

# **The Dinner Study Guide**

## **The Dinner by Herman Koch**

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# Plot Summary

The Dinner is a novel by Herman Koch. In this novel, two couples meet for dinner. One man is a successful politician, one his brother. The two couples are meeting to discuss the actions of their sons. The brother, Paul, avoids the discussion all night as his resentment of his successful brother grows and grows. Finally, Paul finds himself caught in the middle of a conspiracy that he cannot get out of. Not that he would want to. The Dinner is an interesting study in human nature that asks the question, what would you do to protect your child?

Paul and his wife walk to a diner near their home for drinks before going across the street to meet Paul's brother, Serge, and his wife, Babette. As they talk, Paul recalls finding some videos on his son's cellphone that have left him deeply disturbed. Paul debates talking to his wife about it, but decides against it.

Paul and his wife, Claire, walk across the street to the restaurant a half hour late and discover that Serge and Babette still have not arrived. Paul is annoyed by this, assuming it has happened because Serge likes to make an entrance. Serge is a politician. In fact, Serge is the top candidate for the Prime Minister's election in seven months.

When Serge and Babette arrive, they cause exactly the stir that Paul has expected. Conversation is difficult because Paul dislikes everything that comes out of Serge's mouth. Paul gets up to go to the bathroom and is interrupted by a man who wants to know if he and his daughter can have their picture taken with Serge.

When Paul returns to the table, he finds Babette and Serge arguing. Babette gets up and leave. Claire follows. In their absence, Serge tries to speak to Paul about their sons, but Paul calls over the man from the bathroom as an interruption. Then Paul goes outside to find Babette and Claire.

While outside, Paul discovers that he has his son's phone. When the phone rings and shows Claire's face, Paul answers it. It is his son, Michel, calling from home. Paul tells Michel he has his phone, so Michel arranges to come to the restaurant. Paul goes into the restroom again to look at Michel's phone. Paul notices that Michel has several messages, but he does not want to listen to them and alert Michel to the fact that he has looked at the phone. However, while waiting outside, Paul decides to listen to the messages anyway.

Michel arrives. Paul asks him about the videos on his phone of Michel and his cousin, Rick, beating up a homeless man. Paul then asks Michel how a video of Michel and Rick burning a homeless woman to death in an ATM cubicle got on YouTube. Michel claims that his cousin, Beau, put them on there to blackmail Michel and Rick. Before Paul can say much else, Claire comes outside and sends Michel home.



The dinner continues. Paul avoids speaking about the boys until desert. Serge then brings it up. Serge announces that he thinks that he should withdraw from the political campaign. Babette begs Claire and Paul to talk him out of it, but Serge will not listen. Serge then takes a phone call and leaves. Claire makes a point of having Babette check the time more than once before she calls Michel. When Babette and Serge leave, Claire tells Paul that Michel was not home, that she did that to establish an alibi for Michel. Claire has instructed Michel to stop Beau from publicizing the videos any way he can.

Paul and Claire talk about Serge's decision to pull out of the political race and turn Rick into the police. Claire wants Paul to injure Serge to stop him. Paul argues that it cannot be him because of his unstable mental health history. Claire does it instead by hitting Serge in the face with a glass.

Serge does not turn in the boys and he does not withdraw from the political race. However, he loses the race. Beau has gone missing. Paul is closer to his wife and child than ever before.



# Part 1: Aperitif, Chapters 1-7

## Summary

### Chapter 1

Paul and his wife are to have dinner with Serge Lohmann at a local restaurant where the reservation list is months long. Serge brags to Paul that he can get a reservation there at a moment's notice. Paul does not want to be there when Serge arrives, so he and his wife have drinks at a café across the street.

### Chapter 2

Paul and Claire walk to the café since it is close to their home. They have beers, and Paul reflects on his twenty year relationship with Claire. Claire asks Paul if he thinks there is something on their son Michel's mind recently. Paul dismisses the idea that Michel might be having a problem with a girl because he seems very popular with girls. Instead, Paul suggests it might be something to do with school even though he knows the truth and does not want to tell Claire.

### Chapter 3

Paul recalls just an hour or so earlier when he went into Michel's room while he knew Michel was outside. Paul picked up Michel's phone and checked the videos, finding something he wished he had not. Michel comes in and catches him, so Paul lies about why he was in the bedroom.

### Chapter 4

Paul and Claire arrive at the restaurant a half hour late, but Serge and Babette are not there yet. Paul is embarrassed when the girl at the reservation book practically calls him a liar when he says his reservation is under the name of Lohmann. Paul announces that Serge Lohmann is his brother.

### Chapter 5

Paul and Claire are shown to a table where the floor manager begins explaining the aperitif. Paul finds the discussion absurd.

### Chapter 6

When Paul opens the menu and sees how expensive the aperitif is, he becomes angry that the floor manager did not explain that to him as well. This leads to a lively discussion between Paul and Claire.

### Chapter 7



Serge and Babette arrive. Paul reluctantly watches the fanfare as they walk through the door. He finds it aggravating. Serge and Babette then come and greet Paul and his wife. Claire is open and pleasing, but Paul is outwardly polite, although inwardly annoyed. Paul likes Babette, but finds her relationship with his brother volatile.

## Analysis

Paul Lohmann is an unhappy man who is clearly very intimidated by his brother Serge. Serge is a highly successful politician who has a face people clearly recognize on the street. Paul does not understand his popularity because he does not see Serge the same way strangers do. This causes a great deal of stress on Paul's part in his relationship with Serge, coloring everything about their relationship.

At the same time, Paul seems to have discovered something bad about his son. Paul does not say what he saw on his son's phone, but there is clearly some concern. Paul's wife asks him if they should worry about their son, which suggests that not only is there something on Michel's phone, but Michel's behavior has changed as well. This could be anything from trouble in school to drug use, leaving the reader curious about what is really going on with Michel. The only indications the reader has at this point are Paul's discovery of something on Michel's phone and Serge's decision to call this dinner to discuss both Michel and his own son. It is clearly not something good, leaving Paul tense as the evening begins.

## Discussion Question 1

Who is Serge? How is he related to Paul? Why is Paul having dinner with Serge if he does not like him?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Paul's relationship with his wife, Claire, like? How can the reader tell what kind of relationship they have?

## Discussion Question 3

How many children does Paul have? Why is he concerned about his son Michel?

## Vocabulary

Diagonally, apropos, apparently, intact, pelted, handshake, elatedly, tinted, despair, warmers, unmistakable, appearance, compliment, attention, movement, vacation, deserved, experienced, interior, harmony, reduce, proportions, presence.



## Part 2: Appetizer, Chapters 8-15

### Summary

#### Chapter 8

The appetizers come, and the floor manager describes each in detail. The floor manager then tries to open the bottle of wine that Serge ordered, but the cork breaks. This causes Serge some disappointment because he likes to show off his knowledge of wine. Paul finds it amusing, since he does not understand how his soda swilling brother could be a connoisseur of wine.

#### Chapter 9

Paul finds that he does not like his wine. Paul ordered something he would not normally order because Babette and Serge both ordered his first two choices. Paul thinks about the empty space on his and Claire's plates as the floor manager describes what is on each plate. A new bottle of wine arrives, and Serge politely accepts it. Paul finds it amusing how the floor manager is diligent about keeping everyone's wine glass full.

#### Chapter 10

The conversation turns to talk of films, which Paul sees as a bad sign. Babette cannot seem to keep up with the conversation. Serge talks about the Woody Allen film with enthusiasm because of the actress Scarlett Johansson. Paul finds Serge's questions about the movie annoying and calls him out on it.

#### Chapter 11

Paul finds himself wondering why Babette and Serge remain together. Serge once went through girlfriends very quickly, and Babette seems like the kind who would not put up with Serge's behaviors. Paul comes to the conclusion that it is because Babette is ambitious that she wants to be the prime minister's wife. Paul has long since drawn the conclusion that this is why she consented to adopting a young boy named Beau from Africa. It clearly is not Serge's sense of fidelity as Paul can see when he perks up when a young, beautiful waitress comes to their table.

#### Chapter 12

Paul recalls one summer when he and Claire went to visit Serge and Babette at their vacation home near the Dordogne river in France. The local people dislike the Dutch people who have made this their vacation spot of choice. This causes some tension between the vacationers and the locals. At the same time, Paul and Claire find themselves unhappy with the kind of work Serge and Babette do while vacationing. There was a party that included several of the local Dutch people. Paul noticed some



unpleasant behavior among the guests. Then, Paul's son Michel and Serge's sons (Beau and Rick) were brought home by a group of local men.

### Chapter 13

Paul goes to the men's room to avoid a discussion on racism.

### Chapter 14

Paul is interrupted by a man who wants to know if he could ask Serge to take a picture with the man's daughter. Paul is annoyed, but he tells the man to watch him and wait for him to nod. The man delightfully agrees.

### Chapter 15

When Paul comes back to the table, he notices that Babette is upset. After a few angry words, Babette storms from the restaurant. Claire follows, leaving Paul alone with Serge. Serge brings up the subject of Michel and Rick, prompting Paul to signal to the man from the bathroom that now is a good time for a picture.

## Analysis

Things are tense at the dinner table. It is clear to the reader that Paul dislikes his brother because he seems like something of a phony compared to when he and Paul were younger. At the same time, there seems to be a great deal of tension between Paul and his wife Babette. This tension might have something to do with the mysterious event that has happened between Michel and Rick, but the reader cannot be sure of that at this point in the novel.

Paul thinks a lot about the recent past in this set of chapters. Paul recalls going on vacation to Serge and Babette's vacation home in France. Again the reader can see how Paul views his brother as something of a phony. There is a lot of resentment there. There also seems to be some intimidation. Paul seems jealous of his brother, and he twists it into something more like hatred.

The reader knows something is going on with Michel and Rick. For this reason, when Paul finishes his vacation memory with Michel, Rick, and Beau coming home under guard of some local men, it suggests that the three boys are troublemakers. However, it is clear that Serge and Paul do not see them this way.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does a fellow patron of the restaurant want his daughter's picture taken with Serge? How does Paul respond to this request?





## Discussion Question 2

Does Serge see the hatred of the French people toward the Dutch people in the Dordogne river valley? Is Paul seeing it accurately or is he blowing it out of proportion? What does this say about Paul and Serge's relationship?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Babette upset when Paul returns to the table? How does Serge respond to this unhappiness?

## Vocabulary

Rummaging, harder, floundering, furious, showroom, menopause, belonged, realizes, ordinary, elections, remains, suspended, unbelievable, sheepishly, glance, moment, disappeared, subdued, important, soundless.



## Part 3: Main Course, Chapters 16-35

### Summary

#### Chapter 16

The main course comes, and the floor manager explains everything on the plate. Paul asked him questions to prolong the lecture because he could see that Serge is desperate to eat. Claire and Babette have not returned. Serge has decided they should proceed without them. Paul decides to go find them.

#### Chapter 17

Paul checks the ladies' room before going outside to find Claire and Babette. Paul goes into the garden and finds himself studying Serge through the window. Paul thinks about Serge's reaction to the dinner and his daughter who wanted a picture. Serge was polite up to the point where the man began asking nosy questions. Serge then pretended to take a phone call to scare the man away. Paul admires Serge's finesse, if not his motives.

#### Chapter 18

Paul hears a cell phone ring and realizes he has his son's phone in his pocket. Paul cannot figure out how the phone got there. When it rings and Claire's face appears, Paul decides to answer it. It's Michel who is calling from home. Paul tells Michel he has the phone and where he is, so Michel decides to come get it. After Michel hangs up, Claire and Babette come around the corner.

#### Chapter 19

Paul walks back into the restaurant with Claire and Babette, but he goes off to the bathroom instead of their table. Paul checks the phone and sees that there are two calls from Beau. Paul ignores those and goes to the videos to check them again. In the video, Rick beats a homeless man while Michel eggs him on.

#### Chapter 20

Paul goes back outside to head off Michel before Serge, Babette, or Claire sees him. Paul walks over to a bridge in front of the restaurant to wait. Michel seems to be taking a long time. While Paul waits, he checks Michel's text messages and listens to his voice messages. Paul is surprised to find one of the messages is from Claire who is declaring that Paul knows nothing. Paul doesn't understand what Claire is referring to. Paul believes, however, that it has to do with the videos. Michel arrives, and Paul allows him to go up to the front of the restaurant before calling to him.

#### Chapter 21



Two months ago, three boys were on their way home from a school dance. They decided to stop for a drink, but they needed money. They found an ATM cubicle. Inside the cubicle was a homeless person. One of the boys decided to go home, while the other two stayed behind to torment the homeless person by throwing trash inside the cubicle. One piece of trash was an old gas can. When the boys threw in a match, the fumes from the gas can ignited, killing the homeless person. A short time later security footage of the attack was aired on a television program. Paul recognized his son Michel and his nephew Rick.

#### Chapter 22

Paul walks up to Michel and asks him about the videos on the phone. Michel does not have an easy answer. It makes Paul recall when he confronted Michel about the security footage. Michel swore that they did not know the gas fumes would catch fire. Paul remembers soothing his son's emotions and deciding to leave things alone. It also reminds Paul of a time when Michel was eight and he broke a shop window. Paul nearly beat the shop's owner for calling Michel a delinquent.

#### Chapter 23

Paul recalls the dehumanization of the homeless person, and it makes Paul think of how this person had chosen their own lifestyle. Therefore her death was partially her fault.

#### Chapter 24

In preparation for this dinner with Serge, Paul had watched the security footage on the computer over and over again, slowing down the playback until he caught sight of something that surprises Paul. A white shoe is reflected in the final frame of the footage suggesting the boys came back to watch the homeless woman die.

#### Chapter 25

Paul went on YouTube to see if he could find more footage from the ATM security camera. He did not find much more, but he found a video that included video clearly filmed with a phone the night of the murder. In fact, the viewer could clearly hear Michel's and Rick's voices.

#### Chapter 26

Paul advises his son to get rid of the videos on his phone. In fact, Paul suggests that Michel get rid of the phone. When Paul grills Michel about posting the videos on the Internet, Michel tells him that Beau did it to blackmail him and Rick.

#### Chapter 27

As Paul digests what Michel told him, Claire calls. When Paul mentions that Michel is there, she comes outside. Michel tells Paul that Beau got the videos from Rick's



computer after Michel sent them to him. Beau is blackmailing them so he can buy a scooter.

#### Chapter 28

Claire comes out, and Michel is clearly happy to see her. Paul lies about why Michel is there, giving him money as though this is why he has come. Claire can see that Paul knows, however, and asks him after Michel is gone. He agrees and asks when she found out. Claire tells him that Michel called her the night of the ATM cubicle.

#### Chapter 29

Paul thinks back to a time when Michel was still a toddler and he was working as a teacher. Paul began to have trouble focusing. It began on a trip to Berlin when he could not stop thinking of the hundreds of people living in their little homes.

#### Chapter 30

Paul began saying outrageous things in the classroom that finally got the attention of the principal. Paul argued with the principal and was put on leave until he got a clean bill of health from the school psychologist.

#### Chapter 31

The psychologist diagnosed Paul with a congenital mental disorder. The psychologist talked to Paul about the possibility any child he had would have a chance of having the same disorder. Paul thought of Michel and wondered if Claire had ever had any testing while she was pregnant.

#### Chapter 32

Paul was given some pills to control the symptoms and they began to work quickly.

#### Chapter 33

A few weeks later, Paul suggested to Claire they have another child, but she decided they should be happy with what they had.

#### Chapter 34

Claire became ill a few weeks after that and had to spend an extended amount of time in the hospital. Paul became Michel's sole caregiver for that time, often cooking the same meal every night and allowing the house cleaning to fall behind.

#### Chapter 35

One night before Claire was to be operated on again, Babette and Serge stopped by unexpectedly. After seeing the condition of the house, Babette suggested that Michel go home with her and Serge. Paul refused. Babette continued to argue, suggesting that



Paul had taken on too much. Paul grew angry at the suggestion that he could not care for his own child. Therefore, when Serge and Babette followed him into the kitchen where dinner had just burned on the stove, Serge suggested that Paul could not handle the situation. Paul hit Serge in the face with the pot twice in front of Michel.

## Analysis

In this section of the novel, the situation becomes clearer. Paul finds Michel's phone in his pocket and accidentally arranges for Michel to pick it up. When Michel arrives, Paul talks to him about the videos he found on his phone earlier in the day. In flashbacks, Paul tells the reader how he saw on a 'Most Wanted' type program some security footage that showed his son and nephew killing a homeless person in an ATM cubicle. Instead of calling the police and turning in his son, Paul spoke to Michel and accepted his lame excuses for the act. Paul then put it on the back burner, not really doing anything until Serge called and suggested this dinner so that they could talk about the situation. This clearly implies that both Serge and Babette are aware of what happened. However, Paul is not clear on whether Claire knows what happened until she admits to it. In fact, Claire has known from the beginning, advising the boys to leave the area and not turn themselves in.

In his research prior to this meeting, Paul discovers that there is more video evidence of that night that has, for some odd reason, found its way onto YouTube. This footage clearly shows that not only did Michel and Rick return to the ATM cubicle to watch the homeless woman die, but they took video footage of it, using their own names as they laugh and joke with one another. This shows an amazing amount of indifference, leaving the reader shocked at how these boys could murder another human being and see it as a joke. However, Paul explains this away by suggesting that this woman had options and chose this way of life, therefore she somehow deserved her death.

The reader can clearly see that Michel is the leader in these acts and that he will not stop at killing this one person because there is also video of Rick and Michel beating a homeless man after the attack on the homeless woman in the ATM cubicle. A reasonable person might turn these boys in immediately. However, Paul is Michel's father. Not only that, but Paul has reason to believe that he gave Michel a mental illness that might have caused this behavior. It is this guilt that has kept Paul quiet to this point. It is guilt and love for his only child. This leaves the reader wondering how many crimes he will cover up and how far Paul will go to protect his son.

## Discussion Question 1

How did Paul get Michel's phone? What does Paul find on Michel's phone? Why does this upset him? What about the phone suggests to Paul that Claire knows exactly what is going on with Michel?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Paul research the video of the killing of the homeless woman in the ATM cubicle on the Internet? What does he find? What does this suggest about Michel?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Paul tell the reader about his diagnosis with a mental disorder? What impact might this have on Michel's actions?

## Vocabulary

Audible, poised, moist, repress, memory, reasons, forgotten, ridiculous, damask, cutlery, pose, questions, emptied, condition, weakened, unthinkable, happened, surprise, nightmarish, ruined, adopted, cheerful, nonchalant.



## Part 4: Dessert, Chapters 36-39

### Summary

#### Chapter 36

Babette dislikes her dessert and insists they take it back. The floor manager argues. Serge also argues with his wife. Babette stands up for herself. Finally, the desert is taken away. Afterward, Serge criticizes Babette for her behavior. For once Babette argues back. Serge stands like he is going to leave, but does not. Claire plays peacekeeper, trying to calm everyone down. The owner of the restaurant comes to their table and offers Babette an alternative dessert. Paul dislikes the man on sight because he reminds him of a suspected pedophile who once lived in his neighborhood. For that reason, he rudely tells him to leave.

#### Chapter 37

Serge finally approaches the subject of Rick, Michel, and the homeless woman in the ATM cubicle. Serge says that Rick is having trouble dealing with his guilty conscious. For this reason, Serge wants to turn Rick over to the police. Claire jumps on Serge for his declaration that what the boys did is murder. They argue semantics for a minute before Serge announces his intention to drop out of the political campaign. Babette begs Claire and Paul to talk him out of it.

#### Chapter 38

Paul thinks it would be great if Serge ended his political career, but he does not want his son to go to jail. Claire argues the most passionately, clearly focused on the boys and their futures. Claire insists that no one knows who those boys in the security footage are and will never find out. Claire thinks it would be premature for them to hand the boys over to the police. Serge is determined, however, and has already set up a press conference for the next day at the diner across the street. When Paul hears this, he becomes furious that Serge would pick a place that he identifies as his own.

#### Chapter 39

The floor manager comes over to take coffee orders. Serge insists that he and Babette have an appointment to get to, but Claire and Paul order coffee. Serge is clearly annoyed and insists on the check. Paul continues to argue against Serge using his café. Serge takes a phone call from the current prime minister. As Serge talks, Claire makes a point of asking Babette the time, mentioning she needs to call Michel. Claire does this twice as Babette complains about what being Serge's son has already done to Rick. Finally, Claire makes a show of calling Michel.



## Analysis

Over dessert, Serge finally manages to bring Rick and Michel into the conversation. Paul does not say much, but Claire fights for Michel. Claire clearly does not think that what Michel and Rick did is that bad and that they do not deserve to forfeit their futures to make up for it. Serge feels, however, that Rick cannot live with the guilt and needs to make amends in order to live a full life. Babette disagrees, feeling that Rick has always lived in a shadow because of his father's career aspirations.

It is clear that Serge is the only one at this table who can see that the truth needs to come out. Serge wants to do what he thinks is the best thing for his child. The others, however, do not want their children to face public humiliation and criminal prosecution. Serge does not think the boys would spend much time in jail, but Claire clearly does not want her son to spend a moment in jail.

When Serge announces that he wants to withdraw from the political campaign, there are mixed reactions. Babette clearly has spent nineteen years at Serge's side so that she could be the wife of the prime minister one day. Now this goal is within sight, and Babette does not want to lose it. For this reason, she puts her ambitions before right and wrong. At the same time, Claire feels that Serge is using his political career to throw her son under the bus. Paul thinks that Serge giving up his political career is a wonderful idea because he thinks his brother is a phony who is pretending to be something he is not. However, Paul does not want his son to go to jail as a result of Serge's decisions. Paul feels that Serge has always chosen his own child over anyone else, including Michel. Paul does not want Michel punished because of Serge's need to be someone in public he is not at home.

### Discussion Question 1

Why does Serge want to turn Rick in to the police? What does this mean for Michel? How does Claire feel about this?

### Discussion Question 2

How does Paul feel about his brother's political career? Why does he think Serge is a phony?

### Discussion Question 3

What is Babette's biggest concern at this point in the novel? Why? What about Rick?





## Vocabulary

Espresso, intended, aperitif, digestif, cheerfully, reinstate, penalty, precious, intelligent, innocence, complex, prevailing, famous, dilemma, damaging, responsibility, spontaneously, secondary, expects, reputation.



## Part 5: Digestif, Chapters 40-46

### Summary

#### Chapter 40

Paul recalls how Michel wrote a report on capital punishment not long ago. Michel worried about some of his opinions and asked Paul for help. Paul advised him through each draft of the report. A short time after Michel turned the paper in, Paul was called in to the principal's office. During the discussion, Paul not only admitted to helping Michel form his odd opinions on the death penalty, but he assaulted the principal when the principal suggested that Paul might not be completely sane.

#### Chapter 41

Serge returns to the table and tells them he still has not fully decided on what he will do. Serge implies that he still wants to speak to Babette about things. Serge and Babette leave, making as big a show of it as they did when they arrived. When they are alone, Claire tells Paul that they have to stop Serge. She wants Paul to injure Serge in the face so that he will not be willing to have a press conference. Babette's phone, which she left on the table, begins to beep. Claire looks at it and announces it is Beau before returning it to the table, half hidden under a napkin.

#### Chapter 42

Claire tells Paul that Beau has been blackmailing Rick and Michel. Claire says that she advised Michel to do anything he had to do to stop it. Claire admits the phone call she made to Michel was to establish an alibi for him. Claire actually only spoke to the answering machine.

#### Chapter 43

Paul calls the floor manager over and learns that Serge paid the check. Paul grows angry, feeling again that Serge is unfairly throwing his weight around. Paul then tells Claire that he has stopped taking his medication. Claire tells him she could tell by his behavior. They talk about stopping Serge again. Paul says it cannot be him because of his history of unstable behavior.

#### Chapter 44

Claire leaves Paul alone at the table. Paul picks up Babette's phone and listens to the message Beau left. The floor manager comes over and asks Paul about his meeting with Michel in the parking lot.

#### Chapter 45



Paul goes looking for Claire, but cannot find her in the restaurant. Paul walks out of the restaurant toward the little café, but stops on the little bridge. Paul waits, aware that Claire must be with Babette and Serge. Paul does not want to look suspicious. After a short time, an ambulance arrives followed by the police. Serge is brought out, his face bandaged, Babette at his side. Claire follows with two police officers. Claire signals Paul to go home, which he does.

#### Chapter 46

Before leaving the restaurant, Paul gives the floor manager a tip that is as much as the entire ticket was. Paul tells the floor manager he can keep it all as long as he forgets about seeing Paul and Michel in the parking lot. The floor manager agrees. Paul goes home and erases the answering machine, then settles down to wait for his family to return. Paul learns later that Claire slammed a bottle into Serge's face, leaving him with serious scars. As a result, Serge loses the election. However, Serge does not press charges against Claire. Paul and Michel find a new closeness in their relationship. Beau has gone missing and is not expected to be found. Many think he returned to Africa to find his biological parents.

## Analysis

Throughout the novel, the reader has learned about Paul's unstable mental condition. However, the reader is not clear on just how unstable Claire is until the end of the novel. It turns out that Claire has been working with Michel all along to cover up the evidence in his crimes. Not only this, but Claire encourages Michel to kill his cousin, Beau. Claire finds this easy to do because she dislikes Beau and feels there is something wrong with him. Claire also injures Serge so that he cannot hold a press conference that will be the first step in turning the boys over to the police. Claire is clearly the mastermind behind this cover up. Claire does not feel that these homeless people matter enough to warrant putting two boys in jail, especially her child. However, the reader has to wonder if anyone matters to Claire beyond her son and husband.

Paul is an angry, unstable man who has had multiple episodes of unwarranted violence against others in front of his child. This leaves the reader wondering if his violence, coupled with his jealousy and anger toward his own brother, might have something to do with Michel's behavior. The reader must also wonder what will stop this child from committing any crime he wants? After all, he has his parents to help him cover it up.

Serge seems like an unpleasant, ambitious person at the beginning of the novel. However, by the end, the reader actually feels sorry for him. Serge is very ambitious, but this ambition has led him to a place where his wife cares for him only to the extent as to what he can do for her. Serge's brother openly hates him and finds him ridiculous. Despite all this, Serge has created a strong political career and he is the only one among these four adults who wants to do the right thing, who wants to get justice for a murdered woman who cannot seek justice for herself.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Paul get called into the school to speak to Michel's principal? What is unusual about Michel's report? Why does Paul become violent?

## Discussion Question 2

How deeply is Claire involved in the cover up of Michel's crimes? Why? Does Claire know what Michel is planning to do to Beau?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Claire want Serge injured? Who does she want to do it? Who does do it? Why?

## Vocabulary

Fainting, catheter, averting, permit, insurance, amniotic, natural, happened, reminded, distinction, unmanageable, article, biological, dedicated, natural, inability, inherited, absorbed, message, portent, difficult, disappearance.



# Characters

## Paul Lohmann

Paul is the narrator of the novel. At the beginning, Paul seems like a mild mannered, ordinary guy. He is having dinner with his brother and it is clear from the moment he begins talking about Serge that Paul dislikes him. At first it seems that Paul dislikes his brother because he is a slimy politician. However, as the novel progresses it is clear that Paul simply dislikes Serge because he does not like him. Serge does not appear to have ever done anything bad to Paul to deserve this anger. In fact, Serge seems to be a generous brother, inviting Paul and his family to vacation with him in France and offering help when Paul's wife is in the hospital. However, Paul sees these overtures of kindness as Serge's way of throwing his weight around and showing everyone how much better he is.

Paul has a mental disorder that has to do with the way he perceives his surroundings. When not taking his medication, Paul tends to be obsessed with inconsequential details and he is more violent than usual. There are multiple occasions Paul recalls when he was violent in front of his son in circumstances where the violence was unwarranted. Paul has also lost his job due to his actions. Paul is aware of his mental problems and how they might have been passed down to his son. For this reason, Paul feels guilt about Michel's actions and the likeliness that he had something to do with it because of his own problems. Perhaps, this is part of the reason Paul has done what he has to cover up his son's crimes.

## Claire Lohmann

Claire is Paul's wife. Claire is a gentle, kind woman at the beginning of the novel who Paul describes as smarter than him. Claire seems oblivious to the crime that her son has committed, leaving Paul content in the idea that Claire is protected by this lack of knowledge. However, Paul soon learns that Claire has known about the murder of the homeless woman in the ATM cubicle since the night it happened. Not only that, but Claire has been Michel's confidant all along and she has given him advise on how to protect himself. Claire even tells Michel to get rid of Beau in any way he needs to. Claire even establishes an alibi for Michel the night of Beau's disappearance. Finally, to keep Serge from turning both Rick and Michel in, Claire injures Serge so badly that he is left permanently scarred. The reader must wonder if Claire is not the parent with the mental disorder.

## Michel Lohmann

Michel is Paul and Claire's only child. Michel has grown up in the shadow of his father, a man who has a mental disorder and often has violent fits. Michel has witnessed his father threaten to beat a shop owner for calling Michel a delinquent, bash his uncle in



the face for wanting to take Michel away, and beating up his high school principal for suggesting Paul is unstable. All these things have had to have had an effect on Michel's understanding of what is right and wrong. Not only this, but Paul suggests that Michel might have inherited his mental disorder.

Michel and his cousin, Rick, have committed a dark murder. They were recorded by both a security camera in the ATM cubicle where the murder is committed and by Michel's own phone. A television program runs the security footage and Paul recognizes his son immediately. However, he does not do anything to punish Michel and certainly does not go to the police. Instead, Michel is left with a lecture and the clear support of both his parents. In fact, Claire advises Michel to get rid of his own cousin Beau because he has blackmailed him. This happens, but Michel is never implicated in the crime.

The reader knows now that Michel has committed three separated crimes. He killed the homeless woman, encouraged Rick to beat up another homeless person, and instigated the disappearance of Beau. Michel's mother encouraged or helped to cover up two of the crimes. The reader must wonder what will stop Michel from committing more crimes. After all, Michel is only fifteen and has learned that he can do anything and his parents will support him.

## Serge Lohmann

Serge is Paul's brother. Serge is a politician who has a good career based on his image as an ordinary man. Paul thinks Serge is a hypocrite because his adult persona is nothing like his childhood one. Paul thinks that Serge has created this persona to promote himself, but in person he is not an ordinary man and he is nothing like the man the public thinks he is. Paul clearly resents his brother's success and his personal growth.

Serge comes off as an arrogant man as the novel begins, especially through the eyes of Paul. However, as the novel progresses, the reader begins to see a different side of Serge. Serge is actually the only one among the four adults who wants to do the right thing. Serge wants to end his current political campaign so that he can turn his son over to the police and support him through the criminal trial. This is the complete opposite of what the reader expects. If Serge were as ambitious as his brother makes him out to be, the reader would expect him to want to do all he can to hide Rick and Michel's crimes.

In the end, Paul and Claire end up ruining Serge. Serge chooses to remain on the campaign trail after Claire injures his face. Serge loses his campaign. Paul suggests it is because of his refusal to show the scars on his face, changing him in the eyes of the public from the open, ordinary guy to a politician. However, the reader can see that it also has a great deal to do with the rumors that swirl after Beau goes missing.



## Babette Lohmann

Babette is Serge's wife. Babette is a beautiful woman who wants to be rich and famous. Babette is something of an innocent in Paul's eyes, because Paul thinks she puts up with a great deal in order to benefit from being a popular politician's wife. The reader is aware that Babette is upset about something Serge has said or done from the beginning of the novel. The reader might assume it has something to do with her son, but at the end of the novel learns that Babette's grief stems from Serge's decision to step back from his political career in order to help Rick deal with the consequences of his crime. Babette does not care about what happens to her son, except when Serge puts added stress on him by being a politician. Instead, Babette's resentment is against Serge for taking away the possibility of her being the prime minister's wife.

## Rick Lohmann

Rick Lohmann is Serge and Babette's biological son. Rick is an awkward teenager of about fifteen. Rick is intimidated by his father and is often ridiculed at school because of his connection to Serge Lohmann. For this reason, Rick is something of a push over who allows Michel to force him into doing things he knows are wrong. Paul recognizes this about Rick and blames Rick for being spineless.

## Beau Lohmann

Beau Lohmann is the adopted child of Serge and Babette. Beau was just a toddler when he was adopted by the Lohmann's from Africa. Beau strikes Paul as odd because of his quick attachment to Babette and his frequent attempts to get Rick and Michel into trouble. On the night the homeless woman is killed, Beau was with Michel and Rick, but left before anything happened. Later, when Michel sends a video of that night to Rick, Beau uploads it to YouTube in order to blackmail the two boys. Beau wants to buy a scooter. Claire advises Michel to get rid of Beau by any means necessary. Beau's subsequent disappearance plays badly for Serge in the press because of the assumption he went home to his biological parents because he was not treated well in the Lohmann household.

## Floor Manager

The floor manager is like the maître d of a fine dining restaurant. Due to the fact that Serge Lohmann is an important customer, the floor manager acts as waiter to the Lohmann talk. Paul finds the floor manager quite annoying due to his habit of explaining what is on everyone's plates even though the menu clearly described it all. As a result, Paul spends much of the night making fun of the man. The joke is on Paul, however, when he realizes that the floor manager saw him and Michel in the parking lot, poking a hole in the alibi Claire was so careful to create. For this reason, Serge gives the floor manager a large bribe to keep his mouth shut.



## Tonio

Tonio is the owner of the restaurant where the Lohmann's meet to have dinner. Tonio comes out to greet Serge and Babette when they arrive, making it appear that they are all well acquainted. Later, when Babette dislikes her chosen dessert, Tonio comes out to try to make things right. However, Paul thinks that Tonio resembles a suspected pedophile he once scared out of his neighborhood, so he rudely insists Tonio leave.

## Homeless Woman

One night, Rick and Michel stop at an ATM cubicle to withdraw money for a drink. When Rick goes into the ATM cubicle, he discovers that a homeless woman is sleeping in there. The boys do not want to go find another ATM, so they try to move the woman. The woman becomes combative and refuses to move. Beau decides to go home, leaving Michel and Rick alone. Michel sees a pile of trash nearby and decides to start throwing the trash into the ATM cubicle out of frustration for the homeless woman. Among the trash is an old gas can. The gas can is empty, but when the boys throw a lit lighter into the cubicle, the fumes ignite. The woman is killed in the blaze. Later, Paul and Claire both rationalize that the woman had other options and should not have been there. Therefore, they believe the woman deserved to be murdered.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Serge's Cell Phone

Serge carries a cell phone with him everywhere he goes. Serge uses the phone to give an eager fan a chance to walk away with dignity. Later, Serge takes a call from the current prime minister on the phone.

## Michel's Cell Phone

Paul finds videos on Michel's phone that show Rick beating up a homeless man with Michel egging him on as well as a video that shows that Michel and Rick stayed to watch the homeless woman in the ATM cubicle burn to death. Paul also hears a message on Michel's phone that shows that Claire is aware of Michel's participation in the death of the homeless woman.

## Babette's Cell Phone

Paul hears a message on Babette's phone that Beau left, leaving the listener with little doubt that Beau was aware that his life might be in danger that night. Paul throws Babette's phone into the river to keep it from being used as evidence against Michel.

## Camera

A man and his daughter ask Serge to take a picture with their camera. This underscores Serge's popularity among the common people and leaves Paul feeling less successful. However, Paul actually uses this moment as an excuse not to speak to Serge about Michel and Rick's crimes.

## Wine Bottle

Serge orders an expensive bottle of wine at dinner in order to show off his knowledge of wines. However, the floor manager breaks the cork when he goes to open it, depriving Serge of the opportunity to show off.

## Lighter

Michel often carries a Zippo-type lighter with him so that he can light cigarettes for young girls.



## Gas Can

Michel throws an old, empty gas can into an ATM cubicle to humiliate a homeless woman. Soon afterward, one of the boys throws a lit lighter into the cubicle, causing the fumes from the gas can to ignite and kill the woman.

## ATM Cubicle

Rick, Michel, and Beau stop at an ATM cubicle after a school dance to get some money for a drink when Rick finds a homeless woman sleeping inside. Beau leaves, but Michel and Rick stay to torture and ultimately kill the woman.

## Security Camera Footage

The police release security camera footage of the attack on the homeless woman to the public via a crime television program. It is when Paul sees this program that he first learns of Michel's participation in this crime.

## YouTube

While looking for more of the security footage from the ATM cubicle, Paul finds on YouTube a video that includes footage clearly taken on Michel's phone the same night showing the boys watching the homeless woman burn to death. Michel tells Paul that Beau put the video up to blackmail Rick and Michel.



# Settings

## Holland

This novel is set in an unnamed city in Holland. The setting is modern times. The setting is important because at one point, Paul insists that homelessness is not a problem in Holland because of many social programs. Paul says that anyone who is homeless in Holland have made that choice, not because of circumstances outside of their control. For this reason, Paul theorizes that the homeless woman made her choices and deserved what Michel and Rick did to her.

## Restaurant

Most of the novel takes place at an exclusive restaurant. The restaurant is not named, clearly intentionally as Paul suggests he does not want to give anyone evidence against his son. The restaurant is popular, and the reservation list is months long. Paul, however, is not impressed with the restaurant because of the arrogance of the floor manager and the tiny servings of food, as well as the habit of pushing the wine.

## Cafe

There is a small café across the street from the restaurant that is close to Paul and Claire's home. For this reason, they have been customers there for many years. Paul and Claire once took Serge and Babette to that café. For this reason, when Serge needs a small, normal setting for his press conference, he chooses this café. This causes Paul to become very angry as he feels that Serge is taking something away from him and Claire. Later, it is in this café that Claire attacks Serge and damages his face.

## Paul's Home

Some of the scenes take place in Paul's home. Paul's home appears to be warm and well-kept. It would be a nice place to raise children. However, the home takes on a more sinister feeling when the reader learns how this home hides so many secrets, both between the people living inside it and from the outside world.



# Themes and Motifs

## Murder

The entire premise of this novel is Paul and Claire's desire to protect their son. The reader does not learn until the middle of the novel what exactly it is that they are trying to protect Michel from. However, the truth comes out clearly as Paul finds himself struggling to catch up when he realizes that his wife knows more than he thought she did.

Paul is watching television one night when he sees his son on security footage taken from the scene of a murder. Paul assumes his wife has not recognized their son and he wishes to protect her from the truth. For this reason, Paul speaks to his son alone. Michel claims it was all an accident, that they did not know the gas can would ignite. At the same time, Michel places the blame on the homeless woman by claiming that her smell was overwhelming and she should not have been in the ATM cubicle in the first place. Paul leans toward agreeing with his son and decides to sit on what he knows.

A short time later, Paul's brother calls and asks to have dinner with him so that they can discuss their sons. Paul knows that Serge will want to hang Michel out to dry, so he looks on the Internet to get all the information he can about the murder. Paul learns that Michel and Rick returned to the ATM cubicle to not only watch the woman burn to death, but to record it on Michel's phone. Not only this, but Paul finds evidence that Michel and Rick have attacked another homeless person.

As the conversation at dinner turns to the boys, Serge wants to help Rick turn himself in. The reader must note at this point that Serge never says anything about Michel. However, Claire quickly attacks him. Claire argues that what the boys did was simply a juvenile prank and that they never meant for anyone to die. Claire takes it even further in suggesting that the homeless woman should not have been there and brought on her own death by being homeless and sleeping in a place where she was not allowed.

As the reader reads Claire's argument and watches her actions, the reader is left trying to decide what really constitutes murder. Can a murder victim really bring on their own death, desire to die a violent death? Is there ever a time when murder is not murder? Should two fifteen year old boys go to jail for something that began as a joke? It is for this reason murder is a theme of the novel.

## Mental Health Issues

Paul tells the reader that he has been diagnosed with a mental health disorder as he describes the crime he knows his son has committed. Paul moves back and forth between his own diagnosis with his illness and the story of what Michel and Rick did to a homeless woman sleeping in an ATM cubicle. As Paul does this, the reader can see



the guilt that Paul clearly feels in the fact that he never told his wife about the genetic element of his disorder or had his son examined for the illness.

It is clear in the plot of this novel that Paul is unstable and that he fears that his son is as well. Michel clearly displays some of the symptoms of Paul's disorder. Michel does not want to see his mother in the hospital when he is just four years old and she is suddenly hospitalized for weeks. Michel does not react like a typical four year old when he sees his father abuse his uncle, or at eight when he sees his father nearly attack a shopkeeper. Michel has odd ideas about the death penalty that Paul wholeheartedly supports. Michel is not wracked with guilt after he accidentally, or not, kills a homeless person.

Mental health issues are clearly a theme of this novel, not just because of Paul's struggle with a disorder, but because of the obscure thinking of both Michel and his mother. The reader can clearly see Paul's problems, but also wonders if there is something going on with Claire as well. The novel leaves the reader wondering about the future of this family and whether anyone is safe around them.

## Envy

Paul hates his brother. The hatred is clear in every statement Paul makes in regards to Serge. At first the reader thinks this hatred stems from Serge's ambitious personality. However, as Paul reveals more and more about Serge, the reader begins to see that much of the problem is on Paul's side.

Paul is a broken man. Paul was once a teacher, but lost his job when he began to do outrageous things in the classroom, such as making comments that belied the horror of war. For nearly ten years, Paul has been unemployed. For this reason, Paul has not succeeded at anything more than becoming an unemployed house husband. Serge, on the other hand, is beloved by almost everyone.

It is clear that Paul suffers from envy. Paul admires everything that Serge has, therefore he hates Serge. Paul claims that he does not want fame and he does not want his brother's life. However, Paul hates everything that has to do with Serge's success. This is clearly envy, a theme of the novel, and a motivating factor in Paul's actions in protecting Michel from Serge more than anything else.



# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator is Paul Lohmann, the brother of a very successful politician and father to a juvenile delinquent. Paul has dinner with his brother, his wife, and his sister-in-law to discuss his son's crime only to find himself helping his wife cover up everything their son has done.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot. The novel is written as though Paul is writing down the events of this one night in order to show the reader that he has finally upstaged his brother and done something great. The narration, however, is somewhat unreliable because Paul is a man who suffers from a mental disorder, so he sees things slightly different than most people. Not only this, but Paul's thoughts and emotions are scattered, difficult to follow at times. Paul is a sad man who struggles with morality and sanity, falling flat on both counts.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel is set in Holland and the characters travel to France at one point, but there are few, if any, foreign phrases in the novel that are not clearly explained in the text.

The language of this novel is appropriate to the characters and the plot. The language is sophisticated enough to support the education level of the main characters, but simple enough for the youngest readers to comprehend. The language works well within the plot, creating a fascinating story that is compelling until the end.

## Structure

The novel is divided into five parts and forty-six chapters. The chapters are all fairly short, making for a quick read. The novel is written primarily in narration, with much of the story being told in internal dialogue and flashbacks. The story all takes place in a single night, but there is a great deal of backstory that goes as far into the past as eleven years, giving the reader just enough background to understand the motives of the main characters.

The novel has one main plot and multiple subplots. The main plot follows Paul and Claire as they attempt to protect their son from his own actions. One subplot follows the relationship between Serge and Paul. Another subplot follows the relationship between Serge and Babette. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



## Quotes

Personally, I'd never want to know three months in advance where I'm going to eat on any given evening, but apparently some people don't mind.

-- Paul (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This shows Paul's opinion of the long waiting list to get into the restaurant Serge gets them reservations for with only twenty-four hour notice.

I'm his brother,' I said.

-- Paul (chapter 4 paragraph 20)

**Importance:** This is Paul's humiliated admission that allowed the reservation girl to finally believe that he was Mr. Lohmann and he belonged in the restaurant. This shows the level of fame Serge enjoys and the level of obscurity Paul suffers.

It's just something she has inside her, a sort of inner calm or depth that makes her content with blank walls and open kitchens.

-- Paul (chapter 7 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote shows not only a snippet of Claire's personality, but something Paul admires about her.

It was as though the empty plate was challenging you to say something about it, to go to the open kitchen and demand an explanation.

-- Paul (chapter 9 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This is Paul's reaction to the lack of food on his and Claire's appetizer plates. This also illustrates the nature of the fine dining restaurant where the novel is set.

They belonged to that class of Dutch people who think everything French is 'great': from croissants to French bread with Camembert, from French cars (they themselves drove one of the top-end Peugeots) to French chansons and French films. At the same time, they failed to see that the local French population of the Dordogne fairly retched at the sight of Dutch people.

-- Paul (chapter 12 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote illustrates again how Paul sees his brother and his often lavish hobbies. Paul is an unemployed teacher, but he balks at what he sees as Serge's extravagant lifestyle.

There was something about his head. About his face. It was still the same head (and the same face), but it was like it was suspended in the air, with no clear link to a body, without even a coherent thought. He reminded me of a cartoon character who has just had a chair kicked out from under him.



-- Paul (chapter 15 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** This is how Paul sees Serge as Serge tries to explain his tiff with Babette that sent her storming out of the restaurant.

The camera moved in even closer; the homeless man's unshaven face filled the little screen. He blinked his watery red eyes. His lips mumbled something incomprehensible.

-- Paul (chapter 19 paragraph 37)

**Importance:** This is what Paul sees when he watches a video on his son's cell phone. It is clear that Rick is beating the homeless man while Michel is egging him on.

It was a joke,' he'd said. 'And it was...' He grimaced in disgust. 'You should have smelled how that stank,' he said.

-- Michel (chapter 23 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This is Michel's response when his father asks him if he was involved in the murder of a homeless woman in an ATM cubicle. This is clearly not the statement of someone racked with guilt, or with someone with much respect for human life, especially that of a homeless woman.

Or rather: whether I would be able to look at her in the same way I had a couple of hours ago, in the bar for regular people, when she'd asked if I also thought Michel had been acting strange lately.

-- Paul (chapter 27 paragraph 16)

**Importance:** This is Paul's continuing desire to protect his wife from the truth even though he has come to understand that she knows some of what has been happening with their son, Michel.

In other words, the inadequate state of medical science forty years ago is the only reason I'm sitting here across from you today?' I said.

-- Paul (chapter 31 paragraph 36)

**Importance:** This is part of Paul's discussion with the psychologist in regards to his newly diagnosed mental disorder. This chapter lends an argument to the idea that Paul gave Michel his mental disorder and most parents would have terminated the pregnancy had they known their child would be born with this disorder.

Murder?' Claire cried out. 'So it's murder already, is it? Where do you get that from all of a sudden?

-- Claire (chapter 37 paragraph 21)

**Importance:** This is Claire's reaction when Serge calls the death of the homeless woman at the hands of Rick and Michel murder. This statement makes it clear that Claire does not believe that her son did anything wrong by causing the death of this





woman. Claire seems to think that what happened was an accident that everyone should put behind them.

He said it himself: he wanted to solve this as a family. I think he understands now that some things simply have to stay within the family.

-- Claire (chapter 46 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** This is Claire's take on her attack on Serge. She shows no remorse, no guilt, just like her son. Instead, Claire makes it clear that what Michel and Rick did justified what she did to Serge.