

Dragonfish: A Novel Study Guide

Dragonfish: A Novel by Vu Tran

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Tran, Vu. Dragonfish. W. W. Norton and Company, 2015.

Dragonfish opens with a brief letter written by a Vietnamese immigrant named Hong Thi Pham, also known as Suzy. It is addressed to her daughter Mai, and it says that Suzy will attempt to explain the decisions she has made over the years. The main narrative then begins, narrated by Robert, who is an Oakland police officer and Suzy's ex-husband. Robert is ambushed in his apartment by two Vietnamese men who work for a Las Vegas criminal named Sonny Van Nguyen. Five months earlier, Robert had gone to Las Vegas because he found out that Suzy, already divorced from Robert, had entered a romantic relationship with Sonny, and that Sonny was physically abusing Suzy. In Las Vegas, Robert met Sonny's son, Jonathan Van Nguyen, who prevented Robert from seeing Suzy and told Robert to go home.

The two men who have broken into Robert's apartment take Robert to Las Vegas where they all meet with Jonathan. Jonathan says that Suzy has disappeared, and he wants Robert to help him find her. They tell Robert to look in the Coronado casino and hotel, from which Sonny and Jonathan are banned. There, Robert does some investigation and finds the room in which Suzy apparently liked to stay when she visited the Coronado in the past. Inside, he finds a woman who looks very much like Suzy but is much younger. The narrative then switches to another letter from Suzy to Mai, which explains that they had to flee Vietnam to escape the communist regime, leaving behind Suzy's husband, who was dying of an unnamed terminal illness. In a Malaysian refugee camp on their way to America, Suzy and Mai met Sonny and Jonathan, who had also fled from Vietnam.

The narrative then transitions back to Robert's storyline. He introduces himself to the woman, and she introduces herself as Mai, Suzy's daughter. Mai was only about five years old when she and Suzy emigrated from Vietnam, but she is now in her mid-twenties. Mai says she received a letter from Suzy, her long-estranged mother, telling her to come to the room. In the room, they find a suitcase containing \$100,000, apparently stolen by Suzy from Sonny in order to give to Mai.

Robert receives a call from Victor, one of the men who broke in to Robert's apartment. Victor says to meet him at a nearby bar. There, Victor tells them that he has been secretly helping Suzy to escape from Sonny and Las Vegas, and he wishes to help Mai escape with the money. He relates details of Sonny's abuse of Suzy, and he tells Robert and Mai to return to the Coronado and retrieve the money. Robert and Mai decide to comply.

The narrative then transitions to another one of Suzy's letters. Suzy explains how they came to Los Angeles to live with relatives, but they soon moved in with Sonny, who was also living in Los Angeles. When Sonny eventually asked Suzy to marry him, Suzy said she first wanted to live on her own for a year. She then abandoned Sonny and Mai and



did not see either of them for twenty years. The narrative then returns to Robert and Mai, who retrieve the money from the Coronado and go to Mai's apartment to gather Mai's belongings. There, Suzy's old friend Happy, who is also a Vietnamese immigrant, arrives. Happy says she followed them there, and she admits to having had an affair with Sonny behind Suzy's back.

After Robert sends Mai out of Las Vegas, he tries to get in touch with Happy again. He goes to her house to find Sonny there. Happy's body is in the bathtub, as Sonny has killed her. Robert and Sonny fight, causing one of the logs to be knocked from the fire, sending the house up in flames. Robert falls unconscious but regains slight consciousness as he is carried out of the house. He awakes in a room with Jonathan Nguyen, who explains that he chose to save Robert from the fire but not Sonny, as Sonny was becoming too much of a liability. Jonathan tells Robert to leave Las Vegas and never return, and Robert complies.



Pages 1 – 61

Summary

The novel opens with a brief letter written by Hong Thi Pham, also known as Suzy. The letter is addressed to Suzy's daughter, Mai, and it describes their first night at sea after emigrating out of Vietnam. Mai was five years old at the time. At the end of the letter, Suzy says that these letters for Mai are "necessary to explain what I later did. You are a woman now, and you will understand" (4). The novel then begins its first chapter in the apartment of Robert Ruen, an officer for the Oakland police department. He begins to notice things that are out of place in his apartment, and he believes that people have been breaking in and looking around. One evening, he returns home to find two Vietnamese men in his apartment. They say they are from Las Vegas and that their boss wishes to speak with Robert. They put Robert on the phone with their boss, Sonny Van Nguyen, who says that Suzy, Robert's ex-wife has disappeared from Las Vegas. Sonny demands to know where she is, but Robert has no idea.

Beginning on page 17, the narrative then flashes back to five months earlier when Robert first visited Las Vegas. Robert and Suzy had been married for eight years before getting divorced. Suzy then disappeared from Robert's life. He eventually heard from Suzy's friend—a Vietnamese immigrant named Happy—that Suzy had moved to Las Vegas and had begun a relationship with a Vietnamese immigrant and crime boss named Sonny Van Nguyen. Happy said that Sonny was physically abusive towards Suzy, so Robert decided to drive to Las Vegas to inspect the situation. At a restaurant owned by Sonny, Robert met Sonny's son, Jonathan Van Nguyen, whom Robert refers to in the narration as Sonny Junior. The narrative then briefly digresses into exposition of Robert's marriage to Suzy. They were happily married for a few years, but then a distance grew steadily between them. Eventually, they began to have frequent fights, and one even escalated to an exchange of physical blows.

On page 34, the narrative returns to Robert's encounter with Jonathan Van Nguyen. Jonathan took Robert into the basement of the restaurant and showed him the rare fish that his father illegally smuggled into the country to sell on the black market. Jonathan then told Robert of a time after he and his father had emigrated out of Vietnam and were staying in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Sonny was only about five years old, and a man in the camp cut Sonny across the wrist with a knife. In retaliation, Sonny cut off three of the man's fingers with a meat cleaver. Jonathan then advised Robert to go home and forget about Sonny and Suzy. To emphasize this advice, Jonathan cut Robert across the wrist to give him a matching scar to Jonathan's. Later, Robert went to Sonny's house to confront Sonny. The encounter became violent, and Sonny's bodyguards threw Robert out of the house. The narrative then returns to the present. The Vietnamese men, who are brothers, force Robert into their car at gunpoint. They are accompanied by a third brother, younger than the other two. They all work for Sonny and Jonathan, and they tell Robert that they are bringing him to Las Vegas at the request of the Nguyens.



Analysis

The novel's prologue, though brief, serves several integral narrative purposes in terms of the novel's tone, structure, and themes. Firstly, it introduces the narrative device of Suzy's letters to her daughter, Mai. Although Mai does not enter the main narrative until the middle of the book, Suzy's letters are spaced evenly throughout the novel. These letters sharply contrast with the rest of the novel in terms of tone and content; they are lyrical whereas Robert's sections are spare and cynical. Additionally, the letters provide Suzy's point of view, whereas Robert's sections mainly serve to establish how little Robert truly knows about his ex-wife. The fact that one of these letters precedes the beginning of Robert's storyline helps to indicate to the reader that much of the novel's true substance is found in these letters. While Robert struggles (mostly unsuccessfully) throughout the novel to uncover Suzy's past and true motivations, the reader gains great insight in the truths of these matters through these letters.

In Robert's narrative, the novel utilizes a distinct noir mystery style that serves to both reflect Robert's personality and define the narrative functions of Robert as a character. While most of the novel's characters are defined in large part by their immigrant experiences, Robert is defined by his upbringing in a white American working-class household. The hardships of this upbringing, as well as his experiences as a police officer, make Robert very tough and cynical as a person, thus mirroring the protagonists of the noir novels on which the Robert sections base their style. Robert also holds a distinct underlying sense of moral righteousness, again sharing this trait in common with protagonists of classic noir novels. Moreover, Robert's status as a detective-like figure defines his role in the novel as he investigates Suzy's life and disappearance. Through this investigation, Robert also appears to act as a window for the reader into the community of Vietnamese immigrants that Robert explores throughout the book.

However, despite the novel's noir influences, the book also often subverts these genre tropes in order to explore the thematic and humanistic significance of the relationship between Robert and Suzy. In the novel, Robert and Suzy never actually interact in the book's present-day narrative. However, the novel makes many narrative digressions—such as the one in Chapter 2—to explore and exposit upon the marriage between these two central characters. In Chapter 2, this digression focuses upon the overall disintegration of their relationship, and the novel's other segments about their marriage observe different aspects and details of this disintegration. Usually, noir novels depict their detective figures as loners with no real emotional attachments. However, Robert's relationship with Suzy largely defines his role and personality in the novel. In addition, the examinations of their relationship appear to function as larger explorations of interpersonal relationships and the immigrant experience. Robert's background as a white man who was born in America contrasts in many ways with Suzy's experiences as an immigrant from Vietnam. Thus, the novel appears to fixate on their relationship troubles as a way of examining the ways in which these two types of life experiences differ.



Discussion Question 1

How does Robert characterize his marriage to Suzy? What appear to be the underlying causes of their relationship dynamic?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the scene with Robert and Jonathan in the basement of the restaurant. What are the functions of this scene? In what ways does it forward theme and character?

Discussion Question 3

How does setting affect the narrative? Specifically, how do the story's tone and content differ between Oakland and Las Vegas?

Vocabulary

clench, demeanor, gunwale, naive, askew, varnish, leer, linger, trudge, clapboard, irk, ameliorate, simmer, justify, clandestine, misanthropic, oblige, brandish, gristle, accentuate



Pages 62 – 127

Summary

Beginning on page 62, Robert and the Vietnamese brothers arrive in Las Vegas and meet with Jonathan at the edge of a lake. Jonathan explains that he has brought Robert there to help them find Suzy, who has gone missing. Jonathan says that they wish for Robert to help them so that the Nguyens don't have to ask the police for assistance. Jonathan says that they have a tape of when Robert came to Sonny's house and attacked Sonny, and he says that he will give the tape to the police if Robert tells anyone about Suzy's disappearance or if Robert does not cooperate in helping to find her. Jonathan says that they believe she may be at a hotel and casino called the Coronado, as she has visited that place several times on her own, and Jonathan tells Robert to begin his investigation there. Jonathan tells Robert to convince Suzy to return to Sonny. Robert's inner thoughts reveal that he believes the Nguyens are forcing him to perform this task as a punishment for Robert's attack on Sonny.

Beginning on page 73, Robert arrives at the Coronado and calls Tommy, a friend of his at the Oakland police department. He asks Tommy to do some database research on the Nguyens. Tommy reports back saying that the Nguyens were banned from the Coronado after Sonny engaged in a physical altercation in the casino. Robert then goes to the room where Suzy is supposedly staying and knocks. The door is answered by a Vietnamese woman who looks a lot like Suzy, only much younger.

On page 85, the narrative then transitions to another letter written by Suzy to her daughter, Mai. Suzy recounts a mother on their refugee boat whose daughter accidentally fell into the ocean and drowned. The next night, the mother killed herself by jumping into the ocean. Suzy then recounts her upbringing in Vietnam. Her father was strict and often beat her for disobedience. She briefly mentions meeting the young man who would become her husband and Mai's father. Suzy then recounts various memories from the refugee camp in Malaysia where she and Mai stayed. There, they met Sonny and the young Jonathan, forming a tentative bond over their mutual status as refugees from the communist dictators of Vietnam. She recalls constantly worrying over Mai's health and safety in that camp, as Mai often wandered off or became sick.

On page 113, the narrative transitions back to Robert's present-day storyline. He speaks with the young woman who looks like Suzy, and the woman says that she is Mai, Suzy's daughter. She is in her mid-twenties. Mai lets Robert into the room, and Robert asks her what she is doing there. She says that she is a professional poker player in Las Vegas, and she hasn't seen her mother since she abandoned her about 20 years earlier. She says she has recently been receiving letters from her mother, and one of them told her to come to this room in the Coronado. Robert informs Mai about his side of the story and the situation regarding Suzy and the Nguyens. Robert and Mai then search the room and find a suitcase in the closet containing approximately \$100,000 in cash. Robert deduces that this was money that Suzy stole from Sonny to give to Mai. He



figures that Sonny just wants his money back and doesn't really care about Suzy, so Robert leaves the suitcase in the closet, and Robert and Mai leave the Coronado.

Analysis

Robert's interaction with Jonathan by the lake helps to establish a recurring motif of abstruse and ambiguous character motivations, exploring the ways in which people's motivations may be obscure to both themselves and others. When Jonathan forces Robert to come to Las Vegas and investigate Suzy's disappearance, Robert struggles to understand the motivation behind this, as Jonathan could have easily hired a private investigator. Robert comes to the conclusion that this is the Nguyens way of punishing him for his earlier attack on Sonny. However, Jonathan's true motivations are portrayed as somewhat mysterious. Robert tries to understand why Jonathan would expect Robert to go along with the plan of finding Suzy and convincing her to return to Sonny. In part, Robert's cooperation is ensured by the incriminating video of Robert's attack on Sonny, but Robert seems to believe that the Nguyens have deeper symbolic motivations for recruiting Robert for the investigation. One such symbolic motivation might include the desire to prove to Robert that he truly is out of his depth and understanding in the world of immigrants. This is only one example of ambiguous motivations throughout the book, and this pattern encourages the reader to consider the various possible motivations that may inform people's actions, whether they are on a practical or symbolic level.

The second letter introduces one of the novel's first big twists—namely that Suzy met Sonny before she ever even entered America—and with this twist, the novel helps develop its thematic argument that it is possible to actually know very little about a person with whom you are supposedly very close. Although Robert and Suzy were married for eight years, Suzy's letters and Robert's investigation continue to reveal just how little Robert really knew or understood about Suzy's past. At the beginning of the novel, it seems to the reader that Suzy met Sonny for the first time in Las Vegas and that she entered a relationship with him because he was a powerful man with a similar background to her own. However, the revelation that Suzy knows him from before seems to imply that they had a history with each other from before, and thus Suzy may have purposely searched for Sonny after divorcing Robert. The same section that contains this twist also contains information regarding Suzy's upbringing, about which she was always very reticent with Robert. The more information that the reader is given about Suzy's past, the more it seems to inform the tensions that arose between her and Robert due to a lack of openness between them.

This section introduces Mai as woman in her mid-twenties, and this version of Mai appears to act as a catalyst for selfless action in both Suzy and Robert. On one hand, Suzy appears to have stolen a large amount of money from the very dangerous Sonny to give to Mai. Suzy's motivations for this are unclear, but it may be a gesture meant to make up for all the years they were not able to spend together as mother and daughter. In this way, the money seems to serve a similar function as Suzy's letters, in that they both attempt to make amends for Suzy's (thus far) unexplained abandonment of Mai at young age. Meanwhile, Robert also appears to feel charitable towards and protective of



Mai, likely because she is Suzy's daughter and because she looks so much like her. Robert immediately resolves to help Mai get to safety, as she sees her in a position to inadvertently incur Sonny's wrath. Thus, Mai, as a person who has only accidentally stumbled into the dangerous situations of the narrative, seems to represent a type of goodness or innocence that both Robert and Suzy wish to protect.

Discussion Question 1

What appear to be Jonathan's motivations for recruiting Robert? How do these motivations and their ambiguities relate to the tone and themes of the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrative differ between Robert's storyline and Suzy's letters? In what ways does Robert's view of Suzy differ from the portrayal of Suzy in the letters?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Robert's initial relationship with Mai. How do the relationships with Robert, Suzy, and Mai relate to the overall narrative?

Vocabulary

crimp, flinch, indulge, consign, morbid, resemblance, fastidious, iniquity, keepsake, brittle, frivolity, afflict, reciprocate, mar, indelible, irritable, pristine, kinship, prate, disingenuous



Pages 128 – 178

Summary

In the section from pages 128 to 145, Robert and Mai go to the parking lot of the Coronado. Robert receives calls on his cell phone, but he ignores them. Mai brings her car to the front entrance, and Robert places the hotel room keys in a potted plant in the lobby before joining Mai in her car. Robert tells Mai to drive out of Las Vegas, and they begin to go, Robert receives another call from. He answers it this time, and he expects it to be Jonathan, but it is Victor, one of the men who brought Robert to Las Vegas that morning. Victor says that he is on Robert's side. He says that the money in the hotel room is Sonny's and that Robert and Mai are safe for the time being, as long as Sonny does not know where the money is. Victor tells them to meet him at a specific bar. As they drive, Mai comments that Suzy must be crazy. Robert rebukes her for saying this, but then in his head, he recollects an incident from his and Suzy's honeymoon. They had gone to San Diego and were walking near the beach when a car swerved to avoid hitting Suzy and crashed into a guardrail. Robert saw that the car contained only the driver, a man. Robert called 911, and Suzy cried. As they left, Suzy asked Robert if the woman in the back seat of the car was okay, which confused and worried Robert because he knew that the driver was the only person in the car.

Beginning on page 146, Robert and Mai meet Victor at the bar that Victor had named, and Victor tells them that he has been helping Suzy. Victor says that he felt bad for Suzy because Sonny was physically abusing her, and so when Suzy came to him for help, he agreed to help her. He says that, on Sonny's orders, he followed Suzy around town, but he never reported the times when Suzy went to Mai's apartment to secretly drop off letters she had written to Mai. He says that Suzy stole approximately \$100,000 from a safe in Sonny's restaurant, and so he then helped Suzy stash the money in the hotel room and escape from Sonny. He says that his goal now is to get Mai to safety with the money, which Suzy meant for Mai to have.

In the section from pages 164 to 178, Robert thinks to himself that Victor appears to be a reluctant criminal who wishes to be on the side of righteousness. Victor produces a video tape and says that it is a video of Suzy and Sonny. He says that Suzy and Sonny's relationship began to devolve, and Suzy stopped taking her anti-depression medication. Their relationship degraded into arguments and Sonny's physical abuse of Suzy. Soon, Suzy successfully opened one of Sonny's safes and found many video tapes inside. Victor describes the contents of the tape he is holding, which is security footage from Sonny's house and shows Suzy doing strange things like washing the same dish for an hour. It also shows Sonny threatening Suzy with a knife in order to force her into sexual congress. Victor says that, according to Suzy, she has no recollection of any of the events shown on the tape. Victor advises Mai to gather her things so she can leave Las Vegas. He advises her to go back to the Coronado on her way out of town so she can get the money that Suzy left. Victor says that he will be in touch so he can help them, and then he leaves.



Analysis

This section gives greater focus to the implied psychiatric problems supposedly being suffered by Suzy, thus implying that Suzy's past has inflicted a deep level of trauma and lingering anxieties on her psyche. While these issues are not mentioned earlier in the novel, or perhaps are only vaguely hinted at, the episode involving Robert and Suzy on their honeymoon gives a stark example of a way in which Suzy's psychiatric issues seem to manifest. When the man driving the car swerves to avoid hitting Suzy and crashes into the guardrail, Suzy is highly affected. She cries heavily and worries about the safety of the woman who was in the backseat of the car. However, Robert sees that the driver was the only person in the car, implying that Suzy hallucinated the woman. On a literal level, this may indicate a certain amount of trauma inflicted by the hardships of Suzy's past, and this further deepens the illustration of Robert's ignorance of Suzy's past. Robert knows so little of Suzy's past that he could not have known about Suzy's traumas or the psychological and psychiatric issues they may have caused. On a symbolic level, the apparition of the woman may be a stand-in for either Suzy or Mai, representing Suzy's failure to save herself and/or her daughter in some meaningful way during their journey to the United States and their time together thereafter.

These psychiatric and psychological issues are further developed and illustrated by the contents of the video tape, which also appear to have significant literal and symbolic implications for Suzy as a character. The contents of the tape show very strange behavior from Suzy, and the behavior is cast in an even stranger light when Victor reveals that Suzy apparently has no memory of these events. In terms of Suzy's psychology, the narrative seems to imply that this involuntary repression of memories may be part of a psychological pattern that was established in response to traumas that Suzy has suffered in the past. However, this then raises the question of what trauma Suzy suffered exactly. It is already clear to the reader that the death of Suzy's husband, the abandonment of her home country, and the hard journey to America were potentially quite traumatic for Suzy. However, the severity and nature of Suzy's psychiatric events appear to imply that there may be other traumas that have compounded the ones that have already been described to the reader. Other events of the book imply that these events may have something to do with her earlier relationship with Sonny or her abandonment of Mai.

The introduction of Victor as a significant character adds another dimension of moral inquisition to the novel, as Victor presents a type of moral rectitude that slightly mirrors Robert's but also provides significant variations. Robert, as a member of a police organization, operates from a position rooted firmly in a background of legality. Victor, on the other hand, pursues righteousness from his reluctant position as a hired criminal. Robert observes this and articulates it in a blunt fashion that seems to reveal some racial prejudice in Robert: "[Victor] enjoyed his job as much as I enjoyed Vegas, but he kept at it for that most Asian of reasons: obligation" (164). However, Robert's analysis of the situation is quite glib, and the narrative appears to use this glibness to encourage the reader to think deeply on their own about Victor's position. The narrative appears to



emphasize the contrast between Victor's profession and his desire to do good deeds as a way of exploring the many different ways in which people can pursue positive morality.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the character of Victor. What appear to be his motivations for helping Mai and Suzy? How does Victor compare and contrast with the novel's other characters?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the episode involving Robert and Suzy's honeymoon. What do the events in that episode imply about Suzy? How do those events relate to the overall narrative and its themes?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the contents of the video tape? What significance do the events in the tape have on both a literal and metaphorical level?

Vocabulary

caress, impregnable, render, mirage, admonish, supine, petrify, singe, inculcate, glum, neglect, sonorous, adjoin, malady, inevitable, promontory, glorify, indictment, meek, rummage



Pages 179 – 244

Summary

In the section from pages 179 to 190, Robert and Mai go back to Mai's car and discuss the situation. Robert reasons aloud that if the Nguyens have to hurt or kill Suzy to get their money back, they may try to frame Robert for it. He also reasons that the Nguyens may have recruited Robert in the hopes that he would disobey them and try to aid Suzy, thus potentially alerting the Nguyens to the location of Suzy and the money. Mai points out that these are unnecessary risks. She says Sonny is acting like "the guy at the poker table who's losing big in bad ways, and now he's playing emotional" (184). Robert then tries to talk Mai out of going back for the money, but Mai says that the money is meant as an apology from Suzy for abandoning Mai 20 years ago, and Mai does not want the money to fall back into Sonny's hands.

On page 191, the narrative then transitions to another letter written by Suzy. She discusses her relationship with Sonny and the way it formed in the refugee camp in Malaysia. She says Sonny "is not a bad man. Nor a good one" (191). She says that Sonny once saved Mai from drowning in the ocean by the refugee camp after Mai fell in. Suzy and Sonny interacted after that, but not much. Then, Suzy and Mai traveled to Los Angeles where they stayed with the uncle of Suzy's first husband. Soon, Suzy saw Sonny and Jonathan in Los Angeles and realized that they had immigrated there as well. Suzy soon formed a relationship with Sonny, and the two of them—along with Mai and Jonathan—formed something like a family unit. Young Mai liked Sonny and Jonathan, but she missed her father and would sometimes claim to see him appear in the house at night. Suzy then recounts an anecdote that Sonny told her around that time. Sonny eventually told Suzy that he planned on saving up enough money to own a business, and he wanted Suzy to marry him. Suzy, however, said that she wished to live independently for one year, just to see if she could. She left Sonny and abandoned Mai there to be given up for adoption. Suzy then explains that, after divorcing Robert, she returned to Sonny because she believed he would provide good support and protection. Suzy says that she deeply regrets abandoning Mai, and she says she is trying to make it up to her now.

Beginning on page 221, the narrative returns to the present as Robert and Mai go to the casino where Happy works. They approach a Vietnamese woman who is working there and ask if she knows Happy. The woman, Betty, says that she does. They ask her to tell Happy to get in touch with Robert as soon as possible. Robert and Mai then go to Mai's apartment. They collect Mai's belongings, but before they leave, Happy enters. She says she followed them there, and she asks what is going on. Robert explains the situation, and Happy says that she knew nothing about Suzy or the stolen money. Robert and Mai ask Happy about Suzy and Sonny, and Happy admits that she and Sonny had been having an affair. Happy says she is remorseful about the affair, and before she leaves, she says that she hopes Mai is able to get to safety.



Analysis

Robert and Mai's analysis of Sonny's motivations help to deepen the novel's examination of the complexity and ambiguity of human motivations in general. Because Robert has been forced by the Nguyens into investigating Suzy's disappearance, Robert must also face the challenge of figuring out exactly what the Nguyens want from him. The discovery of the stolen money and the Nguyens' ban from the Coronado help to illuminate some of the practical reasons behind the Nguyens' eagerness to track down Suzy and employ the help of a third party. In light of these revelations, Robert believes that the Nguyens also wish for Robert to disobey their orders so that Suzy and the stolen money will become more visible targets. However, as Mai points out, this plan is rather convoluted and involves many unnecessary risks. In light of this, Robert and Mai seem to believe that Sonny is operating from a position of emotion rather than rationality. This idea implies that Sonny's relationship with Suzy actually is of great significance to him and is making him act erratically in his efforts to retrieve both Suzy and the money. On the other hand, these conjectures made by Robert and Mai are simply that: conjectures. Neither Robert nor Mai can access the full depth and breadth of Sonny's psychology and motivations, and thus the narrative examines the interplay of these dynamics to highlight the simultaneous complexity and inaccessibility of human motivations.

The revelation and examination of Suzy's past history with Sonny serves to inform her later actions, as well as the novel's ongoing examination of the pitfalls and complexities inherent in romantic relationships. Suzy is originally drawn to Sonny because he saved young Mai from drowning, and then in Los Angeles, they seem to be drawn together due to their shared experiences of immigrating to the United States from Vietnam. Through the illustration of Suzy, Sonny, young Mai, and young Jonathan as a family unit, the novel reveals that Suzy and Sonny not only had a history together, but that it was highly significant to them. However, this relationship is ended due to an uncontrollable urge in Suzy to see if she could live on her own. This desire forms a direct tension with her desire for stability in her new life in America and her relationship with Sonny. This tension acts as a powerful narrative comment about necessary sacrifices involved in forming any long-term relationship with a person. These sacrifices may also help to explain Suzy's motivation behind abandoning her daughter. Suzy appeared to struggle with her personal needs and the needs of others, and this struggle of hers appears to continue throughout the novel as she faces the consequences of her resumed relationship with Sonny and tries to make amends with her daughter.

As Happy continues to reappear in the narrative, her purpose in the story becomes more refined and specific, and by the end of this section, that function appears to be the exploration of both the value and the dangers of friendship. Sonny's original relationship with Suzy is one of mutual support, as they struggle with similar challenges that arise from a life as a Vietnamese immigrant to the United States. However, this relationship is greatly complicated by Happy's affair with Sonny. The narrative implies that Suzy found out about the affair, and Suzy's discovery appears to have contributed to the degeneration of Suzy's relationship with Sonny. However, because Sonny has already



been portrayed as a dangerous man, Sonny's affair with Happy could be interpreted as a helpful signal to Suzy that she needed to leave Sonny as soon as possible. Regardless, the narrative appears to use Happy as a way of examining the complexities of friendship in a similar fashion to how it examines the complexities of romantic relationships.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Mai and Robert's discussion of Sonny's motives and mental state. Do their theories seem to be satisfactory? What still seems to be ambiguous?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Suzy's original relationship with Sonny. How is this relationship portrayed? What seem to be Suzy's motives for leaving Sonny and Mai?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Happy's affair with Sonny? In what ways does this complicate the plot? In what ways does it advance the novel's themes?

Vocabulary

shrill, askance, sulk, mesmerize, dispatch, intrigue, colossal, exasperated, glean, baffle, placate, pang, hesitate, fetter, alight, clairvoyance, mutter, sought, nestle, exhilaration, clairvoyance



Pages 245 – 296

Summary

On page 245, as Mai and Robert drive back to the Coronado in Mai's car, Robert thinks about how Happy was always closer to Suzy than Robert was. Robert and Mai talk about Robert and Suzy's marriage. Robert admits to hitting Suzy one night towards the end of their marriage. He says he feels ashamed, and he says that he is nothing like Sonny. They arrive at the Coronado and go to the room with the money. The suitcase with the money is still there, but Mai says it feels like someone else has been there, although she cannot point out any specific evidence of this. They put the suitcase of money in Mai's car, and Robert gives her the address of Tommy, Robert's friend who is also part of the Oakland police department. Mai thanks Robert, says goodbye to him, and drives away in the direction of California. Robert then calls Happy and asks for more information about Sonny and Suzy. Happy hangs up, and Robert looks up Happy's surname in a phone book. There are many listings, but only one matches her phone number. He commits the address to memory, hails a cab, and tells the driver to go to that address.

Beginning on page 261, as Robert rides in the cab towards Happy's house, he recalls more memories from his marriage to Suzy. He remembers the time when she came down with a bad flu, after which he sometimes heard her talking to herself. He remembers when he and Suzy attempted to recall the happiest moments of their lives, but they were only able to recall rather sad and difficult memories. Robert then recalls the time that Suzy almost left him, and he found her sitting in the local church with her packed suitcase, after which point she went back home with Robert. From the cab, Robert notices snow beginning to fall as the cab driver approaches Happy's house. Happy's house is in an upscale-looking neighborhood, and when Robert knocks on the door, no one answers. The door is unlocked, so he goes inside. There, he finds Sonny sitting in a chair and holding a gun. Robert and Sonny talk to one another, and Sonny reveals that he bought this house for Happy. Sonny also says that he found a letter that Suzy had written for Robert, but Sonny burned it. Robert realizes that Sonny is drunk, and he manages to wrest the gun from Sonny's grip. Robert then searches the house and finds the body of Happy, whom Sonny apparently killed. Robert and Sonny fight, causing a log to be knocked from the fireplace. As the house begins to catch fire, Sonny knocks Robert unconscious, and Robert later becomes half-conscious as someone carries him out of the house.

On page 285, Robert awakens in the room of a different house, and Jonathan is in the room with him. Jonathan says that Sonny died in the fire because Jonathan chose not to rescue him. He says that he left Sonny to die because Sonny's erratic and impulsive nature was becoming too much of a liability. Jonathan calls Victor into the room and declares that he knows Victor aided Suzy and Mai. Jonathan has his bodyguard, Menendez, hit Victor a few times as punishment, but Jonathan says that he will not kill or fire Victor because he considers Victor family. Jonathan then tells Robert to leave Las



Vegas and never return. As Robert drives out of Las Vegas, he receives a call from Tommy. Tommy says that there was a suitcase with \$50,000 in it left on his doorstep, along with Robert's police badge and a note that had Robert's name written on it.

Analysis

Mai and Robert's final conversation about Robert's personal life serves to bring Robert and Sonny into direct juxtaposition, posing the question of just what similarities and differences truly exist between the two men. When Robert admits to Mai that he did hit Suzy one night, he explains the circumstances surrounding the incident and says, "I don't want you thinking I'm like [Sonny]" (247). Although Mai does seem to have good faith in Robert, this comparison between Robert's incident of abuse towards Suzy and Sonny's many instances of abuse towards Suzy implies that there may be some degree of moral overlap between the two men. As characters, Sonny appears to be by far the worst offender in terms of moral failings, as he has a history of violence and criminality. However, by placing this one link between the two men, the narrative seems to imply that, although Robert values moral rectitude much more highly than Sonny, this disparity may only be a matter of circumstance. As an immigrant, Sonny had to contend with much more hardship and difficulty than Robert, and one apparent result was that it made Sonny crave success at any cost. Robert's life experiences, though not without their unpleasantness, were far less traumatic than Sonny's, and the novel raises the idea that this disparity in experience may be a factor in the differences of the moral natures of Robert and Sonny.

This section of the novel gives much more insight into the nature of Jonathan, who appears to finally reveal his own true ideology after the death of his father. First of all, Jonathan's choice to let his father die establishes a new depth of moral desolation than had yet been revealed in Jonathan in the novel. However, Jonathan appears to rationalize his apparent lack of morals on principles concerning a higher order of crime and punishment. As Jonathan says to Robert, "Punishment is punishment. We all get our due sooner or later" (296). Thus, Jonathan seems to rationalize his father's death as a warranted punishment for his father's many misdeeds. Jonathan's ideology is also apparent in his treatment of Victor. He has Menendez beat Victor as a punishment. Moreover, Jonathan's refusal to fire Victor from the criminal business appears to be another part of that punishment, as Jonathan must know that Victor dislikes being a hired criminal. Jonathan's ideology appears to be a twisted and cynical version of Robert's own moral code, but whereas Robert uses his own moral code to restrict himself from certain actions, Jonathan uses his own ideology as a way of granting himself every freedom as long as he is willing to accept that the universe will punish all misdeeds eventually.

Mai's decision to give Robert half of the stolen money appears to symbolize a deep familial connection between Mai and Robert, despite the fact that they share no actual biological relation. Over the course of the novel, Robert appears to act as something like a father figure for Mai, in a way standing in for the father she lost after she and Suzy left Vietnam. This ability for Robert and Mai to form a connection appears to inform the



novel's overall examination of interpersonal relationships. For example, Robert and Suzy never interact over the course of the novel's main narrative, but the connection they formed in marriage influences Robert throughout his character arc. Similarly, he feels protective of Mai because she is in danger and is the main object of love for his ex-wife Suzy, with whom Robert finds he is still in love. Thus, despite all the violence and cynicism of the narrative, the novel appears to promote an argument for the power of loving relationships to transcend misdeeds and regrets.

Discussion Question 1

How has Robert's relationship with Mai evolved over the short time they have known each other? What are the significances of this relationship and its evolution?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Robert's final interaction with Sonny. How does this interaction help to resolve these characters' respective arcs? In what ways is this significant to the narrative and its themes?

Discussion Question 3

What moral questions are addressed in Robert's final interaction with Jonathan? In what ways do Robert's and Jonathan's morals and outlooks specifically differ?

Vocabulary

baritone, din, murmur, barricade, mete, perverse, meager, douse, flounder, perfunctory, canopy, lurid, reluctant, parabola, redemptive, burdensome, barren, rafter, nimbus, duplex, wholehearted

Characters

Robert Ruen

Robert Ruen is the central protagonist in *Dragonfish*. He is an officer for the Oakland police department and is in his forties. He is tough and cynical, and he has worked in various law enforcement positions over the years. Over the course of the novel, he investigates the disappearance of his ex-wife, Hong Thi Pham, whom he refers to as Suzy.

Robert and Suzy were married for about eight years, and Robert realizes after their divorce that he is still in love with her. Robert is recruited into tracking down Suzy by Sonny Van Nguyen, a wealthy Las Vegas criminal with whom Suzy lived after divorcing Robert. Although Robert never finds Suzy, his sense of moral duty ultimately compels him to help Suzy's daughter, Mai, escape Las Vegas with the money that Suzy stole from Sonny to give to Mai.

Suzy

Hong Thi Pham, nicknamed Suzy, is the ex-wife of Robert Ruen. She is originally from Vietnam. She traveled to America to escape the communist dictators of Vietnam. Suzy appears to suffer occasional bouts of delusion and other potential psychiatric issues. She had a husband in Vietnam, but he died of an unnamed terminal illness. With this man, Suzy had a daughter, Mai, who was very young when Suzy traveled with her from Vietnam to America.

On the way to America, Suzy met another Vietnamese refugee named Sonny Van Nguyen. They fell in love, and although they did not marry, Suzy reinitiated her romance with Sony in Las Vegas after she divorced Robert. Suzy ultimately leaves Sonny, who is abusive, and she takes with her \$100,000 to give to her daughter.

Mai

Mai is the daughter of Suzy. When Suzy and Mai came to the United States from Vietnam, Mai was about five years old. In the main narrative of the novel, she is in her mid-twenties. Shortly after they arrived in the United States, Suzy left Mai to the care of an adoptive family. Mai makes a living as a gambler in Las Vegas.

After Suzy leaves Robert, she begins to write letters to Mai. These letters constitute the first contact Mai has from her mother since the day her mother left her. With the help of Robert, Mai escapes Las Vegas with the money that Suzy stole from Sonny, and Mai eventually gives half of the money to Robert out of her own generosity.



Sonny Van Nguyen

Sonny Van Nguyen is a Vietnamese refugee and the head of various organized criminal activities in Las Vegas, Nevada. Sonny has a ruthless disposition, and his son, Jonathan, is often responsible for curtailing Sonny's rash impulses. In a refugee camp in Malaysia, Sonny cut off the fingers of a man who gave Jonathan a superficial knife wound. In that same camp, Sonny met and fell in love with Hong Thi Pham, who would later marry and divorce Robert. After Suzy divorces Robert and comes to live with Sonny, they have a romantic and sexual relationship, but Suzy eventually flees Sonny and the physical abuse he inflicts. After Suzy steals \$100,000 from Sonny in Las Vegas, Sonny becomes intent on retrieving the money.

Jonathan Van Nguyen

Jonathan Van Nguyen is the son of Las Vegas crime boss Sonny Van Nguyen. Jonathan is far more rational and self-possessed than his father, and he constantly takes on the responsibility of containing his father's outrages and rash actions. After Suzy steals money from Sonny and flees from him, Jonathan has the idea of recruiting Robert Ruen to help them locate Suzy. Jonathan is Robert's main point of contact while working on this task. Jonathan appears to force Robert into this service partially as a punishment, as he knows that Robert still has feelings for Suzy, and he wishes to show Robert that Suzy and her life are not truly accessible to Robert.

Happy

Happy—whose real name is Tuyet Phan—is the best friend of Robert's ex-wife Suzy. Like Suzy, Happy is a Vietnamese refugee. After Suzy and Robert become divorced, Robert and Happy have a brief sexual affair. After this affair ends, Happy follows Suzy to Las Vegas. There, she becomes an employee in a casino, and she eventually has a sexual affair with Sonny behind Suzy's back. This affair, along with Sonny's physical abuse, compels Suzy to leave Sonny. In the end, Happy is killed by Sonny in a fury of grief and anger after Suzy disappears and takes \$100,000 of his money with her.

Victor

Victor is a henchman of Sonny Van Nguyen, although he betrays Sonny in order to aid Suzy and Mai over the course of the novel. Victor is the oldest of three brothers who work for Sonny. Victor wears a goatee, and he performs his responsibilities as a henchman reluctantly. He helps Suzy steal money from Sonny and then flee to safety. After Suzy has fled Las Vegas, he helps Mai take the money and evade Sonny's grasp for long enough so that Mai can escape Las Vegas as well.

Tommy

Tommy is an Oakland police officer and a friend of Robert Ruen. While secretly investigating Suzy's disappearance, Robert uses Tommy as a point of contact. Tommy uses the data resources of the Oakland police department to assist Robert with his secret investigation.

Betty

Betty is an elderly Vietnamese woman who works at the same casino where Happy is an employee. While trying to locate Happy, Mai and Robert talk to Betty at the casino, and she is able to help them locate Happy.

Menendez

Menendez is a physically imposing henchman and bodyguard employed by Sonny and Jonathan. Menendez does not speak in the novel, but Sonny and Jonathan use him as a physical form of protection against the possible threats posed by Robert.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Letters

Suzy's letters to Mai represent the irrevocability of one's past. Many years after Suzy left Mai to the care of an adoptive family, Suzy reconnected with Mai through a series of letters to her, which Suzy writes and delivers in secret. In the letters, Suzy describes her life in Vietnam, and she attempts to make sense of the events of the last 20 years of her life. Suzy explores the hardships she experienced and the choices she made, and she attempts to explain to her Mai the rationale behind these choices. Thus, these letters represent the irrevocable nature of Suzy's past and the work that one must do to come to terms with the own decisions they have made in life.

Dragonfish

The image of the dragonfish represents the allure of the dark aspects of human nature. When Robert first meets Jonathan Van Nguyen, Jonathan shows Robert a secret collection of fish that Sonny smuggles from other countries and sells on the black market. Jonathan specifically points out the Asian arowana, also known as the dragonfish. The fish is beautiful, but it is illegal to smuggle said fish into the United States. This fish thusly represents the various crimes regularly committed by the van Nguyens, as well as the ambition and alluring rewards that drive them to commit such crimes.

Las Vegas

Las Vegas symbolizes desolation and isolation. Las Vegas is literally surrounded by a desert, and the author utilizes the imagery of the desert to help describe and characterize Las Vegas as a city. The Vietnamese inhabitants of Las Vegas describe it as a desolate place where their only comfort and protection can be found in their self-sufficiency and the help of other Vietnamese immigrants. Las Vegas is also the hub of Sonny's various criminal enterprises, so to Robert, Las Vegas represents moral desolation. Moreover, the lack of any real cultural roots in Las Vegas adds to this sense that Las Vegas is a societal desert as well as a literal one.

Gambling

Gambling symbolizes the tension between uncertainty and control. As a professional gambler, Mai has complete faith in her ability to overcome the adversity posed by uncertainty. Mai is very proficient in poker and other games of chance such that she is able to make a good living from them. This dynamic is sharply contrasted with the nature of Las Vegas as a gambling city and the ways in which gambling affects other



characters. For example, Sonny is blacklisted from the Coronado after he loses much money and then loses control of his own emotions and actions.

The Scar

The twin scars that Jonathan and Robert bear symbolize the corrupting nature of violence. As a young boy, Jonathan was attacked by a man in a refugee camp, and the man left a superficial wound on Jonathan's wrist. Sonny retaliated by cutting off three of the man's fingers. Over time, Jonathan's wound healed into a scar. Jonathan has his henchman, Menendez, place an identical cut on Robert's wrist. The history of this scar thusly marks the violent nature that spreads outward from Sonny's past and infects those around him in the novel. This contagious nature of violence results in much struggle and even death by the end of the novel.

The Money

The money that Suzy steals from Sonny represents freedom and independence. When Suzy flees from Sonny, she takes many thousands of dollars from Sonny and intends to give most of it to her daughter. At multiple points throughout the novel, Robert comments on Suzy's thrifty nature due to the fact that Suzy perceives money as a tool for independence and self-preservation. Suzy often struggles with her desire for independence and her necessity of relying on others, and thus her departure with the money symbolizes her final attempt at creating a completely independent life for herself.

Marriage

Marriage symbolizes the impossibility of knowing someone in a genuinely complete way. Much of the novel involves the revelation to Robert and/or the reader of just how little Robert knew of Suzy's past and true inner life. This lack of true interpersonal knowledge resulted in turmoil in their marriage and, toward the end, even violence. The reader's understanding of Suzy is deepened by Suzy's letters to Mai, but Robert is never in possession of these letters. Thus, his understanding of Suzy remains shrouded in mystery due to Suzy's reticence.

Christianity

Christianity symbolizes adherence to ideals of moral rectitude. Throughout her life, Suzy is a devout Christian, and she attempts to remain loyal to Christian doctrines of peace and charity. However, she repeatedly finds herself in situations that tempt her to abandon her values. In Las Vegas, she is surrounded by people who have no regard for moral principles, and she is eventually forced to steal from Sonny in order to escape and right certain wrongs. Thus, the righteous nature of her theft imbues the crime with a somewhat Christian nature.



The Video Tape

Sonny's video tape of Suzy symbolizes abusive control and manipulation. The video tape, which eventually ends up in Robert's possession, shows Suzy doing household chores in a zombie-like trance, as well as performing sexual acts with Sonny. These events supposedly occurred after Suzy resolved to leave Sonny, and Suzy claims to have no memory of them. This phenomenon could possibly be explained by Suzy's potential psychiatric issues, but on a metaphorical level, they appear to symbolize the abusive and manipulative sway that Sonny holds over Suzy.

The Coronado

The Coronado hotel and casino represents safety and sanctuary. Because Sonny and Jonathan have been blacklisted from the Coronado for a violent outburst from Sonny, Suzy goes to the Coronado after she flees from Sonny. There, she leaves a bag of money for Suzy. Before Suzy flees from Sonny, the Coronado serves as her private space where she writes letters to Mai. Sonny's inability to enter the Coronado distinguishes it from the rest of Las Vegas, where Sonny is able to freely proceed with his various criminal operations.



Settings

Las Vegas

Las Vegas, Nevada provides the setting for much of the novel's narrative. After divorcing Robert, Suzy goes to Las Vegas to live with Sonny. Sonny operates many criminal businesses in Las Vegas, and he launders the money through various legitimate businesses that he owns, such as restaurants. After Suzy disappears, Robert goes to Las Vegas to attempt to track her down. Symbolically, Las Vegas represents moral and cultural desolation, as Las Vegas has no deep cultural roots of its own, and it is the setting for so much crime in the novel.

Vietnam

Vietnam is the birth country of many of the novel's characters. Many of the characters, including Suzy, Mai, Sonny, and Jonathan, immigrated to the United States from Vietnam to escape the inhumane communist dictators who had risen to power there. In many ways, this cultural heritage defines and binds these characters together. The cultural desolation of Las Vegas encourages the Vietnamese characters to seek out and rely upon one another. Vietnam also features in several anecdotes in Suzy's letters to Mai, as Suzy lived there with her husband and Mai before the husband died of an unnamed terminal illness.

Oakland

Oakland, California is the town of residence of Robert Ruen. There he works as a detective for the Oakland police department. Oakland was where Robert and Suzy resided when they were married. At the beginning of the novel, Robert is ambushed by three of Sonny's henchmen in Robert's Oakland apartment. The henchmen tell Robert that Suzy has gone missing, and they forcibly take him to Las Vegas so Robert can investigate. Robert's only contact with Oakland from then until the end of the novel is when he calls police friend Tommy to ask for research help with regards to Sonny and Jonathan.

Malaysia

After Suzy leaves Vietnam, she stays for a while in a refugee camp in Malaysia with her daughter. There, they meet Sonny and Jonathan. Suzy forms a strong bond with Sonny and Jonathan in the refugee camp, and this bond carries over to the United States when they all immigrate there. The Malaysian refugee camp is also where Jonathan is attacked by a stranger, and in retaliation, Sonny cuts off three of the man's fingers.



The Coronado

The Coronado is a casino and hotel in Los Angeles. Sonny and Jonathan are not allowed on the premises because Sonny once had a violent outburst in the casino part of the Coronado. Because Sonny and Jonathan are not allowed at the Coronado, Suzy goes there to privately write letters to her daughter. Suzy also goes there after fleeing from Sonny with a bag full of money that she stole from Sonny. She leaves the bag in a room at the Coronado to be found by her daughter.

Los Angeles

After Sonny and Suzy immigrate to America, they settle in Los Angeles, where they live together. However, when Sonny asks Suzy to marry him, she says that she first wishes to live on her own for a year. Suzy leaves Los Angeles to live on her own, leaving Mai in the care of an adoptive family. Sonny eventually leaves Los Angeles as well, moving to Las Vegas with his son.



Themes and Motifs

Immigration

One of the most salient commonalities between many of the characters is that they have immigrated to the United States from Vietnam, and this aspect of their personal history helps to shape their points of view in ways that contrast with that of Robert, the one central character who is not an immigrant. While Robert comes from a somewhat turbulent background considering the dysfunction and antipathy between his parents, he has experienced far more stability in his life than the other characters, who had to experience the dangers of a communist dictatorship and then flee to a foreign country in order to find safety. Thus, while Robert's outlook on life is one that generally focuses on following a strict moral code, the outlooks of the immigrant characters are more focused on survival and self-determination. The immigrant characters do recognize certain morals, and some of these characters have more of an affinity for moral rectitude than others. However, after facing the various dangers of Vietnam and struggling to establish a new life in America, each of these immigrant characters most strongly values the ability to keep themselves safe and determine their own fates. These motivations would explain the willingness of the Nguyens to gain wealth and power through criminal acts, as well as Suzy's desire for independence and Happy's attraction to Sonny for the stability he provides.

The differences between the immigrant experience and the non-immigrant experience are structurally and substantively embodied by the contrasting Robert sections and Suzy sections in the novel, which not only juxtapose their personal experiences, but also use formal differences to emphasize the contrasting aspects of those experiences. For example, on a basic level, the passages in Robert's sections that focus on family life never discuss any sort of rootlessness or geographical movement, only the emotional challenges presented by his relationships with his parents and with Suzy. Meanwhile, Suzy's sections examine the challenges posed by losing one's home and thus needing to find roots in a completely unfamiliar setting. One way in which these differences affect the form of the sections is the simple but significant fact that Robert spends much less time discussing his past than Suzy does. Suzy's personal journey is inextricable from her immigrant experience and the choices that that experience has forced her to make. Another formal difference is that the ideas that comprise Suzy's reflection of herself become much more complicated in the face of her complicated past, while Robert is able to simply follow one moral code. Robert never has to deal with the challenging ideas of shifting identity that are raised by the immigrant experience.

The novel also seeks to explore how the immigrant experience can build connections between unlikely people and erect barriers between people who otherwise seem like they should be able to coexist. One prominent set of examples would be Suzy's relationship with Robert and her relationship with Sonny. Because Suzy and Sonny have shared the hardships of fleeing to a foreign country and trying to establish themselves there, a bond forms between them despite Sonny's many glaring flaws and



dangerous personality traits. Meanwhile, despite being married for eight years, Robert and Suzy's marriage ultimately deteriorates because Suzy is unable and unwilling to communicate to Robert the significances of her immigrant experience, which is one of the most important defining experiences for Suzy. In this way, the novel explores how shared experiences can often be extremely powerful mechanisms by which relationships form, with the added argument that the immigrant experience is one of the most powerful types of experiences people can share because it is so formative for a person's identity.

Morality

In the world of the novel—a world of law and crime, secrets and investigation—the narrative uses many conventions and subversions of its various genres in order to interrogate various aspects of morality and what it means to exercise a positive influence in the world. One of the most prominent ways in which the novel explores this is through the juxtaposition of Robert and the Nguyens. As a police officer, Robert maintains great fidelity to the ideas of morality and legality, and as career criminals, the Nguyens adhere to personal ideals of self-interest and working outside the law. However, the novel provides a more nuanced view of this juxtaposition than simply the idea that Robert is wholly good and the Nguyens are wholly bad. The novel complicates this dichotomy by demonstrating certain moral failings in Robert and extenuating circumstances on the part of the Nguyens. For example, Robert is not wholly blameless for driving Suzy away. Towards the end of their marriage, he physically assaulted Suzy, and while Robert showed great remorse, this example demonstrates how darkness can lurk in those with even the best intentions. Meanwhile, the Nguyens, although highly immoral in many ways, are shown to have inherited this immorality from their destitute background as immigrants who simply wished to become as stable and powerful as possible in their new lives.

Another important figure of moral ambiguity in the narrative is Suzy, as the narrative presents many of her actions as a mixture of moral failings and moral justifications. In this way, the narrative seeks to utilize the central figure of Suzy as an argument for the common absence of a clear moral path. For example, in Suzy's choice to abandon her young daughter, Suzy is simultaneously failing her young daughter and taking a necessary step in discovering her own true identity. Suzy abandons Mai so that Suzy can discover what it truly means to be independent. The moral tension in this decision comes from a series of unavoidable incidents and choices caused by the turbulence that forced her to flee Vietnam. Another connected example would be Suzy's choice to steal money from Sonny. On one hand, it is theft, but on the other hand, Sonny is a criminal. Also, Suzy only wishes to give the money to Mai to make up for the 20 years of absence, but this then raises the question of whether or not the money can truly make up for this absence. Suzy is a tortured figure, haunted by her past decisions and circumstances. In this way, the narrative examines how the truly moral path is sometimes very unclear.



Another complex moral figure is that of Victor, who demonstrates how the will to be moral can often arise out of unexpected and difficult places. Victor is a complicated character in that he is a professional criminal, but he also is unable to refuse the demands of his conscience after witnessing Suzy's abuse at the hands of Sonny. In Victor, Robert sees someone who works as a criminal reluctantly. It is not explicit why Victor does not leave his life of crime, but it seems to be partially some feeling of loyalty to the Nguyens and partially because he has nowhere else to go. However, Victor still feels the pull of his conscience, and he works to obey it in what ways are possible in spite of his position. In this way, the narrative further explores how morality can be complicated by personal circumstances, but the persistence of Victor's conscience in spite of his circumstances presents an optimistic view of morality.

Intimacy

One of the novel's central questions is what it means to truly know a person, and through the case study of Robert and Suzy, the narrative examines how two people can achieve a simulacrum of intimacy without truly knowing one another. Suzy and Robert are married for eight years before they divorce, and in that time, one would think that they would have achieved some substantial intimate knowledge of one another. However, Robert's reflections on his marriage all serve as reflections of his lack of true knowledge regarding Suzy. In addition, Robert's investigation serves as a catalyst for this process as he discovers an increasing number of things that he never knew about his ex-wife. This dynamic is further developed by the contents of Suzy's letters, which inform the reader as to Suzy's own inner-life as well as the events in her life that she considers the most important to her present identity. Because Suzy says very little about her past to Robert, and because Robert never actually reads these letters, the letters' presence in the novel serves to further illustrate the gulf between Robert's knowledge of Suzy and her knowledge of herself.

The character of Happy adds another dimension to the already complicated relationship between Robert and Suzy, as Happy represents both the complicated nature of friendship and of romantic attachment. After Suzy leaves Robert, Robert initiates a brief romantic relationship with Happy, and Robert later realizes that his attraction is partially due to Happy's role as a translator and intermediary in Robert and Suzy's relationship. Happy represents both a connection between Robert and Suzy as well as a barrier, much in the same way that her personal relationship with Robert and Suzy separately consist of both connections and barriers. Happy's friendship with Suzy is fraught by the same reticence on Suzy's part that affects her relationship with Robert. On the other hand, Happy is Suzy's only friend in America, so they form a superficial friendship in spite of Suzy's emotional distance. Happy's death at the end of the novel symbolizes the ultimate destruction of Robert's connection with Suzy, as Happy's emotionally complex mediation was a necessary component for the minimal intimacy that Robert and Suzy were able to maintain.

While the novel focuses on many failures of intimacy, it also subtly illustrates many missed opportunities for bridging gaps between characters. Through the illustration of



emotional distance and reticence between characters in the novel, the narrative also demonstrates opportunities for increased intimacy by contrast. For example, one of the reasons that Robert and Suzy have trouble building intimacy is because they do not attempt to reconcile their differing life experiences. The novel hints that if Suzy had spoken to Robert about all the things that she writes about in her letters, then they may have closed the emotional distance that expanded between them. Similarly, the novel holds up Suzy's abandonment of Mai as another tragic loss of intimacy that could have been avoided if Suzy had at least taken Mai with her. In every case of alienation in the novel, there are several implicit alternatives to the tragic path that is taken.

Family

Throughout the narrative, the story explores themes of family, both through literal family relationships and metaphorical ones, demonstrating both the virtues and dangers that may arise out of such relationships. The two most prominent family relationships in the novel are the mother-daughter relationship between Suzy and Mai, and the father-son relationship between Sonny and Jonathan. Both of these relationships embody corruptions of these relationships as they are traditionally presented, but they also portray the potential values of such relationships. For example, during their journey to America, Suzy wishes only to protect her daughter, but after they have reached America, Suzy abandons Mai in search of independence. Suzy eventually realizes her mistake and attempts to make up for it. Meanwhile, Jonathan and Sonny have a very toxic family relationship that ends when Jonathan allows Sonny to perish in a fire. Both of these relationships are fundamentally broken, but in their depths they each hold traces of deep emotional value for these four characters. In this way, the novel portrays the loss of family relationships as a tragedy that creates deep voids and fissures in the emotional lives of the characters.

The novel also explores family relationships in a more metaphorical sense, demonstrating how the sense of family arises out of intimacy and codependence. Central examples of this phenomenon include the supposed brotherhood between Jonathan and Victor, as well as the family ties that grow between the Nguyens and the Phams. One of the ambiguities of the novel concerns Victor's motivations for helping Suzy and working for Victor. At the end of the novel, although Jonathan finds out about Victor's betrayal, he does not kill or fire Victor because, according to Jonathan, Victor is like family to him. Victor likely feels similarly towards Jonathan, possibly explaining Victor's divided loyalties. This somewhat twisted brotherly relationship, which is built upon shared criminality, demonstrates how family ties can arise out of many different types of shared experiences. In a similar fashion, Sonny, Jonathan, Suzy, and Mai form a type of family after coming to the United States, as they have shared experiences of their immigrant journey and thus understand each other in that way. Suzy and Sonny ultimately prove to be incompatible due to Sonny's violent tendencies and Suzy's desire for independence, but for a time, these differences are ignored in favor of shared experiences and the need for intimacy.



Ultimately, the novel focuses as much on the lack of family as it does on family's explicit presence, and in this absence, the novel advances the idea that family represents a willingness to believe in the goodness of the world around them. The ensemble of the novel is largely made up of highly cynical and world-weary characters, and as a result, these characters are wary of family only a little less than they are of strangers. One of the main sources of friction between Robert and Suzy is that Robert wishes to have children, while Suzy does not. This appears to be due to the fact that Suzy has already abandoned a child and does not see the world as a fit place to raise a child. Family relationships in the novel are shown to either be absent or in some way corrupted, and the novel appears to portray these dynamics as results of the characters' cynicism and distrust.

Loss

One of the most salient features of the storylines and their conclusions is the fact that they all seem to be marked by loss. Very little is gained or won back by the characters of the novel, and in most cases, the characters are left with less than they had in the first place. Robert, for example, sets out to find his ex-wife and possibly reconnect with her, but not only does he not find her, he instead realizes that his marriage to Suzy was even more of a sham than he had originally thought. As he learns more about Suzy's past, he realizes that he knew even less about her than he thought, and in this way, even his memories of his marriage are in certain ways corrupted or made less valuable. Robert does not even have the chance to read the letters that Suzy wrote, either to himself or to Mai, which is a major subversion of reader expectations. Because the novel provides the reader with so many of Suzy's letters, it is a reasonable expectation that Robert will ultimately find them as well, but in one of the novel's ultimate displays of loss, Suzy's remaining letters are burned by Sonny.

Parallel to Robert's story of loss is Suzy's own similar narrative, which stretches across 20 years and extends even into her future. Suzy's character arc begins when Suzy loses her homeland of Vietnam and is forced to flee to America. She then loses her roots, her sense of identity, and even her daughter as her circumstances force her to abandon many identifiers of her previous life. Even when Suzy attempts to create a new identity for herself in marrying Robert, she loses this as well after the eight-year marriage ends in divorce. Suzy tries to regain some semblance of comfort in her origins by reaching out to Mai and giving her the money stolen from Sonny, but Suzy ultimately disappears into the distance, likely never to have any contact with Robert or Mai ever again. In this way, Suzy's narrative is a continual story of loss.

In many ways, the novel portrays a series of destroyed lives, from the literal destruction of Happy's and Sonny's lives, to the destruction of the characters' most treasured states of being. The literal deaths of Sonny and Happy represent the destructive forces that can take hold when a person's identity or way of life is challenged. As immigrants, Happy and Sonny adapted to their new surroundings in different ways, but they both ended up in dangerous circumstances due to the ways in which they had to navigate their new home country. Similarly, Suzy, Mai, and Jonathan are forced to abandon their

old ways of life, and they struggle to find stable roots in America. Even Robert suffers loss in the form of his divorce. Ultimately, much of the drama of the novel comes from the characters' losses and their inability to recover what was lost.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is essentially told from only two perspectives: Robert's and Suzy's. However, the perspectives of other characters sometimes arise in Robert's sections, but these alternate perspectives are still filtered through Robert's point of view. In Robert's sections of the novel, most of the narration is either Robert's direct descriptions of what he experiences in the novel's main narrative, or his recollections of previous events. Although the novel is all told in the past tense, Robert's perspective alternates between his thoughts and experiences concerning the main narrative (his investigation into Suzy's disappearance) and his general thoughts, feelings, and recollections of his own past experiences. The perspectives of other characters organically arise in the course of Robert's investigation, as it is necessary for Robert to examine different perspectives in order to piece together the larger picture. For example, when Victor or Happy give Robert information about past events, it almost seems as if those characters have hijacked the novel's narration. However, these recollections are still filtered through Robert's point of view, because Robert is a first-person narrator, and thus everything that occurs in these sections can only be related to the reader by Robert.

Suzy's perspective contrasts with Robert's in that it is only retrospective. While Robert's perspective alternates between the novel's main narrative and his own memories, Suzy's sections focus only on the past. The point of view in Suzy's letters is also affected by the fact that she has a specific audience: her daughter Mai. This shapes the events and ideas on which Suzy focuses, as well as the way in which she describes them. Suzy's perspective is not only one of great distance, but also one of curated temperament, as the goal of Suzy's letters is to apologize and to explain and rationalize her decisions over the years. Unlike Robert's sections, Suzy's sections are never permeated with the perspectives of other characters. This is because Suzy is not concerned with gathering information in order to understand. Suzy appears to have already arrived at an understanding of her own life, and she wishes only to convey that understanding to Mai.

Language and Meaning

The tone and language of the novel are essentially split into two distinct categories: Robert's narration and Suzy's narration. The sections of the novel that are narrated by Robert are modeled on the cynical and spare prose of classic detective novels, with a hint of heightened lyricism and introspection as compared to that style. Robert is similar to classic detective characters in that his main function is to investigate a mystery, but he also mirrors the wary cynicism and unwavering morality of those characters. Thus, when the events of the novel are filtered through Robert's narrative voice, they are portrayed with an unflinching eye for immorality and a desperate search for virtue within the characters that surround Robert. Robert is an experienced police officer who has



dealt with many dangerous people in his line of work, so the many gruesome details of the world of crime that he enters are described with brazen plainness. On the other hand, this also helps emphasize the strangeness of the novel's more irregular events, as Robert often narrates the more surprising events and action with great emotion and surprise. Meanwhile, when discussing his own personal life and his failed marriage to Suzy, Robert's language becomes rather melancholy, contrasting his tough exterior with his sensitive interior.

The tone of Robert's sections is contrasted by Suzy's letters, which appear to use only a hint of cynicism and instead focus more on lyricism and introspection. Suzy's letters serve as a platform for the explanation and exploration of her past decisions and emotions. Thus, the tone and language she employs serves to both convey the love that Suzy holds for her daughter as well as the hardships Suzy experienced during her journey to America from Vietnam. Thus, the tone of Suzy's sections does share some similar aspects to Robert's sections, but Suzy's narration is far more delicate and lyrical in the face of the hardships she recounts, as opposed to Robert's grizzled frankness.

Structure

Dragonfish is told in the first-person past tense and employs a nonlinear structure in order to focus on multiple storylines. The novel's main narrative, in which Robert investigates Suzy's disappearance, progresses in a linear fashion, but it is often interrupted by the narrative digressions of Robert's own thoughts and memories. Robert often breaks off from the narrative of his investigation in order to narrate events of his marriage to Suzy or other events that took place before he was recruited by the Nguyens to find Suzy. For example, after describing the initial events that made him feel as if his apartment had been broken into, he provides exposition on his own background and the general overview of the origin and decline of his marriage to Suzy. Robert then also takes time to narrate the events that occurred five months previous, in which he first went to Las Vegas to look for Suzy and in which he first met Jonathan Nguyen. The main narrative is also occasionally interrupted by exposition from other characters, such as when Victor and Happy each give Robert information about the events that occurred between Suzy and Sonny. This nonlinearity allows the narrative to create and maintain an air of mystery as it slowly reveals more information about the past to both Robert and the reader.

Another major aspect of nonlinearity is manifested in Suzy's letters, which also serve to interrupt the main narrative and give important exposition about the past. The unique aspect about the letters, however, is that Robert never comes into possession of them, so their information is known to the reader but not to Robert. These letters serve to provide surprising and informative glimpses into Suzy's past, both developing her as a character and revealing just how little Robert truly knows about Suzy's life before she met him. The letters are spaced at regular intervals throughout the novel in order to maintain suspense and mystery, because the structure would become rather uneven if all of the exposition that the letters contained were simply conveyed to the reader in just one continuous section.



Quotes

If you ever read this you should know that everything I write is necessary to explain what I later did.

-- Suzy (Prologue)

Importance: This quotation helps establish the purpose of Suzy's letters to Mai, both in a literal and narrative sense. Much of the action of the novel involves Robert's attempts to uncover Suzy's secrets and motivations. However, he never possesses Suzy's letters, which serve to inform both Mai and the reader as to the salient details of Suzy's past that then led her to make important choices throughout her life.

Being with her was like discovering a new, unexpected person in myself.

-- Robert (chapter 2)

Importance: This quotation subtly reflects the irony of Robert and Suzy's relationship, specifically the fact that in the eight years of their marriage, Robert never really discovers the intimate truths of Suzy and her past. Instead, he feels a sense of discovery that involves only himself. Ultimately, this lack of intimacy becomes apparent to Robert once he is forced to investigate Suzy's disappearance and thereby makes many shocking discoveries about Suzy's past.

This one here...is an Asian arowana. A dragonfish. Very endangered in the wild. They're supposed to bring good luck, keep evil away, bring the family together...Our clients will pay over ten thousand for a gold one like this.

-- Jonathan (chapter 2)

Importance: This represents the only appearance of the titular dragonfish in the novel. As seen in this quotation, the dragonfish appears to serve as a somewhat paradoxical symbol, simultaneously representing good fortune, virtue, and the criminality of the Nguyens who sell these types of rare fish on the black market. In this way, the dragonfish serves to represent the tension throughout the novel between upright morality and self-interested criminality.

The job I'd been given was to be my punishment.

-- Robert (chapter 4)

Importance: In this quotation, Robert thinks to himself that, in addition to the various practical reasons, the Nguyens have forced Robert into the task of searching for Suzy as a punishment for his earlier attack on Sonny. Ultimately, Robert's theory is proven correct, as Jonathan's fixation on punishment becomes clear. However, for the most of the novel this remains only a theory, and it thus reflects the ambiguity and complexity of human motivation on which the novel often focuses.

Victor, I could see now, was a reluctant criminal.

-- Robert (chapter 10)



Importance: This quotation succinctly encapsulates the paradoxical nature of the character of Victor, who works as a criminal despite appearing to feel loyalty to a higher sense of morality. As a character who technically works for the Nguyens but secretly helps Suzy and Mai escape Las Vegas, he exists in an ambiguous moral space and complicates the novel's examination of morality. While Robert appears to believe in a strict moral code, Victor appears to perform good deeds while entrenched in a world of criminality.

He's making decisions he'd never normally make because all he cares about is getting back what he lost—and that's not always money.

-- Mai (chapter 11)

Importance: This idea from Mai serves as a counterpoint to Robert's idea that Sonny only wishes to retrieve the money that Suzy stole from him. Mai points to Sonny's irrational decisions as evidence that he may have multiple motivations, including the possibility that he still loves Suzy. This idea foreshadows and enriches the complicated relationship between Suzy and Sonny, which is revealed and explored in Suzy's letters.

All I needed, I thought, was the chance to know what it would be like to be unneeded, unwanted, unfettered.

-- Suzy (chapter 12)

Importance: This quotation addresses one of the most pressing issues in Suzy's letters to Mai, namely the question of why Suzy abandoned Mai as a young girl. Here, Suzy appears to explain her motivations without necessarily defending them. Suzy admits that she wished to know what true independence felt like. However, the fact that she is attempting to make up for her 20-year absence by writing these letters and giving Mai \$100,000 appears to indicate that Suzy regrets her decision to abandon Mai.

Happy was closer to Suzy than I ever was, but how can you be that close to Suzy and still not know them?

-- Robert (chapter 14)

Importance: This question helps solidify a major inquest of the narrative, specifically the true nature of intimacy and what it truly means to know a person. By this point in the novel, Robert has come to reassess his relationship with Suzy as a connection mediated more by Suzy than any real chemistry or connection between Suzy and himself. However, both Happy and Robert appear to have achieved an absolutely intimate relationship with Suzy, and this strikes Robert as a symbol of the true challenges of knowing someone completely.

We were always gonna fail...On our honeymoon, I knew it. There was some denial there, but really I knew it was just a matter of time.

-- Robert (chapter 14)

Importance: This quotation demonstrates the effect that Robert's experiences over the



course of the novel affect the way he sees his relationship with Suzy. The discoveries that Robert makes during the course of his investigation appear to help him realize that not only did he not really know her, but their relationship was doomed from the start. This realization provides a highly melancholic tone to counterpoint the noir action of the narrative.

Punishment is punishment. We all get our due sooner or later.
-- Jonathan (chapter 17)

Importance: This quotation helps to provide a definitive portrayal of Jonathan's ideology and motivations, thus retroactively coloring his actions throughout the novel. This statement from Jonathan affirms Robert's idea that Jonathan recruited Robert in part as a punishment. Moreover, Jonathan's ideology of punishment appears to be a twisted version of Robert's own moral rectitude, allowing Jonathan to grant himself absolute freedom as long as he accepts that the universe will give him his proper punishment at some point.

I was here, though. I was here, and everything happened.
-- Robert (chapter 17)

Importance: This quotation is the last instance of spoken dialogue in the novel, and it serves to both conclude Robert's role in the narrative as well as provide a final comment on exactly what that role is. As the main point-of-view character, Robert serves to observe and investigate the events of the narrative and the motivations of the characters. However, Robert is an outsider in many ways, and he has no real influence on the events of the novel. In this way, he mostly plays the role of observer, seeing the events of the narrative unfold and interpreting them through his own moral lens.

On the tape was everything I knew about her and everything I would never know. That wasn't enough, but at least it was real.
-- Robert (chapter 18)

Importance: This quotation comprises the final two sentences of the novel, ending the book with a sense of defeat, desperation, and a hint of personal resolve. By this time, Robert has accepted his inability to help Suzy or to truly know her, but he has also accepted the fact that Suzy no longer needs his help. In light of this, Robert contents himself with the lack of resolution he has experienced with regards to Suzy, and he is satisfied to hold on to the video tape as a symbol of the end of this chapter in his and Suzy's lives.