

Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club Study Guide

Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club by Benjamin Alire Saenz

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Everything Begins and Ends at The Kentucky Club*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2012.

"He Has Gone to Be With the Women":

Juan Carlos, a middle-aged writer from El Paso, Texas, tells the story of his relationship with Javier, a driver from Juarez, Mexico. They are both of Hispanic origin but have come to understand their identities in different manners, the border between the two influencing how they see each other. Slowly, they become more intimate and reveal more about each other. Javier had to live with his aunt and uncle because his mother was a social worker in Juarez and always in danger. She was eventually murdered and buried in the desert. Javier's uncle is suffering from cancer and his death allows both of them to bond, deepening the relationship between Juan Carlos and Javier. Juan Carlos is concerned about Javier living in Juarez, as the city slowly deteriorates into chaos. They both come to terms with the fact that Juarez will always be an important part of Javier's life and that Juan Carlos will love him regardless of where they live.

Their idyllic life is struck by tragedy when Javier disappears one night, his neighbors in Juarez revealing that he was kidnapped by armed men. Juan Carlos looks for him everywhere, falling into a depression as he tries to get a sense of Javier in the things they shared. Eventually he finds that Javier was taken to the desert where his mother was buried, and the last memento left for Juan Carlos is the watch he was wearing when he died.

"The Art of Translation"

Nick, a young college student in 1985, narrates the emotional fallout after he is brutally assaulted by a group of white men while attending university in Albuquerque. They use a knife to carve the word "illegal" into his back. After the attack, he loses his sense of identity, trying to come to terms with the attack as he recovers while also attempting to piece together his life by translating words from English to Spanish, words that were familiar once but are no longer. Nick's family is concerned, as they are constantly harassed by reporters and hecklers trying to pry themselves into their home for interviews or derogatory comments. The strain on them is visible but Nick does not react, his silence compounding their worries.

Slowly, he begins to turn his life around, settling into a routine where he works at a restaurant. One night he visits a bar and leaves with an older woman, Sylvia. They have sex in her apartment in Juarez twice, where they argue over him not taking his shirt off. Nick leaves her and comes to terms with the changes in his life, especially the scars on his back and his eventual journey to claim a new identity in the aftermath of all that has happened.

"The Rule Maker"



Maximilian "Max" Gonzales tells the story of his childhood in Juarez, where he has to learn to deal with his mother as she loves him in her own unique way. There is always a roof over his head, clothes to wear, food on the table, but his relationship with his mother is not all that he would like it to be. She teaches him English and prioritizes his education, while also leaving him for days and spending a lot of time at home sinking in depression. As a result, Maximiliano spends a lot of time at other people's home, imagining himself in their families. Eventually he learns that she is a drug dealer but he does not respond to the information in any explicit manner, finding comfort in his friends, their families, and his drawings.

One day his mother takes him to El Paso and leaves him with his father, who he has never met before. His father enforces a regimented life on him, having him follow rules while also satisfying any financial needs. As Maximiliano grows and excels at school, his relationship with his father, tense at first, evolves into something more wholesome, as they are never openly affectionate but somehow find comfort in each other. Just like his mother, Maximiliano's father is also a drug dealer and addict, funding Max's education and eventual move to Georgetown University with the drug money. His father eventually dies from an overdose and Max comes to realize the true depth of his relationship with his father.

"Brother in Another Language"

After a failed attempt at suicide, Charlie tells the reader how he ended up in a therapist's office. While there, he slowly falls in love with David, the man his mother is paying to listen to him, while also revealing details of his life, including the perpetual hatred and indifference he had to face from his parents growing up, and the loss of his older brother, the only comfort he had growing up. Charlie's father passes away in a car accident, and Charlie violently ends his relationship with his mother, while being reminded again at the funeral of all the hate and anger the family had directed towards him.

A phone call from his therapist reveals that his father left him a large amount of money, a fortune that he does not wish to partake in. Being convinced by David, Charlie meets with his father's lawyer, Richard Fry, who tries to convince him to take the money that was left to him and his brother. Richard reveals his uneasiness at having been a part of Charlie's father's business and his relationship with Charlie's brother, whom he loved and supported financially after his exile from the family. Charlie's brother is revealed to have died in Buenos Aires after a dispute with his lover. Charlie, burdened by the loss of one of the few people who loved him, wanders about and ends up in a jail cell, unaware of how he got there but determined in a manner to never leave.

"Sometimes the Rain"

While driving through the rain on a highway, Neto reminisces about his last few months of high school and the summer after. During that time, he befriended Brian Stillman a local boy who had been part of the track team with him. As Neto roams aimlessly around the town, he encounters Brian and they have an honest exchange where Brian



expresses his admiration for Neto and apologizes for his behavior. While at a riverside party, Neto overhears a couple having sex and learns that it is Brian and Jorge Ledesma, the son of the a farmer from Mexico who worked on Brian's farm. Neto leaves without confronting them and masturbates to the image of them that night.

Having received a large financial aid package from The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, Neto decided to work two jobs over the summer to finance the remainder of his education. While driving one night, he encounters Brian Stillman on the highway, bloodied and bruised. He takes Brian home and cleans him up, offering a place to stay as he comes to terms with his father's brutal assault and his future. Brian and Neto drive around for a few days, getting closer but never in a sexual manner, despite Neto's desire. When Brian decides to leave, Neto gives him \$600 and sees him off to Denver. Some time later, it is revealed that Brian lost his life in Vietnam and that he had fallen in love with Neto during their time together.

"Chasing the Dragon"

Conrad tells the story of his relationship with his sister, Carmen, and how their parents led her to her death. After the death of their parents, Conrad and Carmen are raised by their uncles and aunts, who try to control their lives in every manner possible. Carmen is the rebellious one and antagonizes her extended family deliberately. Both Conrad and Carmen try to come to terms with their parents and their volatile relationship, a mother who was depressed and indifferent, and a father who was an alcoholic. Conrad begins to attend college and immerse his life in his education and sex, the latter being the only thing satisfying for him and the only thing under his control.

Carmen slowly introduces him to drugs, first marijuana and then cocaine, revealing her own addictions and demons that were carried down to her from their mother. Conrad attempts to help her while also fighting his own addiction: sex. Carmen consistently reminds him of their similarities to their parents and their inability to escape from their fate. Carmen slowly spirals into a depression fueled by her heroin addiction, as she desperately attempt to "chase the dragon." After multiple attempts by Conrad to control her addiction, Carmen finally overdoses and dies, leaving Conrad to confront the loss of his sister and his inability to help her.

"The Hurting Game"

After he receives news about Tom's death, Michael recalls the uniqueness of their relationship, from how they met to the strange intimacy that developed between the two.

Michael, a high school counselor, and Tom, a criminal attorney begin a relationship. Despite Michael's uneasiness, they begin dating and Tom reveals a softer side to him that pleases Michael. Tom teases Michael about his choice of drink while also praising and encouraging him about his art. During his job, Michael sees Danny, a child who is being severely beaten by his father and attempts to provide an out for him. While Danny's father constantly follows him around even after he is relocated to a foster



home, Michael, with the help of Tom, acquires an attorney and begins the process of sending Danny to Colorado to live with his aunt.

Tom comes to Michael one day severely agitated and reveals his fears and desires to keep Michael away from his business and the danger that accompanies it. Tom disappears, and for a while Michael stumbles around bars trying to find solace. In a newspaper clipping, he sees that Tom has been arrested for trying to fake his own death and he is relieved to hear that Tom is still alive. While sitting at the Kentucky Club, he imagines what Tom would say once he walked in and how he would respond.



He Has Gone To Be With the Women

Summary

The story starts with Juan Carlos looking on at a man in a coffee shop, admiring the way the morning light changes his appearance. Juan Carlos visits the coffee shop every Sunday and notices the man drinking his coffee and reading a book. As he looks on, Carlos admires his fine features and makes up stories in his head. They never speak. Juan Carlos never orders coffee, but instead merely looks on as he waits in line for his newspaper every Sunday. He imagines one day he will walk up to the man and ask him about whatever book he is reading. While at the coffee shop, Juan Carlos reflects on everyone who stops him and asks him about his day and his work, the number of people who know his name. The knowledge that so many people know him does not provide comfort and instead makes him feel alone.

One day Juan Carlos is approached by the man, Javier, who asks him why he does not buy coffee. They begin a discussion about Carlos's choice of newspaper and his homemade coffee, which eventually leads them to this apartment in Sunset Heights. They have discussions about their ethnic origins, as Javier's father was Iraqi and emigrated to Mexico and married his mother.

As they become more intimate, physically and emotionally, they begin to reveal details about each other. Javier's father was killed and he spent a large portion of his childhood with his aunt and uncle in El Paso while visiting his mother on the weekends. Now, as a chauffeur for the U.S Consulate in Juarez, he visits his uncle every weekend and takes care of him after the death of his aunt from cancer. Javier is concerned about his uncle, who is suffering from cancer himself and has lost his sense of security, needing Javier to protect him from the slightest emotional and physical threat he perceives.

Their relationship deepening, Juan Carlos worries about Javier's security across the border. One Sunday, Javier appears at his doorstep, revealing that he admitted his uncle into a hospital. Emotionally vulnerable, Javier asks Carlos to reveal something about him. Carlos tells him about his brothers who died and left numerous children behind to weeping widows. He tells him about the people he loved and the ones whose love he did not return. Carlos tells him about his past as a child laborer and the scars he still bears from that time. Javier talks about his mother, who was a social worker in Juarez working a lot with transvestites. She was killed and buried in the desert and Javier was never able to find her.

Javier's uncle passes away and Carlos supports him through the ordeal. They visit the uncle's old house and make love there. They settle into a routine, becoming comfortable with each other's quirks. Eventually they fight and reconcile over Carlos wanting Javier to leave Juarez because of the danger. One day they meet at the Kentucky Club, from where they make their way to Javier's apartment. Carlos meets Magda and Sofia, Javier's neighbors who are social workers.



One Friday, Javier disappears. Juan Carlos goes to Juarez and is told by Magda and Sofia that Javier was taken by a group of armed men who were rounding people from the neighborhood. Grief stricken, Juan Carlos goes to the U.S. Consulate and asks for help. For weeks, he roams from street to street, from the police and to the consulate, trying desperately to find information about Javier. He finds himself settling into Javier's apartment, trying to sense his presence through the items in there. Months pass and in the numbness of his grief, he stops investigating until he receives a call from Magda and Sofia. They tell him to stop looking and accept the inevitability of Javier's death. They tell him how they were taken to the desert to see Javier's body and brought back Javier's watch, which they give to Juan Carlos. He cherishes the last memento of his lover and thinks of the peace Javier is in now that he is with his mother and all the other women in the desert.

Analysis

Javier and Juan Carlos's relationship explores multiple taboos that men in their position have to face. As homosexual men, their relationship is further hobbled by the border that divides them. Juan Carlos is from El Paso while Javier is from Juarez. While walking distance from each other, the border line has different meanings for both men. Juan Carlos sees Juarez as a broken city full of danger and the border as simply a physical line that can be crossed. For Javier, the city of Juarez is his home, his birthplace and eventually his place of death as well. The border line represents a certain individuality for Javier, the crossing of which can have irreversible consequences, and in a manner of speaking, exactly that happens. Javier is defensive about his living in Juarez, despite the danger, and fights with Juan Carlos when the latter urges him to leave. The city is not only a reminder of who he is as a person, where he comes from, the people that he has lost, but it also signifies a certain danger that only he is capable of facing. By not leaving Juarez and by keeping Juan Carlos in El Paso, he is saving the latter from the fate that befell his mother and which will also lead to his own death. Their relationship is tranquil until Juan Carlos crosses the border and visits Javier's apartment in Juarez. Their relationship inches forward in intimacy and love but it also goes further to its end. It is only after Juan Carlos crosses the border that Javier is kidnapped and murdered in the same way his mother was.

Parental figures play an important part throughout the collection and in this story as well. It is a source of intimacy between people and here it is the same case. The only mention of Juan Carlos's father is of him holding Juan Carlos's hand when the father is on his deathbed. For Javier, his uncle is the only father he has ever known, and Javier stands close to him as he expires. There is another connection between parent figures and the central characters. Fate and destiny tie parents and their children together and in this story, Javier is most affected by it. His mother is a social worker who works a lot with transvestites. While it is never explicitly stated, his mother's work with people whose sexual identities are taboo eventually leads to her death as an unknown woman among many in the desert. Javier faces his death in a similar manner. He is embroiled in a forbidden love, almost as if he is one of the people his mother used to work with. Like his mother he is handsome, stopping people like Juan Carlos in their tracks. And



just like her, he is taken by force and buried in the desert, just another face among many.

The dialogue is an important part of the story and constitutes the majority of the action. Javier and Juan Carlos chat about seemingly banal things, but there is always a tension underneath the surface - something that fuels their relationship further. They talk about circumcision and the uncomfortable aura around the topic allows them to break further into an honest exchange. Javier always comments on Juan Carlos's books and how he is related to his characters. The most tense interactions between the two are when they are talking and the dialogue is short and terse, driving the tension to a climax.

Discussion Question 1

How does the border between Juarez and El Paso manifest itself in the relationship between Javier and Juan Carlos?

Discussion Question 2

Is there a relationship between Juan Carlos the writer and the lover? Are there similarities between the descriptions of his works and his life as it develops in the story?

Discussion Question 3

What importance do parents play in the growth of the central characters?

Vocabulary

pensive, mural, capricious, mesmerizing, transvestites



The Art of Translation

Summary

The story opens with Nicholas (Nick) in a daze as he lays in a hospital bed. Attending university in Albuquerque, Nick has been attacked by a group of xenophobic white men. He senses his family around him and the pain in their faces when he opens his eyes. Nick repeats his parents and siblings names to himself, while also thinking about the family name: Guerra; It means war and he thinks about whether or not his family consists of warriors who are capable of winning their battles. His family emigrated from Mexico, the land of battle, to America, the land of happiness. As such, he should bear his scars with silence and dignity, grateful for the opportunity for happiness. In the hospital bed, he begins to contemplate the words that people are saying around him and the loss of meaning for him.

After a conversation with his doctor, Nick further loses his sense of words. After being released, he goes home with his parents and tried to find familiarity with the items in there. He feels a certain distance from the house and its objects, recognizing them but also not feeling attachment. While at home, his family begins to be harassed by journalists who come to inquire about Nick and the emotional fallout for him and the family after the attack. Nick notices the appearance of calm slipping from his family and tries to empathize with their grief, wanting to own it, but he fails. After a while, the family changes their phone number but a tension remains among them, along with a constant stream of inquiries. The less Nick speaks, the more freedom he feels from the burden of words, and the burden of trying to translate them. He gives up reading because he no longer wants to fight for the meaning of words.

Nick gradually begins to recover, going running and speaking more to his family. He finds words to translate in a dictionary and starts a job busing tables at a restaurant. He develops a routine, running in the morning and working at night. One day he decides to go out for a drink. At a bar he meets an older woman, Sylvia. They drink and cross the bridge to her apartment in Juarez. She notices his timidity and tension, as he refuses to take his shirt off during sex. They argue after he tries to pay her, mistaking her for a prostitute. A week later, they have sex again and argue once more, Sylvia antagonizing him for not taking his shirt off and for not trying to be more intimate.

He goes back home and slowly, words begin to come to him. Now he is able to translate phrases and the meaning returns. He continues his routine of running and working, slowly coming to terms with the attackers and their intent. He thinks what the appropriate response should have been to the attackers, whether he should have submitted himself to them. Perhaps he should have taken the knife and written the words on his back himself. Nick faces a final moment of tranquility as he comes to terms with the changed world he lives in and the meaning of words he has to learn once more.



Analysis

Words are an important symbol throughout the story, as they are the center of Nick's spiritual agony. Coming from an immigrant family, Nick is beholden to two languages: Spanish, his native tongue, and English, the language of his adopted country. After the attack, during which the words "illegal" are written on his back with a knife, the xenophobic nature of his attackers forces him to confront language as identity. The attack is a rejection from America and its language. In response, Nick loses his grasp on the English language and finds himself questioning words one by one, trying to construct meaning for himself. Every encounter after the attack prompts him to look for new words, trying to make sense of his growth with the meanings of words. His growth is accompanied by the breadth of words he thinks about, slowly developing into phrases that reassert his identity and the identity of people around him.

Nick's surname, "Guerra," plays an important role after the attack. Meaning war, the name prompts Nick to reexamine his role within the new society he inhabits. If he is a warrior, and comes from a warrior, so why did he lose this battle? Does being a warrior mean that he has to win every battle that he is a part of? Perhaps the warrior in him has died once encountered by the hatred of his adopted country. Perhaps the warrior in him died when he crossed the border and began to learn the English language. Redefining his life would mean coming to terms with the new definition of warrior. Not only does he have to translate Spanish into English again, he also has to familiarize himself with the new him, the new warrior. His new battle is with language and trying to assert his identity within English. Coming to terms with his new reality is a battle itself and words are his weapons.

The theme of home comes to front again and again. Since he is an immigrant from Mexico living in the South, geographically home is closer and thus the definition is blurred. Set during the Reagan years when immigration was opened for scores of people, the attack on Nick shows a backlash of sorts. The inscription of "illegal" in English on his body is a direct attack of language and country. However, the question becomes where exactly is Nick's home. He goes to university in Albuquerque but his family is settled in El Paso, and he refers to that city as home. The space that encompasses El Paso and Juarez has no defined country or border, and it is within the space of this purgatory that Nick reexamines his identity through language. His growth is spurred when he crosses the border into Juarez, crossing countries. His encounter with Sylvia prompts him to his new reality. The violent spat with Sylvia allows Nick to cross back into El Paso and accept the change in his life in an optimistic manner, settling his soul to a place of comfort.

For the majority of the story, Nick moves about in a physical and spiritual haze. The author establishes this through Nick's deep introspection. The atmosphere is surreal, with Nick's ruminations about his parents and siblings feelings read as if he is viewing them from a distance. Nick talks about the grief his family might feel and wishes to take it away from them, yet he is unable to do so because of the distance. The purgatorial



sense imbued through Nick's mind sets the emotional core of the story, that of a certain listlessness that pervades every character that he comes into touch with.

Discussion Question 1

How does Nick grow as a warrior through the story?

Discussion Question 2

In a spiritual sense, where is Nick's home?

Discussion Question 3

How does Nick's family's emotional state affect him? Does it play a part in his eventual growth?

Vocabulary

impersonator, disconcerting, illegal, indecipherable, vestments, creosote



The Rule Maker

Summary

Maximiliano grows up in Juarez with his mother, who spends a lot of time away from home. He reminisces about his time there with a muted sense of nostalgia, thinking about his school and his neighbors who were kind to him. He spends a lot of time at his friend Jorge's house, where he eats dinner regularly and finds a sense of calm among the family. His own home is adequate for him and his mother and they are not burdened by any severe financial constraints. Maximiliano grows up learning to take care of himself under the shadow of San Martin Caballero, a savior of the poor. His mother reads to him in English, emphasizing the language while also providing for his upkeep in American dollars.

Maximiliano and his mother spend a lot of time in El Paso, where they have family. His mother takes him there to purchase clothes because she believes them to be of better quality. As time goes on, Maximiliano learns more about his mother's occupation, as a stranger appears at their door and asks for her. His mother becomes upset and tells him never to open the door when she is not home. Maximiliano spends a lot of time home by himself and despises the isolation, always thinking about his mother.

One day, his mother appears home drunk and takes him to El Paso. When there, she reveals that she is taking him to meet his father, who he has never seen before. Maximiliano goes along quietly, witnessing his parents arguing. He tells his mother he hates her, even though he does not, and goes along to his father. His father is terse with him, providing all the necessities of life for him but dealing with him in a regimented manner, providing Maximiliano with rules to follow and stressing he take care of himself and the house.

Maximiliano finds out his father's last name is McDonald and that he is a drug dealer. As they spend more time together, they settle into a routine, where Max writes down all the rules his father prescribes in a notebook, takes care of the house and cooking, while his father provides for him in a satisfactory manner, giving him money and anything else he needs. His father makes him attend church and stresses his education.

Soon, Maximiliano notices his father using some of the drugs he sold. Around the same time, he begins to give Maximiliano more independence, prompting him to learn driving and buying him computers and phones that would help him. Maximiliano gets drunk for the first time and does not recall fighting someone who offered him marijuana. One day, his father leaves for a few weeks and orders him to make a list of colleges to go to, leaving a number for a lawyer in case anything happens. He comes back from the trip satisfied and is determined to pay for Maximiliano's apartment and education. During a party at their house, someone offers Maximiliano a crack pipe and his father attacks him, yelling at Maximiliano to never do drugs. His father's addiction worsens and he attacks Maximiliano when the latter confronts him.



After getting accepted in Georgetown, Maximiliano leaves in the car his father buys him to go live in the apartment he has paid for as well. During the final scene, Maximiliano thinks about his father's death from a drug overdose, reflecting on all that he had provided for him over the years and how his father saved his life.

Analysis

The border plays a more muted part in this story, yet is important nonetheless. While growing up in Juarez, Maximiliano's life is both tranquil and volatile, depending on whether or not his mother is around. When she is not around, he plays with his friends and spends time at their houses, eating with their families and finding peace in the family setting that he does not have. Whenever his mother is around, she takes care of him but there is also a sense of implicit anxiety within Maximiliano during these times. His mother takes him to El Paso supposedly to purchase clothes because the items from there have better quality. Eventually, though, she leaves him with his father in El Paso so he can have a better life, even though both his parents have the same occupation. The drug dealing his father does in El Paso is still drug dealing but because it is in El Paso, the danger is less and Maximiliano benefits from it more.

Addictions are prominent throughout the story. Maximiliano's father, Eddie slowly becomes addicted to the drugs he sells. As his addiction furthers, his relationship with Maximiliano changes and he becomes more openly affectionate spending more money on his son in an attempt to save him before he (Eddie) dies himself.

Maximiliano is addicted to his drawings, drawing his mother and his father's house. Since he never has a family with both parents and a tranquil house like his friend Jorge, the pictures are the only means by which Maximiliano can make sense of his surroundings. The drawings allow Maximiliano control over places that he has no control. Maximiliano is also addicted to following rules, writing down in his notebook every rule that his father orders him to follow. He is addicted to the control of his parents and lets them shape the way his life moves forward. He exerts very little independence and exists within the domain his mother creates for him, and then the one his father creates for him.

Surnames are connected with identity, a prominent theme throughout the collection. While growing up in Juarez, Maximiliano is only aware that his surname is Gonzalez and he lives with that fact. Once he moves to El Paso, his father reveals that his surname really is McDonald. While his grandfather is originally Irish and settled in Mexico, the fact that there is a part of his lineage that is not fully Mexican has a certain impact on his life. His mother was fully Mexican, and as a result, she was unstable and unable to provide for his upkeep on a consistent basis. Maximiliano's father, on the other hand, has a part of him that is not Mexican, and thus, he is able to take better care of his son. On the surface, Juarez represents chaos and El Paso represents stability. Yet, this is only on the surface, as Maximiliano's father has his own demons which he eventually succumbs to. Maximiliano is not safe on either side of the border and the



only protection he has from his parents's demons is the regimented, rule-based life his parents create for him.

Maximiliano's narration helps to establish a subdued tone throughout the story. There are no strong emotions evident in his words, as he always submits himself to the flow of events that guide his life. His actions tell the tale of his submission, as he adheres to the rules of parents without question throughout the story. The act of writing down rules is not only a symbol of addiction and submissiveness, but it also helps to set the tone of the story, since anytime he opens his notebook it is with an unquestioned sense of duty.

Discussion Question 1

While the story ends with Maximiliano's father, how does his mother's influence continue throughout the story?

Discussion Question 2

Is Maximiliano ever able to break out of the shells his parents force him into? If so, how?

Discussion Question 3

What are the similarities between Maximiliano's parents? Differences?

Vocabulary

communion, rosary, portfolio, laundering



Brother in Another Language

Summary

The story begins with Charlie in a therapist's office after a failed attempt at suicide. His parents feel ashamed of him and begin to pay for his treatment. During conversations with David, the therapist, Charlie reveals the strained relationship he has with his parents. They are wealthy and have no issues paying for his sessions but he brims with resentment, exclaiming that he hates his father. He had a brother who was banished from the family, contributing to Charlie's feelings towards his family, particularly his father. Charlie's decision to attempt suicide in his parent's bedroom prompts the therapist, David, to inquire into Charlie's feelings for his parents, which Charlie reveals is indifference. Charlie reveals that his father is controlling and his mother is more of a spectator, claiming that he does not love her but does not hate her either. David attempts to get Charlie to say he loves his parents but Charlie is insistent and firm in his feelings.

Charlie's father dies in a car accident, and Charlie attends the funeral regardless of his feelings. While there, he witnesses his cousins and other members of the family, wondering if they love their fathers or hate them like he does. He reflects on his father's biggest aspect: his cruelty. One of his cousins attempts to talk to Charlie, but he brushes her off and gets into a violent argument with his aunt, leading him to explicitly end his relationship with his mother.

Working as a bartender, Charlie moves into an apartment at Sunset Heights. He thinks about the people he has loved and the ones who have attempted to love him. There was a girl, Ileana who left him after a while, claiming that she could not stand by as Charlie wallowed in his self-hatred. Over a phone call, David reveals that Charlie's father has left Charlie a fortune. Despite his determination to avoid the money, Charlie ends up meeting with the lawyer, Richard, who has been left in charge by his father to disperse the money. During their conversation, Charlie insists he does not want anything to do with the money but Richard surprises him that the money was left for him and his brother. Charlie asks about his brother and finds out that he recently died in Buenos Aires, and that Richard had been his lover before he was banished from home.

After leaving Richard's office, Charlie wanders about dazed, thinking about his brother, the only person who had loved him growing up. Charlie visits the Kentucky Club and drinks, eventually losing his memory of the night as he wakes up in a jail cell. He considers calling either David or Richard but decides against it.

Analysis

Hatred is the primary emotion driving this story. Charlie feels the hatred from his parents after his failed attempt at suicide and reciprocates. The people he loves can never



return his love, such as with his brother who is banished from home, and David, who is his therapist. Even the nurse, though tender and compassionate, does not love Charlie the way he wants her to. Ileana, a former girlfriend, attempted to love Charlie, but his self-hatred drove her away. Charlie is stuck in an impossible place, hating the people that ought to love him, losing the people who do love him, and not being able to love the people who want to love him. The current of hatred drives the action of the story and Charlie's character.

Despite his relationship with them, Charlie's parents influence his life more directly than anyone. Charlie reveals his father to be cruel and implies the illegal nature of his business. His mother is indifferent for the most part and Charlie reciprocates his feelings for her in a similar fashion. Charlie's father kicked his brother out of the house for reasons never stated, though it could have been for his homosexuality, as Charlie's mother later makes a jab towards him when he reveals that he will be moving to Sunset Heights, telling him to make sure it is a woman he is sleeping with. The only way for his parents to express any feelings is through money, as they pay for Charlie's therapy and eventually his father leaves him a large sum of money. Similar to "The Rule Maker," money is a currency of love. But in this story, there is no love attached, just a transference of parental responsibility to paper money.

Though not as developed as in other stories, the issue of language plays a part here as well. Charlie reveals to David that he has a strong relationship with words. Later on, he reveals that his brother left the country to go embrace the language his parents never spoke. Since his brother went to Argentina, one can surmise that the language Charlie is referring to is Spanish. His parents, with their money and residence in El Paso, have forsaken Spanish. In an act of defiance, his brother embraced Spanish, and now Charlie can only think of his brother's death in Spanish, indirectly thwarting his parents' influence and hatred.

While he is never directly present, Charlie's father is perhaps the most important character in the story and is a stronger antagonist in his own absence. His lack of presence creates an aura around him that Charlie fills with hatred and anger. He is almost a mythical figure, one that is the cause of the angst that threads itself through the characters in the story. His death does not relieve Charlie from his hell of self-hatred but precipitates his demise. Even in death his hatred of his children lives on and Charlie is unable to fight it.

Discussion Question 1

What kind of love does Charlie have for David? Is it merely paternal or is there a romantic element involved?

Discussion Question 2

While the story ends with Charlie in a jail cell with a nihilistic frame of mind, does his progression through the story offer any hope of redemption for him?



Discussion Question 3

How does money play a part in family relations in the story?

Vocabulary

fresco, emissary, empathy, transference, counter transference



Sometimes the Rain

Summary

The story follows Neto during his last few months in El Paso during the summer of 1970 as he prepares to move away for college. His relationship with his father is hateful and strained, mostly due to the loss of siblings in different manners, and his mother's affections are not enough to make up for it. Feeling distant from his friends and family, essentially ready to move on, Neto has a casual interaction with Brian Stillman one day as he cuts school and drives around. He is surprised at the polite behavior of Brian, who had been one of the people who bullied him while he was on the track team.

During a bonfire party by the river, Neto interacts with Rosie, an ex-girlfriend he is on good terms with. She reminds him of how he inspired the love of words in her and how that had prompted her to go to Austin for university. As he moves away for some quiet, he begins to hear the sound of people making love, who eventually reveal themselves to be Brian and Jorge, a boy who lives and works on Brian's father's farm. Neto does not reveal himself and does not tell anyone. That night he masturbates to the thought of them and feels a well of self-hatred inside.

Having received a substantial scholarship to go to Albuquerque for university, Neto begins to work two jobs over the summer to pay for the remainder of his education. He loses himself in his work and enjoys the solitude it provides. On a night off, as he is driving on the highway, he runs into Brian Stillman, who is beaten and bruised. Forcing him inside, Neto takes him home, as his parents are out of town, and takes care of him. Brian reveals that his father attacked him, expressing his hatred for him. Brian and Neto bond over their mutual hatred for their fathers, spending time together and revealing their isolation to each other. They go to Juarez and drink at the Kentucky Club, enjoying each other's presence but never making any sexual advances.

Brian reveals his desire to leave El Paso, wanting to join the military as a means of escaping after he finds out Jorge is moving back to Mexico with his family. Neto initially convinces him otherwise and gives him several hundred dollars to go to Denver. Before departing, Neto tells Brian that he knows about him and Jorge, and that he harbors similar desires. A year later, Neto receives a letter from Brian with the money Neto lent him, letting him know that he had joined the Army and was in Vietnam. His mother lets him know some time after that Brian was killed in Vietnam trying to save a fellow soldier.

After graduating from college, Neto comes home to visit his dying father and runs into Jorge, with whom he talks about Brian. Jorge reveals that they ended things before Brian left for Vietnam, and that the latter had fallen in love with Neto.



Analysis

The forbidden love the characters engage in during the story highlights the primary tension. Set in 1970 with the Vietnam War as a backdrop, the central characters engage in sexual relations or sexual thoughts that are not acceptable at the time. The primary threat to Brian and Jorge's relationship is what would happen if somebody found out, and the result is Brian's father beating him senseless when he becomes aware. Yet, where some characters act on their love, others do not make a move. As Neto and Brian spend more time with each other, their attraction for each other grows but they never act on it. Neto still has not fully come to terms with his sexuality while Brian is still scarred by his father and does not want to spoil Neto's kindness.

The relations between fathers and sons is an integral part of the story, and the hatred that comes with it. Both Neto and Brian have hateful relationships with their respective fathers. Neto's father is full of anger due to the incarceration of one child, pregnancy of another, and the death of a third. In his emotionally turbulent state of mind, he directs all his anger at Neto, who receives it with calm indifference. Brian's father is more volatile in his hatred and beats him for it. While it is never explicitly revealed what caused his physical outburst towards Brian, it is implied that he found out about the relationship between Brian and Jorge. When they visit the Kentucky Club, Brian tells Neto that his father met his mother at the Kentucky Club. The loss of his wife prompts his anger and is further fueled by Brian's illicit relationship. While Neto is able to brave his father's calm hatred and do something with his life, Brian is not able to do the same. His father's violent anger prompts him to go to Vietnam, where he loses his life.

Escaping their surroundings is important for their central characters, as they attempt to leave their places of origin as a means of beginning new lives. Neto, fed up with his father's casual hatred, decided to go to Albuquerque for university, while Brian goes to Denver first and then Vietnam. Neto also wants to escape his family surroundings, working at 7/11 to pay for his education, as opposed to his brother, who tried to rob one. They are both looking for a place to call home but by the end of the story, neither has found a permanent place to live. Jorge is prompted to leave the U.S. for a while but ends up returning and living in California. Neto eventually returns and lives in New Mexico but is reminded in his surroundings of Brian and the pain the recollection brings.

Discussion Question 1

What are the similarities and differences in Neto and Brian's relationships with their respective fathers?

Discussion Question 2

Can you think of a reason why Neto and Brian do not act on their feelings for each other?



Discussion Question 3

Leaving is an important theme in the story. In a spiritual sense, who manages to leave and who does not?

Vocabulary

recidivist, novena, shiner, hunch, scarce, inconsolable



Chasing the Dragon

Summary

Conrad and his sister lost their parents when they were younger and have been raised by their aunts and uncles. Their parents had a volatile relationship with each other but were indifferent to the children for the most part. After their mother's suicide, they were taken in by their Uncle Louie and Aunt Lucille, along with their Uncle Hector and Aunt Susan in the vicinity. The aunts and uncles are a source of amusement for Conrad, as he enjoys listening to them argue about his parents but never with any conviction as to what they are talking about. They are all controlling and it is with his sister Carmen, the rebel, that he shares a bond with.

Conrad and Carmen often talk about their parents's beauty and their mental illnesses. Carmen is the only person Conrad truly loves, because she was consistently kind and affectionate during their turbulent childhood. After she turns 18, Carmen moves out of their aunt and uncle's house, burning the bridge in the process and inviting a comparison to her mother. Carmen moves into an apartment in a building owned by their Uncle Hector, who does not charge her rent. Carmen and Conrad soon share drugs, all the while talking about sex. Carmen tells Conrad that he is addicted to sex, something that he does not dispute and is true over time. He sleeps with many women but does not care to remember names, reminded of what his sister said.

After enrolling at UT El Paso, Conrad is confronted by aunts and uncles who tell him that he needs to move out of the city and away from his sister. He does not fight them despite wanting to, and goes along with them paying for everything. In the meanwhile, Conrad's Uncle Hector gives him an apartment for free away from his sister. Carmen shares cocaine with Conrad and they go to Juarez, where Conrad meets a man who he eventually has sex with.

Carmen's depression and drug abuse worsens. One night when he is in bed, Conrad receives a call from Carmen, where she sounds distraught. When Conrad goes to her, Carmen tells him that her dealer, Freddy, attacked her, tried to rape her, and went off with her car. Conrad threatens Freddy and gets the car back for Carmen. A depressed Carmen tells Conrad the following day that she is addicted to heroin and is always trying to "chase the dragon." She tells him that they are no better than their parents and will die like them. When Conrad tries to stop Carmen, she reminds him of his own addiction and reiterates their physical and mental similarities to their parents.

Conrad tried to fight the desire for sex but is unable to do so. He sleeps with more men and is finally able to feel the bliss that Carmen described. One night he receives a call from Carmen, who invites him to a hotel room. Once there, he realizes that she has overdosed herself. Despite his attempts, she dies and Conrad thinks about how she was the dragon that he was never able to find. She was the person he needed to save but could not in the end.



Analysis

Both Conrad and Carmen have vast similarities to their parents. Conrad's mother reminds him before his death that he will be more beautiful than his father, while Carmen carries her vivacity and depression. Conrad is cursed because his beauty fuels his addiction to sex while Carmen is driven to her death because of her depression, just like their mother. While their uncles and aunts attempt to protect them, removing the children from their father after their mother's death, their fates seem inevitable. Conrad's life is controlled by the family and he goes along with them, not fighting back. By conceding to their control, he is trying to escape his addiction and his parent's fate. While he is not able to shun sex, he does not succumb to mental volatility like his parents and Carmen. Carmen leaves the controlling environment and embraces her past and her destiny, succumbing to her depression.

The distance characters place between themselves is an attempt to remove negative influences. The children are taken from their mother's funeral and to a movie by their aunts and uncles, who hope the distance will protect the children. Conrad attempts to stay in El Paso but is forced into moving to Austin eventually because going away will allow him to grow into a better person. They also want him to be far from his sister and her negative influence, leading Uncle Hector to give him an apartment far from her. Carmen puts distance between herself and the extended family in a desperate attempt to embrace her life and eventual death. The aunts and uncles fail to protect the children, as Carmen is not able to escape the fate of her mother while Conrad is scarred by her death, close to her the entire time.

Addictions have a literal and figurative importance in the story. Conrad is addicted to sex, Carmen to drugs, and Aunt Lucille to control. None of them are ever able to escape the bonds of their addictions. Conrad tries to fight it and is somewhat successful. However, Carmen never fights back and that leads to her quick death. In a different way, both children are also addicted to their parents. Conrad can never stop thinking about them, always bringing them up as a topic of conversation with his aunts and uncles. Carmen is obsessed with not outliving her mother, desperately trying to embrace a similar fate. Lucille never cedes control and she is successful in saving Conrad but not Carmen.

Discussion Question 1

What are the similarities and differences between Carmen and Conrad?

Discussion Question 2

Is Carmen right about Conrad, that he will never be different from his parents?



Discussion Question 3

What part do the aunts and uncles play in Carmen's death?

Vocabulary

ethereal, inscrutable, insatiable, pretentious, schlock, euphoria



The Hurting Game

Summary

After meeting at a dinner party, Michael and Tom begin a relationship. Tom discreetly acquires Michael's number from an acquaintance, the latter not terribly keen on meeting him. Over drinks, Tom chides Michael for his choice of drink. They begin to see each other tentatively, both trying to work around their professional lives. Tom is a criminal attorney and Michael is a high school counselor. Tom does not open up about his profession but Michael is dealing with Danny, a young student dealing with physical abuse from his father.

Tom and Michael's relationship is turbulent. They are tender with each other but tentative about becoming too intimate, especially Michael. Tom disappears for long periods of time but Michael is okay with it. Meanwhile, Danny is placed in a foster home and Michael goes out of his way to take care of him. One night, Tom shows up at Michael's doorstep shaken and disturbed. He tells Michael that he is involved in illegal business and ends up leaving with a note, telling him how much he loves him.

Danny is found by his father, who takes him home and beats him viciously. Michael takes him to the emergency room and manages to file a police report. Using an attorney that is referred, Michael is able to get Danny to Colorado, where he has an aunt. Danny thanks him profusely before he leaves, thanking him for going out of his way to save his life. While reading the newspaper, Michael sees that Tom has been arrested in Juarez for faking his own death. Now that he is in jail, Michael relaxes and realizes the full extent of his love for Tom, imagining him to make some remark as he walks into the Kentucky Club to meet him.

Analysis

The relationship between Tom and Michael is different in many ways than other characters in the text. There is no immediate attraction to each other. If anything, Michael is hesitant to get involved with Tom. Their relationship is also the longest in the text, as Tom's note reveals that they have known each other for five years. Their intimacy develops slowly over time, rather than a rush of affection. Tom is at times distant but also tender, while Michael is almost observing from afar but slowly falling in love himself. Yet, time has also allowed their relationship to be more stable, as Michael is determined to stand by Tom despite the latter's legal issues.

The subplot of Danny continues a recurring theme of the collection - that of wanting to escape. Danny is constantly beaten by his father after his mother's death. In this manner, he shares a similarity with Brian Stillman. Danny is determined to escape, no matter what but he is not able to do so without help from others. Tom is also trying to run away from his problems. He divorced his wife, thinking it would save his loved ones



but he fell in love again, this time with Michael. The love for Michael prompts him to escape and fake his own death. Michael attempts to shy away from developing intimacy with Tom but he is unable to do so as well.

Both Michael and Tom have Mexican heritage but come by it in different ways. Michael's mother was a Garcia and his father a Steadman. Tom's surname is Espinosa but the full extent of his ethnicity is never revealed. Michael exclaims that Tom looks like a "non-Mexican Mexican," while Tom says asks if Michael is a "gringo wanting to be a Mexican." Neither of them fully carry their heritage on their skin and this allows them to bond in their relationship.

Discussion Question 1

How does Michael's relationship with Danny inform his relationship with Tom?

Discussion Question 2

How do the beginning and ending contradict each other? Is Tom still alive or is it just Michael's love for him that lives?

Discussion Question 3

Danny manages to escape from his father's brutality. How is he different from similar characters in the collection who attempt to do the same? Different?

Vocabulary

counselor, ingrained, immaculately, austerity, scruffy, rank



Characters

Juan Carlos

Juan Carlos is one of the protagonists in the short story, "He Has Gone To Be With The Women." A middle-aged writer from El Paso, Juan Carlos is a complicated man. Despite being recognized as a successful writer by the people around him, he finds himself alone and at a distance from the world. His shyness pervades early in his relationship with Javier, as he is hesitant to open up, only doing so incrementally and because Javier has done so first. He is a dreamer, preferring imagining stories about Javier rather than approaching him.

As his intimacy with Javier increases, readers see more of the protective side of Juan Carlos. When Javier's uncle passes away, Juan Carlos takes care of him, soothing him and doing everything in his power to calm him down. He urges Javier to leave Juarez, as he is scared of the violence reaching him. As Javier opens up, Juan Carlos does so as well, revealing details about his father and his brothers' widows.

In contrast to the distant Juan Carlos in the beginning, Javier's disappearance reveals a different, sentimental side to him. He stays in Javier's empty apartment, wanders from street to street, looking for any trace of Javier. All through this he moves slowly, as if moving through a fog. This is evident when Javier's death is revealed to him, as he caresses Javier's watch and mourns in silence, numb at the end.

Javier

Javier is one of the protagonists in the short story, "He Has Gone To Be With The Women." In contrast to Juan Carlos, Javier is more overtly confident, as he approaches the former in the coffee shop without any hesitation and immediately strikes up a conversation. He is not afraid of taboo subjects and initially makes Juan Carlos uncomfortable with his brazen conversations. Yet this confidence also helps Juan Carlos feel comfortable, as Javier's ability to reveal intimate feelings and thoughts initiates the relationship between the two.

Javier is marked by his strong emotions, loving and grieving strongly. Unlike Juan Carlos, Javier does not hesitate to show his emotions, especially when his uncle passes away. He weeps openly, not ashamed of loving his uncle dearly. He holds the memory of his deceased mother close to his heart and wonders everyday what happened to her. He feels strongly about his identity as well, proud of his residence in Juarez and unwilling to leave the city, fighting Juan Carlos as a result. Yet, there is a calm element to him as well, induced by the routine he settles into with Juan Carlos, as they read and write side-by-side, enjoying each other's presence quietly.



Nick

Nick is the main character in the short story, "The Art of Translation." Nick's defining quality is his numbness after the attack on him by a group of young white men. He lives in a fog, trying to find a strand of meaning after the xenophobic attack on his body. While he feels the physical scars on his back, he also feels the scar on his soul. He feels the attack as a rejection of his American identity, attempting in the aftermath to find meaning in the small words that surround him.

While his family tries to isolate him from the world so he can heal, Nick finds himself isolated from his family and the version of himself that existed before. His parents and siblings move around him in the house, yet he finds himself a casual observer. The attack allows him to develop an introspective element to his personality. He questions his own identity and observes the grief of his family, trying to understand their grief and their emotional connection to the new him.

His attempts to break the cycle of life are halfhearted, as he forces his old routine on himself, saying and doing things the old Nick would. As he goes out, he still cannot stop questioning words and looking for meaning. His interactions with Sylvia highlight his emotional lethargy and is not till the end that he fully comes to terms with the attack and his path to a new identity.

Maximiliano McDonald

Maximiliano is the protagonist of the short story, "The Rule Maker." Maximiliano, also known as "Max," is for the most parts a quiet boy. Reserved, he spends the majority of his time by himself, reflecting on the world that moves around him. In Juarez, he followed his mother's orders quietly, taking pleasure in the strange life that was presented to him. Despite not having a family of his own, he finds comfort in the family order that his friend Jose's family allows him to be a part of. When he moves to El Paso to live with his father, he does not veer beyond the rules established by his father; he does not make any intimate friends; and he excels in academics.

While seemingly complacent, Max's adherence to his father's rules are more of a survival skill than anything. Both his parents are drug dealers and the only way he can avoid the path of their lives is by sticking to their rules of living. His mother suffered from depression and his father slowly loses himself to his addiction. The only way out of that life and to a more productive path is to follow the rules. Max's mother forbids him from speaking to strangers and his father strictly enforces that he do no drugs, physically beating a man who offers Max drugs.

Max finds comfort in his habits amongst the turmoil of his life. He draws his mother as a means of remembering her, and soon becomes addicted to drawing everything in his life. It is his way of preserving any semblance of stability that has entered his life. Similarly, he copies his father's rules down religiously, out of habit, and finds peace in the process.



Charlie

Charlie is the main character in the short story, "Brother in Another Language." Having never been loved by his parents, Charlie's defining feature is his hatred. The brunt of the emotion is aimed at his father but an equal amount is directed at himself as well. He never forgave his father for exiling his brother from the family, the only person who had shown any affection for him. He is someone who has come to terms with his familial relations and the affect they have on him, as he calmly tells his therapist about his feelings regarding his parents. At his father's funeral, he shows a more volatile side to himself as well, physically dragging his aunt to his mother and declaring the end of their relationship.

As he was never loved within his family, Charlie has a difficult time developing relationships with other people, his self-hatred coming in the way of him developing intimacy. The only person he has affection for is his brother and his therapist, David. In David, Charlie finds someone who displays affection for him, and such, he is involved in transference with him. Charlie's girlfriend eventually leaves him when she is no longer able to bear his self-hatred. Charlie's predicament is that he cannot love himself because he was taught to hate himself, and anyone he ever loved he is not able to love.

Neto

Neto is the main character in the short story, "Sometimes the Rain." As a teenager in his last months of high school, Neto finds himself at a certain distance from the festivities of his fellow classmates. He has a fractured relationship with his father, who takes out the frustrations of parental failure on Neto. Neto is known for his intelligence among his peers and confidence in his abilities. He receives a substantial scholarship to go to university in Albuquerque and works two jobs over the summer to help pay for the remainder of his education.

While his father is continuously hateful towards him, Neto is, for the most part, indifferent. He has a cool demeanor on the outside, something that Brian notices. Yet, underneath the surface he is incredibly kind, evident in the affection he shows Brian, with whom he has no prior relationship. He takes care of him and gives him a substantial amount of money so Brian can start a new life elsewhere. While they have similar relationships with their fathers, Neto also develops feelings for Brian that he never discloses. His kindness is also displayed when he cries at his father's funeral, crying for a man who was always hateful towards him.

Brian Stillman

Brian appears in the short story, "Sometimes the Rain." Someone who during high school was a jock and bully, Brian displays a different side to himself during the events of the story. His relationship with his father is violent, as his father attacks him after his relationship with Jorge is revealed. Throughout the story, he reveals to Neto the



fractured relationship he has with his father, and the abuse he has suffered his entire life after the death of his mother. While Neto has a plan for the future, Brian's ejection from home leaves him directionless.

Despite being having no home or prospects, Brian is resolute in his ideals. He refuses to give up Jorge in the face of his father's hatred and is determined to leave town, despite lack of money and resources. While Neto eventually convinces him not to, Brian ultimately joins the Army and dies in Vietnam.

Conrad

Conrad is one of the main characters in the short story, "Chasing the Dragon." Raised in the aftermath of his parents death by his aunts and uncles, Conrad is beautiful and impressionable. Still haunted by the memories of indifferent parents who were mentally volatile, Conrad finds comfort in the routine of his life and in his sister, Carmen, the only bright spot remaining from his childhood.

Raised in a regimented environment, Conrad knows his aunts and uncles love him, and he subjects himself to their control willingly. The order they provide is in contrast to the chaos he experienced as a child with his fighting parents. They might be boring, but in their boring life is safety and Conrad follows along as well.

Conrad's relationship with Carmen is the opposite, as she is a spitting image of their mother. In her presence, he indulges in drugs and she constantly provides a commentary about their parents. She reminds him of his fate, to go down the same path as them. His love for Carmen prevents him from interfering in her affairs. While Carmen goes on a different path, Conrad indulges in his addiction of sex as a means of relief from the control of his guardians.

Carmen

Carmen is one of the main characters in the short story, "Chasing the Dragon." Unlike Conrad, Carmen does not allow herself to be bound by her guardians's rules, and instead breaks out as a rebel. She is vivacious and beautiful, yet also suffering from a deep depression. She is aware of her similarities to her mother, physically and mentally, and constantly reminds Conrad of the same. Her escape comes in the form of her drug use, which eventually kills her.

For Carmen, fate is unavoidable and something she is cognizant of at all times. While Conrad may shy away from their parents past, Carmen accepts and embraces her connection to her mother. They are both beautiful and disturbed. It is not a matter of pride for Carmen, as she has already accepted it by the beginning of the story and lives with the fact. Despite her awareness, she has no fight in her and gives in to her fate willingly, hurrying the process by "chasing the dragon."



Michael

Michael is one of the main characters in the short story, "The Hurting Game." Grown weary by the turmoil he sees as part of his job as a counselor, Michael is reserved when it comes to romantic interests. He invests the majority of his time in his job, trying to help students like Danny escape from the brutality they suffer in their homes. He is hesitant to engage with Tom but does so regardless, allowing himself to become intimate. Michael is also very independent, going months at times without talking to Tom and not fretting in the meanwhile. Despite occasional cold exterior, he is kind and nurturing, going out of his way to help Danny escape his abusive father, while also taking care of the Tom when he comes to him troubled in the middle of the night.

Tom

Tom is one of the main characters in the short story, "The Hurting Game." Tom is an energetic lawyer who does not hesitate to say what is on his mind. It is this quality of his that initially repulses Michael but what eventually brings the two together. He is able to chip away at Michael's exterior with his charm and genuineness. He is a divorced criminal attorney and does not reveal too much about his work. Despite his charm, he does not divulge too much personal information to Michael, making it a rule between the two. Eventually, his drug addiction is revealed and he takes it upon himself to leave Michael in order to protect him, not revealing the reasons behind his departure. He escapes to Juarez but is caught after faking his own death.

David

David is Charlie's therapist in "Brother in Another Language" and shows genuine concern for Charlie. Charlie thinks of him while at his father's funeral, transferring his feelings of parental love to David.

Eddie McDonald

Eddie appears in the short story, "The Rule Maker." Max's father, he is a drug dealer with a penchant for establishing rules that he makes his son write down. He is cold and distant at first but provides everything for Max, insisting that his son excel in academics and never do drugs. He is able to provide for Max's college education and provides him with things like computers, phones, and cars. Eddie also has a drug addiction that worsens over the years. He does not allow Max to help him and eventually dies from a drug overdose.

Danny

Danny appears in the short story, "The Hurting Game." A young student at Michael's school, Danny is physically abused by his father. He attempts to escape and is unsuccessful at first, but succeeds in leaving for Colorado with Michael's help.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Kentucky Club

The Kentucky Club symbolizes an escape from the real world for characters – a static place they can lose themselves in their various forms of escape. The Kentucky Club is somewhere where all the characters eventually find themselves at one point or another. In Juarez, the bar serves as a haven of sorts. The characters meet and drink, able to escape their problems for their duration there. It is also a place of transformation, as Nick meets Sylvia at the bar for the first time, and Carmen introduces Conrad to drugs here. It is also the setting of a picture of their parents. The Kentucky Club holds memories for the characters and allows them to forge new ones as well.

The Border

The border between Juarez and El Paso is significant in its ability to become non-existent at times. It is supposed to separate the more stable El Paso from the chaotic Juarez, yet violence always spills over from one side to another. Characters never have issues crossing over at any point and they are not able to escape the influence of Juarez as a result. Max is the only character who never crosses over and his life turns out relatively well compared to the other characters in the collection.

Scars

Characters carry different physical and emotional scars. They are part of the identity of the character, such as the scars on Nick's back. Javier's mother's death is an emotional scar that he carries through his life and it defines the way in which he lives his life. The scars define the characters, no matter how much anyone attempts to escape the meaning they carry.

Language

Language is another sign of identity. After his attack, Nick has to determine what language he belongs to, as he attempts to translate his life back into English, yet never feeling at home with the Spanish that pervades his home. Charlie's brother escapes the hatred of his father who abandoned Spanish in an attempt to redefine his life with love somewhere else.

Artistry

Art symbolizes comfort and stability for characters throughout the short stories. A majority of the characters throughout the text are artists of different kinds. The art they



engage in ranges from writing to painting, and serves as a place of comfort. Engaging in art also allows for a certain introspection that allows them gauge the lives they are living and the people they are in relationships with. It is an escape from their lives, as Max draws his mother and house in order to stabilize his life, and Neto uses his pursuit of art to leave his father's hatred behind.

Relationships

The relationships, or lack of them, define the characters throughout the text. Some characters engage in relationships with people who are their opposite, such as Juan Carlos and Javier, as they end up complementing in each other. Neto and Brian find common ground based on their hatred for their fathers and that defines their friendship and also explains the tepidness they have around each other. Charlie is never able to have a fulfilling relationship, as he is too consumed with his self-loathing.

Drugs

Drugs are an escape and also a precursor to destruction for some characters. While Eddie's drug dealing provides for his son's education and stable future, it is also the cause of his death. It is also Eddie's identity, and it is not something he shies away from. Conrad uses drugs to bond with Carmen, who uses them to embrace her fate and hasten her death.

Parents

Parents and their relationships with their children are indicative of the lives their children will lead. Javier's mother was kind and fought for justice, setting an example for her son to do the same. Eddie, despite being a drug dealer and addict, lived his life with a set of inviolable rules that set the tone for Max's life. Parents influence how their children will be as adults, emotionally and physically. Carmen looks and acts just like her mother did, beautiful and depressed.

Juarez

Juarez is an escape at times, allowing characters to leave their troubles behind for a few hours before they have to deal with themselves again. Despite being embroiled in chaos and violence, characters find themselves drawn to the city, especially at night when, under the cover of the darkness and chaos, they are able to fully explore their own identities, moving freely within themselves.



Albuquerque

The city comes up repeatedly as a new chance for some characters, a catalyst for others. Nick's attack occurs in Albuquerque, which prompts him to start the journey of establishing his identity again. For Neto, the decision to go there for university instills a certain drive in him, as it is a means of escape from his father's hatred and from the mundane that becomes a norm of his life at the end of high school.



Settings

El Paso

A border city, El Paso is the residence for all the characters in the text. The proximity of the city to the border influences the character's personalities and its peace is in contrast to the turmoil of Juarez.

Juarez

Across the border from El Paso, Juarez is more chaotic and filled with violence. Yet, it is also where characters steal away at night to escape from their problems across the border. While it might be a temporary reprieve, the violence always crosses over in one way or another.

The Kentucky Club

All the characters end up here at some point throughout the collection. A bar in Juarez, it is a place of comfort and a retreat from the turmoil outside. People feel comfortable sitting in this bar, as it allows them a chance to embrace their identities and develop intimacies with people.

Sunset Heights

A neighborhood in El Paso, numerous characters reside there. It is marked for its somewhat downtrodden appearance and as a haven for artists. When characters are engaging in art, it is usually within the confines of their apartments in Sunset Heights.

Albuquerque

A city in New Mexico, Albuquerque is marked as an escape for multiple characters. It is a place where characters go for new opportunities. It is also a place of transformation, as it was for Nick, as his attack happened there.



Themes and Motifs

Language as Identity

Through multiple characters' experiences, the author shows how strongly language can be tied to one's identity.

All the characters through the short story collection are of Mexican origin. Their residence in El Paso, close to the border, forces them to confront their dual identity time and time again. The characters are owners of two languages, Spanish and English, but the Spanish rears its head time and time again. Some characters embrace their Spanish side but for others it is a distant aspect of their identities, something they only recognize as a part of their Mexican heritage but not something they actively practice or speak; those characters are entrenched in El Paso but the crossing into Juarez is a reminder of the other part of their identity.

Who are these characters? Are they Spanish or English speakers, or are they both? Nick is forced to deal with the question after a xenophobic attack by a group of white men. After the attack, he is forced to confront his identity as an individual through language. He can only remember Spanish but he feels a distance from it as he attempts to relearn English. It is a sense of purgatory, existing between the space of the two languages without a definitive claim on either. Nick is attacked by the English language, the word "illegal" a permanent scar on his body. But even as the word drives a wedge in his soul, it also brings him closer to the English language.

In "Brother in Another Language," Charlie remarks about his brother leaving home to embrace the language his parents abandoned. His parents's success comes at the cost of sacrificing their native language. Yet, it is a corrupted success, one that does not benefit the family emotionally or spiritually, as their relationships with each other are frayed. Charlie's brother is able to find some measure of happiness and independence once he left to Buenos Aires despite his eventual death. Charlie and his parents exist within the emotional turmoil that exists between them, having abandoned the language that was an integral part of their identity.

The Space Around the Border

The author shows many times over that a boarder on a map separating two locations does not necessarily translate to a separation of identity for those who live near that boarder.

All the central characters reside in El Paso, not from the border crossing into Juarez. Throughout the collection, there are repeated references towards the violence and chaos that envelopes Juarez. Yet, Juarez is also a means of escape for the characters, a temporary reprieve. They cross over and are able to escape the brunt of their problems in Juarez for a moment, enjoying the freedom that accompanies chaos.



The line that divides the two cities is a political border erected by two governments, dividing the two country's citizens. However, the people that inhabit the space around the border do not necessarily explicitly identify as citizens of either country. They have a dual cultural identity that they are trying to come to terms with. The physical border is an indefinite line that wavers as the characters move across and back without hesitation. If anything, the characters live in a bubble that encompasses El Paso and Juarez.

Juarez is a somewhere the characters go to escape their issues, such as Neto and Brian, enjoying each other's company. Nick crosses over to Juarez as he moves around trying to identify himself. However, Juarez also spills violence into the character's lives. Javier is abducted in Juarez and buried alive in the desert. Conrad and Carmen travel to Juarez to get drugs, signaling Carmen's descent into drug addiction. Tom is arrested in Juarez after faking his own death. But most importantly, The Kentucky Club is in Juarez, the bar that is a place of intimacy and comfort for every character during their time of need.

Parents as Influencers

Parents play an important part throughout the collection, impacting the characters's lives in positive and negative ways. They raise and influence their children, who often carry the scars of their childhood with them into their adulthood. The parents establish the emotional tone that defines the characters for the rest of their life, impacting their relationships with their romantic partners and friends.

Charlie's relationship with his parents influences his life and the interactions he has with people. His father's hate and his mother's indifference sets the tone for his life and romantic relationships. He is beset by self-loathing and it affects everything he does. Neto has a fractured relationship with his father and it drives him to leave, a strong catalyst behind him working two jobs over the summer to pay for his education, and also a reason why he decides to help Brian, who is dealing with a similar issue.

But parents can also have positive influences on their children, such as Max. Both his parents have dishonorable professions as drug dealers but they both manage to create a bubble around Max that manages to protect him. His father uses the money from his drug sales to create a better life for him, creating a set of rules that allow Max to live his life within reasonable bounds. Similarly, Javier's mother serves as a symbol of power even in death, influencing him to be a better person overall and to be caring and kind.

Fate and Destiny

The author seems to support the idea of fate, as characters seem destined to end up in situations regardless of their desire to fight the circumstances. Fate is also connected to identity and familial relations throughout the book.

While Javier has made something of himself, he suffers the same fate as his mother, buried in the desert. In a sense, he was always tumbling along to his death in that



manner and no situation or person he met could have changed that. In the same vein, Juan Carlos is destined to be alone, just like he was before he met Javier. His relationship with Javier is an anomaly that allows him to enjoy that aspect of life but his numbness after Javier's death gives the feeling that he felt this coming along the entire time.

Carmen and Conrad have to confront their fate the entirety of their lives. Carmen comes to understand that she will always end up like her mother, in every version of her life. She inherits her mother's good looks and depression, and she seems to give into it, not fighting the inevitable. While Conrad finds shelter in his guardian's regimented life, his addiction to sex hints at a similar descent. Carmen ultimately loses her life, and the reader may notice that no matter Conrad's attempts to save her, she was always fated to "chase the dragon" and lose her life.

Max is one character that is able to break free of the destiny that could have been prescribed to him. With both parents as drug dealers, dealing with their own mental issues, he seems fated to end up in the same position as them. However, he is calm and collected, excelling at life. But he is not able to do so on his own. His parent's interventions are the sole means by which he is able to escape his fate.

Self-Hatred

Self-hatred is the defining feature of numerous characters in this collection of short stories, propelling the action that happens in their lives and influencing their relationships. It is often present due to family issues or crises of identity. Charlie is the biggest example of this. Since he was never loved by his parents, he is never able to find a reason to love himself. The only person who loved him was his brother, someone that was taken away from him. Isolated and angry, he takes some of the hatred he has for his father and directs it at himself. The self-hatred drives his life, as he pushes away his mother after his father's death. Charlie's ex-girlfriend, Ileana, also left him because he was unable to love himself, and as such, she could not love him.

Neto does not begin his story steeped in self-hatred. For him, it comes about a crisis of identity. His relationship with his father, however, does inform his subsequent self-loathing, as they both hate each other. Unlike Charlie, Neto channels his father's hatred and outputs it as indifference. But the presence of the hate is the seed he draws upon when learning to hate himself. After eavesdropping on Brian and Jorge by the river, he realizes he is sexually attracted to men and this opens a can of self-loathing that later helps him become intimate with Brian, as they both suffer from the same fate.

Styles

Point of View

The stories in the collection are all written from the first-person perspective. This provides the reader with unlimited access to the narrator's conscious, their interior thoughts and how they reflect on events transpiring around them.

Despite the breadth of thoughts on hand for the reader, the first-person narrative point of view is also limited in that it is constricted to the thoughts of just one character, such as Charlie in "Brother in Another Language," where Charlie's hatred for his father is explained but the father's perspective is absent. The reader is only able to see other characters and their actions through the moral and social perspective of a single character.

Along with the first-person, all the stories are written in the past simple tense. Combined, this provides for a more reflective narration since time has passed from when the events of the story occurred. The passage of time allows the narrator to add thoughts and recollections that would not be possible if it were in the present tense.

Language and Meaning

The narrators of the stories are all American with Mexican heritage. The primary method of communication and the language used is English. Despite the proximity to the border and the ethnic backgrounds of the characters, Spanish does not play a prominent part throughout the collection. Some characters have a more substantial connection to the Spanish language than others but for the most part, English is the primary mode of communication and thought.

When Spanish does play a factor in a story, it is tied to the theme of identity. In "Lost in Translation," Nick struggles with questions of identity after being the victim of a xenophobic attack. The Spanish word for war, and Nick's surname, "Guerra," is at the center of his internal conflict. Nick's journey involves him attempting to translate from words from Spanish into English, thereby reconstructing his identity.

The author employs a minimalist approach to writing throughout the text. The language is sparse, with short sentences and dialogue taking precedent over long monologues. Yet, there are also moments where the author employs a more poetic style of writing. This is mostly used when characters are immersed in intimacy with a significant other, such as when Michael and Tom are in the desert together in "The Hurting Game."

Structure

There are six short stories in the collection, each of them similar in length and physical setting. All the stories have a male narrator, their ages varying from story to story. While "Sometimes the Rain" is explicitly set in the past, around the same time as the Vietnam War, the other stories do not have a defined time frame but can be surmised to be set in the twenty-first century based on clues about technology and the state of Juarez, Mexico.

The use of the short story form allows for a more impressionistic emotional impact rather than a sustained narrative that continues from beginning to end. Each story is focused on capturing the emotional intensity of a moment, a small window of time that is integral and trans-formative in the character's world. Trauma is at the center of it, a theme that connects the stories from beginning to end.

There is no particular order to how the short stories are arranged in the collection, as they are seemingly random in their placement. However, there is a sense of a bookend being used, particularly with the first and last stories in the collection. "He Has Gone to Be With the Woman" is primarily about loss, as the narrator, Juan Carlos, acquires love but then loses it to tragedy beyond his control. In "The Hurting Game," the story begins with loss, develops the intimacy of the characters, intensifies it, and then ends the story, and the collection, with a gain of love and life. Michael learns that Tom is alive and rejoices, with the author using The Kentucky Club as the setting of not just the beginning but also the end.

Quotes

I wish now I would have told him that I made up stories about him too.
-- Juan Carlos (He Has Gone to Be the Women)

Importance: This reveals the dreamy and shy aspect of Juan Carlos's personality. He is a writer primarily who lives within the fictional world, making it difficult at times to step outside and engage with people. His fictional world provides comfort and he is at peace with the stories he creates for Javier.

That was hard for me -- to let him wash me. To let him touch me.
-- Juan Carlos (He Has Gone to Be With the Women)

Importance: This reveals the difficulty Juan Carlos has in establishing intimate relationships. He is hesitant to open up emotionally, and the physical intimacy marks the breaking of the barriers between him and Javier.

And I didn't care that I hadn't earned that love and didn't deserve it.
-- Juan Carlos (He Has Gone to Be With the Women)

Importance: As someone who essentially lives most of his life alone, Juan Carlos is steeped in self-loathing. Javier's love for him is confusing at first, and even though he feels undeserving, he decides to move past his problems and embrace the love.

Countries are bigger than men.
-- Javier (He Has Gone to Be With the Women)

Importance: Javier highlights the struggles of people like him against the political machinations of countries. Juan Carlos lives in the USA and his life is defined by that. Javier lives in Juarez and he has to suffer the consequences of doing so. Their love is not respected by the chaos that has enveloped the city of Juarez and El Paso offers no respite to Juan Carlos after Javier's death.

We're like our parents.
-- Carmen (Chasing the Dragon)

Importance: Carmen brings up the idea of fate passed down through parents. She and Conrad are like their parents, physically and mentally; they are defined by their handsome features but also by the pitfalls of their addictions.

It's so unnecessary to hate a man who hates himself as much as you do.
-- Ileana (Brother in Another Language)

Importance: This is directed at Charlie, who is filled with self-hatred. His inability to love himself forces Ileana to leave as well, as she cannot stand by and witness him die slowly from a poison of his own making.



As I repeated the names of my brothers and sisters and felt each syllable on my tongue, I wondered what their names meant and wondered if they had scars too, scars that they were hiding from me and hiding from my mom and dad and from the world.

-- Nick (The Art of Translation)

Importance: Nick is reflecting on the pain his siblings might be enduring. His scars are emotional but everyone sees the physical ones. Perhaps his siblings have had to deal with the same issue of identity as him, and as such are carrying a burden within themselves.

I would have to fight to translate myself back into the world of living.

-- Nick (The Art of Translation)

Importance: This is indicative of the journey Nick takes through the story and his growth in the aftermath of a tragedy. Struggling with his identity, he finally comes to terms with what he has to in order to reestablish himself as a person.

He was the rule maker. I was the rule follower.

-- Maximiliano (The Rule Maker)

Importance: Max describes the relationship between himself and his father. Arriving at his father's doorstep, he is subject to a number of rules that are supposed to create a stable life from him, a marked difference from the lives his parents live.

I would not wear the scar of that afternoon on my face. That's not where I would keep it.

-- Maximiliano (The Rule Maker)

Importance: After being punched by his father while attempting to talk to him about his addiction, Max allows the scar to heal and is determined to bury it deep inside him. Even after it fades from his face, he is determined to hold on to it.

Just when I started liking myself, I hated myself again.

-- Neto (Sometime the Rain)

Importance: This is when Neto first encounters his homosexuality, as he masturbates to the image of Brian and Jorge having sex. Towards the end of high school, he had finally come to terms with who he was as a person and was looking forward to the future. This moment reverses all his progress and brings him back to his knees.

I think it matters very much whether your father loves you or not.

-- Neto (Sometimes the Rain)

Importance: Neto talks about the impact father's have on their children. Since his and Brian's father hated their sons, it created a turmoil within them. Jorge's father loved him and he is a more stable person as a result.



I didn't even know where he lived. That put me at a disadvantage.
-- Michael (The Hurting Game)

Importance: Michael wonders about Tom not revealing where he lives. Most of their meetings are at Michael's apartment and this allows Tom to keep certain parts of his life private from Michael, while he is revealing everything when they are at his place.