his childhood does not prepare him for this. He was exposed to some different ethnicities and even fought his way into acceptance when his family lived in a predominantly Italian neighborhood, but even that does not prepare him for the prejudice he faces because of his dark skin. As he slips into the role of dope pusher in Harlem, Piri tells his mother that he has a job on the docks.

It is that driving need to belong that prompts Piri to accept the drugs while he is waiting for Trina. The guy who makes the offer has a history of altercations with Piri and it seems Piri simply does not want to lose face. When he is told that he is likely doing too much, he insists he knows what he is doing. Though he does not dwell too much on his reaction, he does say nothing much matters while he is high. Piri says he sees nothing wrong with marijuana and he uses and sells that drug. However, he says he has seen those who used the harder drugs and many are burned out from the addiction. It is also interesting he is so disturbed about the fact the doctor knew he had done the drugs. The doctor asks if he is "hooked," and Piri denies it, though it is likely that he is in fact well on his way to being fully hooked on drugs.

Piri looks like his father. He says that bothers him and he wishes he looked more like his mother. That bothers him as well because he says it makes him feel disloyal to his mother for what she is not and to his father for what he is. He recalls his efforts to smooth his hair so it was less wiry and more like his that of his brothers. He feels his nose and says it is not so flat, but knows it is nothing like the slender noses of his brothers. He says it is awful to sit at the dinner table with his younger brothers across from him, reminding him of what he is not and of his hatred for the Negro.

# Chapters 14 through 16

## Chapters 14 through 16 Summary and Analysis

Brew says his mother taught him the ABCs—Accept, Behave and Care. He tells Piri his mother wanted him to care about the white people and says he sees no reason for it. Piri says Brew seems to be more prejudiced than even he is. They board a train to the National Maritime Union where Piri hopes to get them jobs on ships going south. On that train, Piri is jammed up against a white girl who rubs against him. He apologizes and tries to give her room but she presses toward him. He notes the "girl and me and train get to the station at the same time." He wishes he could call out to her after they are pushed out of the train but does not know her name. He says he feels weak, like when you see something glittering but have no way to get hold of it so you tell yourself it is not that great after all. Later, he considers what the girl might have said about the incident on the train. He imagines she is telling her friends about this "nigger" she encountered on the train and that she was glad they were separated after the train stopped. Then he imagines she might have said she was ashamed of herself because she wanted to push her way back to him.

Piri tells his brother, Jose, that he is going "down south." Jose asks why and Piri says he has to find out something. Jose tells him the two of them are Puerto Ricans, which sets them apart from people who are black. They argue and Piri says they all have Negro blood and none of them can claim to be white. Jose says Piri can be black "if you want to," but that he is not. Then Jose says he and James have explained to others why Piri is so dark. Piri loses his temper, hits Jose repeatedly until his father pulls him off his younger brother. He then tells his mother and father he has joined the merchant marine and is going south.

On the day Piri is to leave, the entire family gathers for breakfast and Piri notes it is like a funeral. Though the goal seems to have been a chance for them all to be together that morning, Piri says he cannot sit there without saying what is on his mind. He says he has a deep hate within him and he has to find himself. He tells his father he seems to have been living a lie all these years, pretending to be Puerto Rican when he looks like a Negro. His mother tells him he is to be a man no matter where he goes. Jose has a black eye from their fight the day before, but he tells Piri he loves him as a brother, despite their difference of opinion.

There is no indication of the girl's racial motives but it is a sign of Piri's insecurity about his ethnicity that he imagines what she might have told her friends. He begins by saying the girl probably mentioned his "black cock," and that meant she was not referring to him as a Puerto Rican. He also says the girl probably mentioned black men have larger pricks than whites and told them she had an orgasm. The power over her becomes an important part of his story and seems to override the negatives—such as the fact she would have believed him to be a "nigger" rather than a Puerto Rican.



Piri and Brew are to travel on their own to Norfolk where they will be assigned duties on a ship with the merchant marines. They plan to leave the following day. Piri goes home to tell his parents.

Piri's mother asks him why it hurts him so much to be black and Piri says he wishes his mother could see inside him so she could discover it does not hurt "so much." While Piri might say that, he is obviously struggling to understand his identity. He seems to feel his troubles would be eliminated if he were light-skinned like James and Jose. Both his brothers are pale with blue eyes and blond hair. It really seems to get to Piri when he discovers his brothers have "made excuses" for Piri's dark coloring.

It is interesting Poppa says he has lived his life seeking acceptance from those other than Negroes. He says he does not have a single American Negro friend. It is also interesting he says he loves Piri just as he loved the other children in the family, but he admits he could have been at least a bit prejudiced against him. That is a point Piri made back when he was just a child of twelve. He said then that he believed his father loved the others more and that there was always a distance between them, a distance Piri blames on his dark coloring.



# Chapters 17 through 19

## Chapters 17 through 19 Summary and Analysis

Piri arrives at Brew's apartment and asks if he is ready to go. Brew's girlfriend, Alayce, asks why they are going. When Brew explains, Alayce says she does not understand—that she and Brew are black, that Piri is Puerto Rican, and that no Puerto Rican would ever just decide to be black because there is nothing worse than being black. Brew tells her blacks are to be proud of their race and their argument becomes heated before Brew tells of being alone one day when white boys approached him and threatened to "corn hole" him. He beat them up and dropped a rock on the face of one, prompting his mother and uncle to hurry him out of town to New York. He says that was three years ago and Piri asks if returning to the south will be a problem. Brew assures him it will not be.

On the bus, Piri takes a seat at the front but Brew moves him toward the back saying that once they cross the "Mason-Dixon," sitting in the back will be a requirement and Piri might as well get used to it. Piri is angry at the discrimination but agrees and they take a back seat on the trip. In Norfolk, they are told there are no positions for them until Brew says they have about twenty dollars each that they will not need if they get jobs on a ship. He says they would like to donate it to the Seaman's Fund if they could just get a job and the man making assignments assures them there will be two openings in two days. He calls them "boys," which angers Piri. Brew tells him he has to forget it because the word "boy" is a part of the vocabulary in the south.

Piri and Brew go to a bar called Blue Bell where the waiter, Gerald Andrew West, tells them he is writing a book about the race relations in the south. It is obvious he is writing a story that will put the situation in the best light possible from his terms—the rich poverty of the black man and the fantastic ability to endure and absorb their past. Brew challenges him, asking if he is willing to fight for those race relations. Gerald says he believes his writing is a contribution in itself. He then questions Piri about his background. Finding he is Puerto Rican, Gerald turns briefly to Spanish but is not fluent. When Brew asks, Gerald says his own ethnicity is that he is only one-eighth Negro. It is Brew who asks if Gerald does not feel a bit more Negro than that. Gerald says if having some Negro blood makes him a Negro, then it should also be that having some white blood makes him white. Gerald then says the white man is willing for "someone like me" to be a Negro, but the Negro is not willing for him to be white. He says Brew is right—that he looks white, acts white and is white, and he has discovered he is not going to fit in among the Negroes and so he might as well go back to Pennsylvania and be white. Piri says he cannot hate Gerald who seems to be "hung up" on the same issues as Piri.

The morning they are to ship out, the talk turns to Gerald. Brew says he hates Gerald but he at least has the courage to make a decision. Piri agrees and Brew tells him it seems he is walking a fence—an impossible task.



On the ship, Piri waits tables. At one point, an officer who calls him "boy" receives cold coffee. When he asks Piri why, Piri tells him he was a boy but his mama helped him grow into a man. He says the officer did not like the answer but he liked cold coffee less. In Mobile, Piri goes into a white café and is told to leave because they do not serve Negroes. Brew steps into the building and leads him out but tells him he cannot go back in to fight. Piri notes Brew seems to have "lost something." While on shore in New Orleans, they separate to go to with two octoroons for sex. Piri never sees Brew again though he waits for him at the gangplank until the ship is pulled out of port. When Piri returns to New York, Alayce is also gone. In Galveston, Texas, Piri meets up with a Mexican who helps him convince the owner of a cathouse Piri is Puerto Rican, not Negro. After Piri makes it with the white woman, he tells her she has just been had by a nigger and runs for the ship. He continues to travel and at one point has a fight with a large, older man. Piri is winning the fight but pulls back before he kills the man, prompting another man to tell him he is "yellow" when it comes to instincts. The man says Piri must be willing to take life when necessary and Piri says he has learned everything else he needed to know—he will learn that as well.

It is interesting Piri has talked only a little about Trina but they are still seeing each other. He has not told her he is leaving but sees her just before they catch the bus. He tells her then that he cares for her and he will write while he is away. He tells Brew he is not having sex with her until they are married and he expects their relationship to progress to that point quickly.

It is Piri who first talks to Gerald, noting his well-mannered speech. It is Brew who calls him on the purpose for his writing and his attitude toward the blacks. Gerald says he wants to write the book from the Negro point of view, but after talking with Brew, admits he cannot do that. He says he also cannot write solely from a white point of view because one-eighth Negro blood is "that potent."

Piri seems to envy Gerald, not so much because he looks white and considers himself white, but because Gerald has made a decision. Piri notes Gerald did not have as much difficulty with his choice for several reasons, including his looks which lean toward white rather than black. However, and probably more importantly, Gerald was raised to be white and is—as Piri puts it—white inside. Piri says he is just facing the question and cannot seem to move fully to either side.

Piri says racial slurs really bother him. His friend Crutch says that some whites drove by him once and told him that he should "crawl up out of that gutter" he was in. Piri says that just hearing Crutch talk about it bothers him. Piri says that Crutch has a good way of looking at things. According to Crutch, the black man in the south is so important that anyone with a drop of Negro blood is considered black.



# Chapters 20 through 24

## Chapters 20 through 24 Summary and Analysis

After seven months, Piri returns to New York. He stops first to visit his aunt who tells him his mother is in the hospital. Piri goes to visit but she is very weak and he is not allowed to stay long. That night, he receives word she has died. At the cemetery, he recalls her, saying his father had another woman but Piri again says it cannot be true, though he knows it is. At home, he goes through his father's things, finds the woman's picture, tears it to little bits and throws it in the street. He says he can hate her more fully now he knows what she looks like. His father begins slapping him around, yelling for the picture and Piri denies he has it. He never admits to having torn it up. His sister breaks up the fight until the next morning when it starts again. As she is standing between her brother and father, she begins to cry which takes the fight out of both of them. Piri picks up his things and leaves the house.

Piri says once he is back in Harlem, he starts using heroin, also called dogie. He is first a careful snorter, limiting his use to once every seven days. Then comes the day when he uses seven times in one day. He turns to a man called Turkey because he kicked his own drug habit, cold turkey, several times while in jail. Turkey gives him heroin, allows him to keep any profits above three dollars per bag, and allows him to use a portion for himself. Then a panic sets in with supplies way down and Piri does not turn in Turkey's money. He goes to Waneko, a friend from his childhood, and asks for help. Waneko helps him score first then answers Piri's cry for help and agrees he will help him get off the heroin. Piri describes the hours of the withdrawal as hellish. Waneko's mother comes in occasionally, wipes his face with cool clothes and cleans him when he has "made soft ca-ca" or puked.

Piri is working at a restaurant but believes there must be faster ways to make money. He runs into a friend, Lil' Louie, who says he and two friends would welcome Piri into their venture—stick-ups. Louie says both Danny and Billy are white, which gives Piri a moment's pause. However, Louie says he can vouch for Danny and Danny vouches for Billy. Danny says he wants to see Piri and Louie "work." Piri says he has not seen Danny and Billy work. When Louie points out Danny and Billy have been in jail, Piri says that proves nothing except they got caught.

They begin doing minor robberies, splitting the profits four ways. They have a system worked out—two take all the money from anyone inside the store or bar they are robbing, one serves as lookout and one goes with the owner to take everything from the safe or cash register. Then they move everyone to the bathroom and shove something against the door—a cigarette machine, for example—while they walk away. Once, a bartender breaks and runs, and in the scuffle, they shoot at him. They get away with seventy-five dollars and Piri questions their operation. He says they almost killed someone for seventy-five dollars. He then realizes it would not have made any difference if they had scored seventy-five thousand, that they still shot at a man over





money. Then he realizes they are never going to get anything near seventy-five thousand from a bar or store owner.

They wreck their car and decide to get another. They take four hundred and fifty dollars to a used car lot, buy a car and then Piri goes into the office and holds the man up for the money he has just taken. He struggles and Piri winds up hitting him repeatedly in the head with his pistol. He is smeared with blood when he comes out of the office and realizes he left the money. He returns, gets the cash, and walks past a motorcycle cop and another officer on his way to meet the others. When they get home, they split the money but it is over. Louie joins the military, Danny and Billy go back to Newark and Piri goes back to the sea.

Trina goes to Puerto Rico for awhile and Piri winds up in bed with a girl named Dulcien, who becomes pregnant. Piri moves to Washington, D.C. He has a job, begins preparing to go to college and feels he might break away from Harlem. Piri learns the girl has been kicked out of her home and is sleeping in stairwells. Dulcien's aunt lives in the building where Trina lives and Piri leaves Washington, returning to Harlem and confronting the aunt. He tells her that other than marrying Dulcien, he will do whatever it is she expects of him. The aunt is surprised at this attitude and tells Piri he must send her money for airfare to New York.

Meanwhile, Trina has returned. Piri tells her it is possible the child is his but says he will not marry anyone unless it is Trina. He tells her he loves her and asks for her love in return. Trina says she does love him. When Dulcien arrives with the baby—a boy named Pedro Louis—Piri shows him off to others around the neighborhood and then takes him to Trina's. They talk of plans for a future, including the child, but Piri says it is not going to work out that way.

Piri gives Dulcien what money he can. He continues to think he needs one major score in order to give her what she needs and—more importantly—get away himself. Louie returns from the Army and he and Piri agree to hook up with Danny and Billy. They plan a robbery at a major night club where they expect to take serious cash. Trina is ill and Piri stops off to see her before he goes. She says she has a premonition and asks him not to go. She does not know what he has planned but feels the gun in his pocket. At one point, Piri considers what she said and wonders if he should back out. Louie does back out, blaming illness.

At the club, Danny takes the stage and yells for quiet, punctuating the demand by firing two shots into the ceiling. There are "a couple hundred" people in the club and the three cannot control the crowd. Piri is guarding the door and is mobbed by people wanting out until he fires his own gun. He then sees a man climb onto the bar, sees a flash from that direction and feels the bullet hit him in the chest. He fires off a return shot, dropping the man who he later learns is a police officer. At the hospital, he hears someone say a bullet passed through his chest and he is not likely to live.

Piri is so angry at his father for what he sees as a betrayal of his mother that he wants to hurt his father. He does so by tearing up the picture of his father's mistress. When Piri





is about to leave the next day, he cannot go without getting at his father yet again. He begins talking in an exaggerated southern drawl, using phrases like, "sho nuff." This strikes anger in his father who demands he stop that "cotton field talk." Piri asks if that is not the problem, that his father came from the cotton field himself. Looking at the attitude of Piri's father, it makes Piri's own dissatisfaction and questions of ethnicity easier to understand.

When Piri is looking for a way to pay Turkey and considers asking Trina for money, he decides it is time to do something. His own misery is not enough but seeing what he is doing to his girlfriend is the catalyst for the desire to kick the habit. It is interesting Piri berates himself for giving in to the need for the dope. He says he would have been fine if he had never started mainlining himself. He does not seem to regret the decision to ingest the heroin through his nose but says that step toward the harder use was the problem.

Danny jokes the four of them are like the League of Nations—Billy is a Polack, Danny is Irish, Louie is a white Puerto Rican and that he does not know about Piri. Piri takes offense though Danny says he only meant Piri is of mixed race. Piri can only focus on Danny's words, "who the hell knows" what race Piri is.

Piri hears his mother's voice after he has beaten the old man at the car dealership. She is asking what he has done. When he walks in, he sees it is just an old man and he wants to walk out but he cannot bear the thought of facing the others unless he does what he is supposed to do. This is another example of Piri's constant need to fit into with anyone he considers a friend.

Piri admits that when he and Dulcien are "grinding" together on the dance floor, he knows it is part of the "game" that continues when Dulcien flings herself down on a bed, cries and says it has "been a long time since a man's touched me." Piri says he believes it is possible the child is not his, but that it is more likely to be his. Dulcien has two children when she and Piri meet but Piri writes nothing about where those children are or why her parents are angry Dulcien is pregnant with Piri's child.

It is noteworthy that Piri has almost broken his ties with Harlem by gaining admission to college and getting away from the city when he learns Duclien is pregnant with his child. He says he had almost escaped, indicating he knows such a move is the only way he will get out of the vicious cycle of poverty. However, when he learns of the baby, he confronts Dulcien's aunt and says he will do whatever she says he must do to make it right. The only stipulation he makes is that he will not marry her. When Dulcien arrives, she tells him she will make a good wife and that she will live with him if he does not want to marry. Piri is quiet but firm in his affirmation of his love for Trina and Dulcien seems to accept it.

Piri's recollections of the moments after he is shot are a nightmare. He says he pushed his finger into the hole in his chest and that the action reminded him of the story of the little Dutch boy who plugged the hole in the dike. He believes he will be fine if he can just keep the blood from flowing out of his body and if he can get back to Harlem. It is

interesting he understands he needs to break free of Harlem but when he is seriously injured and can barely think, he wants desperately to return there.



# Chapters 25 through 31

## Chapters 25 through 31 Summary and Analysis

Piri is told the cop he shot died but later learns he is on the way to recovery. He is held at the hospital for some time, then moved to Bellvue before being taken to the "House of Do-Right," also known as the Tombs, to await trial. He learns police traced the car back to Louie and that he talked to the police about Piri's involvement. He says he thought Piri was dead and that it would not matter. When the time comes for sentencing, Piri is given five to fifteen years of hard labor at Sing Sing for the robbery and five to ten for the assault. The sentences are to run concurrently, meaning they run at the same time. Otherwise, he would have been forced to serve the entirety of one sentence before the other started. He hears parts of the sentences of Danny and Billy but Louie is taken in separately. When Louie returns from the courtroom, Piri learns he fainted and was given zero to five years total.

Piri arrives in Sing Sing and falls into the routine of a half day of work, a half day of school, an hour of free time and the remainder in his cell. He is soon confronted by another inmate named Rocky and Piri knows he will have to stand up for himself or face the torment of Rocky and his gang. One day, he offers to draw a picture of Rocky and produces a flat-nosed aborigine with a bone through his nose. Rocky is about to jump on Piri when a guard breaks it up. Piri convinces another inmate to give him a shank—a makeshift knife. That day, he is told he is transferring to another prison. Rocky tells Piri he is lucky to be moving before they fight. Piri says the same to Rocky but admits he is not certain who was actually more fortunate.

Piri arrives in Comstock State Prison and says he avoids calendars, refuses to count the days left on his time but finds himself counting the minutes. He says he hates the sunny days because they remind him of the time he is missing with Trina. He hates the prisoners for reminding him he is one of them and himself for being one of them.

Piri learns the "pecking order" of prison and begins to carefully make friends. One man he likes is called "Little." Piri says he is aptly named but that he is solid. Though nothing in particular prompts it, one day the two decide to fight. They make their way to a place they believe they can get away with it and there is a guard named Casey. Piri and Little begin throwing punches and Casey does not interrupt. When the fight tapers off and both Little and Piri are ready to quit, Casey asks if they have gotten it out of their systems. They both say they have and Casey says he expects it to be over, that he did not see anything and does not want to hear any more about it. He does, however, point out that he would have stopped it if the two had not fought fair. As Piri and Little part ways, Piri asks why Little did not spend more of his energy on Piri's midsection where his punches were doing the most damage. Little says he knew Piri had been shot and did not want to seriously hurt him.



Piri says most guys masturbate but some give in to the need for sex and enter homosexual relationships. He describes a "wedding" between two inmates—Jules and Claude. Then he learns a new inmate is claiming to be his cousin. The youngster is fourteen years old and his name is Ricardo though he is called Tico. Piri knows him but they are not related. Piri understands Tico is trying to save himself from being taken by the older, tougher cons. He tells Piri he has already been threatened by a man named Rube. Piri tells him the only thing to do is to grab whatever is available and start swinging on his first opportunity. He says Tico should be yelling that he is a man and make it clear he is rejecting Rube's advances. Tico follows his advice and spends a few days in solitary though Piri points out it is better than "losing your ass."

Piri's family come to visit. His brother, Jose, is a paratrooper and is in uniform. He wants to hug his father but their past hangs over them. They talk for awhile then Piri realizes they have something to tell him. James has learned Trina married. Piri says it is no big deal but when his family leaves he admits he is almost blinded by the pain. He has not been allowed to write to Trina during his incarceration at Comstock and says he had told her not to wait, but rages against her for not waiting. Piri then takes some drugs from the man in the next cell named Young Turk and manages to sleep. The next morning, he is assaulted by the fact the day begins just like any other and there is nothing to do but get through another day.

Piri spends a sleepless night before his first parole hearing. He has been in prison for four years and has planned every moment of his release. He says anyone who has been in hell knows he cannot think about the possibility of being denied. However, he is denied. He walks into the room where the parole board is looking over his records only to have them say his case is very serious, that he should have known he would not be released this year and "maybe next year." Piri quietly says "thank you" and leaves. He later gets the official decision that his parole will be reconsidered in two years. Though he is cool about the decision at first, he soon reaches the boiling point and is ready to fight when someone else asks how he made out with the parole board. He turns in anger but finds it is the chaplain—a man who seems to Piri to be a version of God. It is this chaplain who tells Piri that if he has heart, it will now shine through. Piri considers the words and agrees he must cool it in order to make it through the next two years.

For a year and a half, Piri stays out of trouble. Then a riot begins in the prison yard. Piri knows it is coming but is suddenly faced with the decision to join the cons or move to neutral territory out of what would become the fight zone. Piri chooses to go inside rather than to join the riot. It rages on though the guards naturally win the battle eventually.

Piri becomes acquainted with a man named Muhammad who teaches from the Quran. Piri is curious and it is Muhammad who tells him about the Muslim religion. Piri is soon reading and studying on his own and is then invited to join the group of worshipers who study under Muhammad. He does and is given the Muslim name, Hussein Afmit Ben Hassen. Piri says he does not remain true to the Muslim religion long after leaving jail, but that some of the teachings remain part of him. He cites Muhammad's words, "No matter a man's color or race, he has a need of dignity and he'll go anywhere, become



anything, or do anything to get it ..." Piri himself has been working toward making himself a better person. He is working on a construction crew that is building a school in order to get hands-on experience. He is studying brick masonry, has completed requirements for his high school diploma and has finished several courses, including mail-order Bible courses.

With just two weeks before his second hearing of the parole board, Piri is wound tight and having problems. He yells at a guard and expects a fight but the guard says Piri is not worth the effort and walks away. He then gets into an argument with a con named Big Cot but takes time to consider that a fight on his record this close to his parole date would be serious. Cot says Piri punked out but Piri says he only wants to be out of jail. The parole board, reminding him of the outstanding warrants for the robberies he committed in New York prior to the shooting incident, tell him they are going to release him.

It is interesting Piri seems to think Louie's sentence should have been more severe when Louie had not even gone with them. However, the truth is Louie would likely have been involved if he had not been sick. The police try to get Piri to talk about other robberies but he refuses to talk. In the courtroom, he worries about how he seems to the judge and whether he should stand straight or appear humble. He goes for humble but says the judge must not have noticed. Back in his cell at the Tombs, he is relieved the sentencing is over even though it means he is on his way to jail. He says he knows where he stands.

Piri talks of how difficult it is to look forward through fifteen years. He says that he wonders how long fifteen years is, but is unable to break it down. It is likely that he could not bear the thought of the number of months, weeks or days ahead of him. He says the one thing the guards cannot stop is his mind, though he says he wishes he could stop thinking. He thinks of the "free world" and says he is starting to think like a con. Then he admits it is true—he is a con.

Casey, according to Piri's description, is a friendly man and one of the few decent people in Piri's current world. As Little tells Piri he did not want to hit him where he had been shot, Piri is near tears. Considering Piri's former lifestyle, it is doubtful he could survive in prison without finding ways of release. He says neither he nor Little did anything wrong other than to look at each other. Later, the reader will learn Little spent all his time trying to "decode" Psalms in search of a way to find all the loot he needs. He ends up in a mental hospital.

Another of Piri's friends is a man named Kent who has an education and talks properly. Piri says he gradually began emulating Kent. When Kent realizes it, he helps. It is Kent who tells Piri he should write. Piri says he does not know what to write and Kent says he could write his thoughts or poetry. It will be many years later that Piri does just that.

When Tico and Piri meet for the first time inside, Tico says he hopes Piri does not mind that he claimed they were cousins. Piri says they are brothers. He does not voice all his thoughts but remembers what it was like to be afraid and alone.



It seems Piri has spent many hours thinking about Trina and that he has placed all his hopes on being with her once he is out of jail. Taking that hope away from him is a tremendous blow. Drugs are common in Comstock. The crews who work outdoors gather wild marijuana and there are several other drugs in pill form that can be had with little difficulty. Piri takes everything he can lay his hands on after his family leaves. It is interesting to note Piri says there is too much between him and his father for the two of them to let the past go. He notes this was his father's first visit and it will be the last.

Piri's hesitation to join the fight is a sure sign of his maturing attitude. Rather than thinking only of the moment and his need for release—which is all the riot really amounted to for any of the cons—he is thinking of "outside." He says all those who elected to go inside rather than fight felt they had punked out on their fellow inmates but he cannot stop thinking what impact the riot might have on his next parole hearing.

It is likely Muhammad's words are exactly what Piri is searching for. When asked if he is interested in the Muslim religion, Piri says he is interested in anything that makes the "cockroaches" of confusion stop running around in his mind. Muhammad says the biggest mistake of the black man was his willingness to become a Christian. He says that what the black man lacks is unity and dignity, and the Muslim religion teaches those traits. According to Muhammad, the white man does not know how to be equal with the black man, meaning the white man must be afraid and prejudiced. Piri says he knew some Muslims and Muhammad asks what stood out about them. Piri describes them—that they dress neatly, never curse and never drink. Muhammad presses and then points out that all Muslims have a strong sense of dignity. Piri will later admit that in times of crisis he continues to call out to God rather than Allah. He says he has simply been a Christian too long to change.

Piri tells the chaplain he feels himself so near to freedom that he cannot seem to remember the rules still apply to him. The chaplain says he will see what he can do to help but tells Piri he has to remain in control. Piri says he does not believe he can handle another sentence.



# Chapters 32 through 35

## Chapters 32 through 35 Summary and Analysis

At twenty-eight, Piri leaves his cell for the last time. He notes it is almost like leaving home, but then shudders at the thought of prison as "home." Several fellow cons are waiting near the gate to say good-bye and the chaplain offers last words of encouragement. The moment he is released, he is arrested on the old charges of robbery. The two officers are understanding, stop for food and allow Piri to eat without handcuffs, and drive him on to jail by way of Spanish Harlem.

Piri is put in a cell with a kid Piri only calls "Chico," meaning "boy." The kid shot an officer and is shot himself and Piri considers the similarities between his own case and what this boy is facing. Piri goes for his first court appearance where the judge assigns a high bail and sets the case to be recalled in two weeks. One night, in his jail cell, Piri climbs down from his upper bunk, gets on his knees and prays sincerely. He is assigned an attorney from Legal Aid and says the prosecutor seems more on his side than his own attorney when he returns to court. He is given three years probation and told to report to both his probation and parole officers each week. He is also told to get a job "quick."

Piri says he is relieved to have the opportunity to be outdoors. His parole officer tells him to stay away from women who are not his wife, to stay away from drugs and to get a job. Piri says the first rule he breaks is to stay away from women. He shacks up with a "homely" broad and then starts smoking pot. One day, he looks in the mirror, realizes he is hung over and looks it, and decides he must change. He argues he might as well live a little while he has the opportunity but then counters that with his insistence that he wants to be free to "be somebody."

Trina is weighing heavily on his mind and one night Piri hears Trina is going to be at her aunt's home. He goes there and quickly discovers they have nothing to say to each other. Later, he walks to his old building and discovers a junkie preparing to shoot up. The junkie almost bolts and runs, but then calls Piri by name. It is Carlito—Trina's cousin and a friend of Piri's from before his years in prison. Piri watches and Carlito asks if Piri wants to share. Piri says he is clean and Carlito spends the next several minutes saying he can get clean anytime, and he is planning to do just that soon. He continues to talk like that as Piri looks back over his own life—Trina, his father and Brew. He says they were all "yesterday" and he now has to look toward tomorrow. He says he cannot stay to watch Carlito and heads out of the building. Carlito yells after him, asking if he is alright. Piri says he is.

At one point, Piri goes to the bathroom alone. There is a door and he realizes he could simply walk out rather than return to the officers. He also realizes that once he runs, he will always be on the run. When he returns to the table, he finds there is a giant mirror and the police would have seen his attempt.



Piri seems to have accepted Jesus as his savior on the night he prays in his jail cell. The kid who is in the cell with him says he also believes in God. Piri later notes his aunt and her pastor are in court when he goes and his aunt has been praying. He counts those among the positives on his side and reasons he should allow the court system to run its course rather than running away.





# Characters

## Piri

The author. His name is actually John Thomas but people call him Piri. He is twelve as the book begins and twenty-eight at the end. Piri's mother is Puerto Rican and his father is Cuban but Piri takes his looks from his father. He is dark-skinned with a flat nose and curly hair. It makes many people believe he is a Negro and Piri will spend much of his early life fighting those prejudices. Piri's father does not acknowledge his Negro heritage and it seems Piri's own denial is tied to his father's. From an early age, Piri believes his father loves him less than his siblings and blames the fact he is so much darker than his brothers and sisters. He eventually travels south in the hope of finding something about his roots. It is never clear exactly what he is searching for or exactly what he discovers, but he returns to New York seemingly as confused as before he left.

In New York, Piri is drawn repeatedly to Harlem. Though his family moves to Long Island, Piri does not fit in and never wants to be there. He leaves as soon as he is able, returning to sleep wherever he can find a bed in Harlem. He soon turns to drugs and begins dealing. He claims to have a grip on the habit until the day he realizes he has gone from using once every seven days to using seven times a day. His dealing barely supplies his habit and the money he hoped to make does not accumulate. In desperation, he and a friend join other young men and begin committing petty robberies. One day, Piri is sent to rob a car dealer. It is an old man but he puts up a fight and Piri beats him bloody. They drop the robberies for a while but soon return to one major hit. The crowd gets out of control and Piri is shot. He returns fire and later discovers he shot a police officer.

He does six years in prison and says he is not certain he could stand to do any more time. He is immediately arrested for those first robberies but is released on probation for those charges. He does not intend to get back into the drugs but soon finds that he is. When he realizes what he is doing, he finally kicks the habit.

## Trina

Trinidad, otherwise known as Trina, is a cousin of a friend of Piri. Piri is taken with her from the first moment he sees her. Trina is not without problems of her own. She and Piri argue when she drinks and Piri is critical of her attitude when she drinks. Trina seems willing to forgive Piri anything. When Piri gets another girl pregnant, Trina is—in Piri's words—wild about the baby. She is at first angry at Piri but then tells him she loves him. As Piri is leaving to commit what turns out to be his final robbery, Trina tells him she has had a premonition and begs him not to go, though she does not know the details of where he is going. Trina and Piri apparently write only infrequently while he is in prison and at Comstock he is denied the opportunity to write to her at all. His family comes to visit him and tells him Trina has married. Trina herself writes to Piri with the



news, though he does not get the letter until he is released from prison. Thoughts of Trina helped Piri through the days of his prison sentence, but he still survives after her marriage. Once out of prison, he continues to think of her but the one time the two meet, it is merely uncomfortable. Piri says it is evident you cannot turn back time and seems to finally come to some sort of peace about losing her.

## Dulcien

Dulcien is the cousin of a boy Piri knows. At a party one night while Trina is out of town, Piri has sex with Dulcien. The girl soon announces she is pregnant and does not have a place to live. Piri has left the city and is planning to begin school but drops all that to return to Harlem. He asks Dulcien's aunt what he must do to make it right, limiting it only by saying he will not marry Dulcien. She tells him that she will make a good wife or that she will live with him without marriage, but he makes it clear he loves Trina. There is no indication what happens to Dulcien after Piri goes to prison.

## Pedro Louis

The child born to Dulcien and Piri. Piri takes the child around the neighborhood and his friends offer their congratulations. Piri also takes Pedro to Trina's and says Trina is wild about the baby. They talk about the possibility of raising him together but Piri is arrested and goes to prison before they broach the subject with Dulcien. There is no indication of what happens to Pedro in later life.

## Piri's Father

Piri's father does manual labor and seems to be trying to do the best he can for his family though he and Piri have a strained relationship. Piri blames it on the fact that he is dark—just like his father. His father once admits Piri's looks might have prejudiced him though he says he tried not to let that happen. When Piri wants to get to his father, he begins talking with an exaggerated southern drawl and tells his father he might as well go back to the cotton patch where he father came from.

## Lola

Piri's mother. She seems to have the best interests of her family at heart and she and Piri share a special bond. It is likely she tries to make up for the shortfalls in the relationship between Piri and his father. Piri is with his mother shortly before her death. When he beats an old man during a robbery, Piri swears he can hear his mother's voice and that she is disappointed in his action.



## Rocky

The Italian kid fighting with Piri when he gets hit in the face with a handful of tar. Before the fight, Rocky and his friends constantly torment Piri. After they fear they could have blinded the boy, Rocky and his friends never bother him and sometimes include him.

## Gerald Andrew West

The student from Pennsylvania who meets Piri and Brew in Norfolk as they are waiting to ship out. Gerald is doing research for a book about race relations. He says he is one-eighth black but he feels white. After some questioning from Brew, Gerald admits he cannot fit in with the blacks and he will write the book from the white point of view though his black heritage will show through simply because it is so potent. Brew later admits he hates Gerald for preferring his white heritage over his black, but says he at least has the guts to make a decision.

## Brew

A young man about the same age as Piri who agrees to travel south with him. It is Brew who tells him how things are in the south but Piri wants to go see the region for himself. Brew joins the merchant marines with Piri and the two spend their time together in the various ports. One day, when they are to have reported back to the ship, Brew simply does not appear and Piri never hears from him again.

## Ricardo

Piri's baby brother who dies "of some kind of germs." Piri says his death prompts the family's move from 111th Street to 114th Street. Piri does not speak at length about Ricardo's death nor about another brother, Paulie, who dies of a routine tonsillectomy.

## Jose

Piri's younger brother. Piri notes Jose is light-skinned and looks more like their mother. During an argument, it is Jose who tells Piri he has stood up to others who questioned Piri's dark skin.



## **Objects/Places**

### **TNT appears in non-fiction**

The gang Piri joins along with Weneko and others.

### **Jolly Rogers appears in non-fiction**

A rival gang.

### **Lexington Avenue in Spanish Harlem appears in non-fiction**

The corner where Piri shines shoes. He notes it is not his corner alone but that he has to fight for it everytime he sets up his shoe shine business there.

### **Dozens appears in non-fiction**

A game among gang members. Friends throw insults back and forth. Piri notes it is sometimes dangerous and more than one person has lost a tooth over something said during the game.

### **Harlem appears in non-fiction**

Where Piri spends his childhood and where he returns after his family moves to Long Island and after his release from jail. Piri notes Harlem simply is not willing to give up its hold on most people and they find they cannot stay away.

### **The James Clifford appears in non-fiction**

The boat where Piri and Brew sign on with the merchant marines as mess boys.

### **WPA appears in non-fiction**

A work program in effect during the author's childhood. His father works for the WPA for a while.

### **Home Relief appears in non-fiction**

A welfare program. Piri's mother takes him with her to sign up for the program.



## **The House of Do-Right appears in non-fiction**

Located at 125 White Street, it is also known as the Tombs. This where Piri is taken to await his trial for the robbery and shooting of the police officer.

## **Sing Sing appears in non-fiction**

Where Piri does his first few months in prison.

## **Comstock State Prison appears in non-fiction**

Where Piri is moved to after Sing Sing.



# Themes

## The Need to Belong

Piri's need to fit in is what leads him down the wrong road. He is willing to fight for the right to a "rep" in the neighborhoods where he lives and leaves home at an early age in order to return to his friends in Harlem. Piri talks about his skin tone and his features that make him look more like a Negro than his brothers. Though he has friends who are black, Piri continues to wish he was lighter skinned so he is not constantly being called Negro. He continues to insist he is Puerto Rican. He goes on a trip to the south in what seems like a quest to find his roots.

It is his friends who first entice Piri to take hard drugs with them. Though he takes marijuana, he does not take any harder drugs because of what he has seen happens to the junkies. However, when they begin accusing Piri of being unable to handle it, he snorts the drugs.

In prison, Piri is caught up in the beginnings of a riot. He stands in the middle of the yard for long moments, trying to decide whether to move to the side where the cons who are going to fight are milling around, or to line up with those who are just going to go inside. He finally decides to go inside because he is very near his parole but says he felt he had betrayed his fellow inmates once the fight was over.

That need to belong almost gets Piri again after his release. He moves back into his circle of friends in Harlem and is soon smoking pot. One day he looks in the mirror and knows it is time to decide which way he is going to go.

## The Quest for Identity

Piri is caught up between the ethnicities of his parents, largely because of his own appearance. He says he takes after his father—large, flat nose, curly hair and dark skin. His siblings resemble their mother and are all light-skinned with light hair and eyes. Piri eventually learns his brothers are also faced with racial issues because of Piri's appearance and say they have defended him to others. Piri himself insists he is Puerto Rican though he resembles a Negro.

When Piri is at the height of his confusion, he and a friend—Brew—take jobs on a merchant ship going south. Piri hopes to find answers though he can barely form the questions. He seems only to want to come to peace with who he really is and believes it is an external issue he can find an answer to. Piri faces prejudice wherever he goes, which seems to keep his anger at a boiling point.

While in jail, Piri connects with a man who is teaching the ways of the Muslim faith. Asked if he is interested, he says he would be interested in anything that put an end to the confusion. Again, he seems to be seeking an external answer to his own questions.



It is from the Muslim teachings that he comes to realize the blacks who are part of that religion are set apart because of their dignity. They dress neatly and do not curse or drink, but the main difference is their upright appearance. Piri admits this and for a time clings to the teachings of the Muslims. However, he says Christian teachings are difficult to shed and when faced with a crisis he always turns to God. Finally, in a jail cell awaiting a court date to determine whether he will be returned to jail or released, he falls to his knees and prays sincerely. This seems to be a turning point, though he says he is not certain he could have survived another term in jail—even with this new-found faith. He falls into the old habits briefly but finally decides he wants to "be somebody" and moves to a new life.

## Coming of Age

Piri is twelve when the story begins. He ages fourteen years over the course of this book but also ages mentally and emotionally, eventually finding peace within himself. Piri drops out of the Long Island school where he is transferred when his father gets a job in an airplane factory. He later realizes education is his ticket out of the ghetto. He is on the verge of breaking out of those bounds when he gets a girl pregnant. He is already accepted to college and enrolled for courses to prepare for entrance when it happens. Despite the fact he feels education is important, he leaves school and returns to Harlem to give his support to the girl and her child. That willingness to take responsibility seems to surprise some people.

Piri then spends a great deal of time trying to find another way out. He pushes drugs and commits a series of robberies. Both come with problems of their own. He uses more drugs than he can sell which means easy money does not help at all. When he robs an old man and beats him bloody, he loses his taste for the robberies. It is when Piri and his friends attempt to rob a busy night club that he is shot and returns fire, wounding a police officer. He finds himself in jail for the next six years. During that time, he connects with a man teaching Muslims. Though Piri wonders if it might be "jailhouse religion," he is interested simply because he is seeking something and hopes this might be the answer. He later falls away from the faith but then seems to find his salvation in Christianity.

When Piri returns to his old neighborhood, he soon slips back into some of his old habits. He is smoking pot and sleeping with a "homely" woman. One day he looks in the mirror and holds an argument with himself. On the one hand, he says he is never going to make a lot of money and that he might as well enjoy life while he can. On the other, he says he wants to "be somebody." That second desire, along with the knowledge he could not withstand another stint in jail, seems to win. When a friend of his who is now a junkie asks Piri if he is alright, Piri says he is.

# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in first person from the limited point of view of the author. The point of view and the voice are acceptable and believable and it can be argued these are the only effective means for the author to tell this story. The limited point of view means the reader does not know what is going on except at the moment when Piri himself is interacting with others. For example, once he leaves his family's home, the reader does not know anything about the family until Piri again interacts with them.

There is sexual content in the book, all from Piri's point of view. However, the majority of that content is either violent or perverse and though he says at one point that he is not the kind of guy who will make out with a girl then tell his friends the details, he also does not reveal any of those details to the reader. The sexual scenes include homosexuality, a violent interlude with a girl and a public incident on a train in which he and a girl rub against each other until both achieve orgasm. These seem to be true and may simply have held more importance in Piri's mind than other encounters.

## Tone

There is excessive foul language throughout the book and many slang terms that can only be guessed at today. Piri Thomas grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in Harlem. It was a rough neighborhood and Piri fit in with rough crowds. They were not hesitant to use foul language and words such as "shit" and "mother fucker" are vital to their vocabulary. By the time Piri is a young teenager, he no longer seems to care that his mother hears his foul language as well. For some readers, the language may be distracting simply because of the amount of it found in the story. By the same token, this is how Piri and his friends and family talked and the use of these words are vital to the truth of the story.

The slang is another matter because it is sometimes difficult to determine exactly what the author means with a certain phrase. Many of the terms—copping, fuzz, cats and junkie—are common enough that most readers will understand the meaning. Other words and terms—coolies, whalin' on booze and paddies—may not be as familiar but can usually be determined by the context. While it can be argued the excessive amount of slang is not necessary, it is another way the writer is true to his story. The writing is divided between exposition and dialogue with both being written in the voice of the author.

Piri is Puerto Rican and his mother speaks English only slightly. Piri learned Spanish and speaks it fluently. His writing is interspersed with Spanish words and phrases. Some are so common as to be easily understood by the reader with even a vague grasp of the language. Others will be understood based on the context. Occasionally, a





word or phrase will simply be left to the imagination of the reader who does not have a good grasp of Spanish.

## Structure

The book is divided into eight sections and thirty-five chapters of varying lengths. The chapters are written chronologically. Generally, each chapter covers one specific event. Some readers may find it distracting that the story line is sketchy in some respects and some details seem to be omitted. For example, Piri and two of his friends break into a grocery store but their burglary is interrupted by the police. Both friends are caught but Piri escapes. When he arrives home, he is worried his friends will tell on him and the police will soon be knocking at his door. This apparently does not happen but the scene ends abruptly with Piri wondering if it might happen. There is never an indication as to whether the two boys are jailed, whether they tell on Piri, or whether they are simply released. There are other details of Piri's life referred to only in passing. Piri says his brother, Paulie, died while undergoing a routine tonsillectomy and his mother never seemed to get over the child's death. Piri mentions he tries not to think about Paulie but there are no other details of how the child's death impacted the family. It is possible Piri finds the topic too painful to be included in the book but it could also be assumed it was not a major factor in Piri's life. It is left completely to the reader to determine that point.

Each chapter is named and begins with a quote from that chapter. These offer a hint to the reader about what is going to happen in the chapter. The sections are named "Harlem," "Suburbia," "Harlem," "Suburbia," "Down South," "Harlem," "Prison," and "New York Town." The titles offer clues as to where the scenes take place.



## Quotes

"Get angry, get hating angry and you won't be scared. What have you got now? Nothing. What will you ever have? Nothing.... Unless you cop for yourself!" Prologue.

"The lampposts made a big shadow on the stoops. I couldn't help wishing I'd run away in the daytime," Chapter 1, p. 4.

"Sometimes when you have too much, the good gets lost within and you have to look very hard. But when you have a little, then the good does not have to be looked for so hard," Chapter 2, p. 9.

"I could feel a thin hot wetness cutting itself down my leg. I had been so ashamed of being so damned scared that I had peed on myself," Chapter 4, p. 30.

"Momma smiled at the thing woman; she didn't smile back—one smile wasted. I stuck my tongue out at her; she didn't see it—one stuck-out tongue wasted," Chapter 5, p. 42.

"Just being a kid, nothing different from all the other kids, was good. Even while you slept over at some other kid's house, it was almost like being in your own house. They all had kids, rats, and roaches in common," Chapter 8, p. 70.

"I felt the warmth from the furnace greet me and I welcomed it like a two-day-late home relief check," Chapter 11, p. 96.

"I looked at our different shades of skin and thought, 'He's a lot darker than me, but one thing is for sure, neither of us is white,'" Chapter 13, p. 125.

"I looked at my brother. Even his peter's white, I thought, just like James's. Only ones got black peters is Poppa and me, and Poppa acts like his is white, too," Chapter 15, p. 142.

"So I ask you, if a white man can be a Negro if he has some Negro blood in him, why can't a Negro be a white man if he has white blood in him?" Chapter 18, p. 176.

"We rode and talked, or rather Louie and Danny talked. I played my cool role. I didn't



feel the picture that much. It was like mixing rice and beans with corned beef and cabbage," Chapter 22, p. 215.

"Dulcien, he added, had been thrown out of her home in Puerto Rico, belly and all, and she was sleeping in hallways and underneath stairs. My name, in fact, was something like shit around the block and Dulcien's family was looking for me to cut me up with Puerto Rican machetes," Chapter 23, p. 224.

"I counted my fingers, then checked how many teeth I had in my mouth and guessed at the hairs on my head; I pulled off my shoes and pared my toenails with splitting fingernails; I flushed the toilet to make a different noise; I scratched and yanked and twisted and turned; I thought and dreamed, hoped and wanted—and tried to small away the shit-filled feeling of 'this is it,'" Chapter 26, p. 250.

"I looked into the glass and saw a small brown face, bleary-eyed from an overdose of wanting to be free; then I turned the mirror over and saw my face enlarged, bloated with prison time and scarred by squeezed pimples and long lines, my lips dry and my tongue yellow-coated from the nicotine of a chain-smoking night," Chapter 30, p. 276.

"They knew the rebels didn't have a real beef, but cons are cons and time is thicker than blood," Chapter 30, p. 284.

"Man, everything was the same; only I had changed. I wasn't the grubby-faced Puerto Rican kid anymore; I was a grubby-faced Puerto Rican man. I am a hombre that wants to be better," Chapter 33, p. 322.

## Topics for Discussion

Describe Piri's family. What is it about them that makes him happy? Sad? How does he interact with his family members?

What is it about Harlem that draws Piri? Why does he not fit in at the school in Long Island?

What prompts Piri to join the merchant marines? What is the result of that trip?

How does Piri become addicted to drugs? How does he get away from it? Does his effort to clean up last? How is the drug use finally resolved?

Describe Piri's relationship with Trina, with Dulcien. How are the two women different? How does Piri treat them differently? What plans are Piri making just before he is arrested?

Describe the robberies Piri is involved with. What happens at the used car lot? What does that do to the four robbers?

What is it that lands Piri in jail? Upon his release, what happens? Why does he decide not to run when the opportunity arises?

How does Piri attempt to reconcile himself to his ethnicity? What is it about the Muslim faith that attracts him?