A Fistful of Fig Newtons Study Guide

A Fistful of Fig Newtons by Jean Shepherd

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

A Fistful of Fig Newtons follows Ralph Parker on a long trip through the Lincoln Tunnel from New York to New Jersey. As Ralph sits in the tunnel, stuck in traffic, he reminisces over scenes of his life and speculates about the future and the state of culture. The reader travels with Ralph through memories of his childhood, the army, and life in college on the GI Bill.

As the story begins, the narrator is just approaching the Lincoln Tunnel in stand-still traffic. As he gets inside the tunnel, his mind begins to wander. First, he recalls an episode while he is in college on the GI Bill. His Fig Newtons attract three dorm-mates to his room, and Big Al, a football star, begins arguing with erudite anti-athlete Umbaugh. Umbaugh challenges the others to a chocolate laxative-eating contest, which his opponents lose. The narrator runs for the restroom, while Big Al winds up collapsed on the floor, unable to move. He can't play in the next day's big game, and the college loses.

Then, the narrator ruminates what a strange place New Jersey is, the light at the end of his tunnel. His thoughts are brought back again to his past, and he remembers his first summer at camp. As a first-year camper, he was picked on by the older boys and forced into menial duties like cleaning up trash (foreshadowing his future army career). A boy named Skunk, who no one talks to, surprisingly wins the camp treasure hunt for the narrator's lodge.

The narrator recalls being trapped between a tailgater and a truck full of crushed cars, thinking of how his mind wanders creatively while driving. While trapped, he thinks up stories about the crushed cars. Then, he remembers moving out with his army troop. After a grueling KP duty, one of this company members gets off the train to get beers, and the train starts up and leaves without him. The narrator's mind wanders again, comparing Van Culture to Camper Culture in a made-up sociology lecture.

The narrator then mentions writing an article for a car company magazine. The article describes a conversation with an ad executive who works for a lemon counsel. He describes the difficulty of promoting lemons, chickens, and other things used disparagingly in common language. The narrator's mind flashes forward to the future. He imagines future archaeologists digging up New York and their impressions of the culture based on TV commercials.

After discussing a catalog of oddities, the narrator reminiscences about his grammar school, where he learned nothing because he was always stuck in the back of the class. He miraculously passes algebra with a flash of luck or inspiration in deciphering an equation at the board. The narrator recalls another childhood event, an ice cream price war in his home town, resulting in the local ice cream parlor running the big chain ice cream store out of business. Finally, he remembers coming come after being let out of the army, and in this memory, his name, Ralph Parker, is revealed. Ralph goes out on the town for his first New Year's as a free man, and his date with a reverend's daughter

turns into a disaster when she drags him into a bar and proceeds to get drunk and pass out. Still, Ralph is a free man, and he finally exits the Lincoln Tunnel.

Opening and A Fistful of Fig Newtons or the Shoot-Out in Room 303

Opening and A Fistful of Fig Newtons or the Shoot-Out in Room 303 Summary

A Fistful of Fig Newtons follows Ralph Parker on a long trip through the Lincoln Tunnel from New York to New Jersey. As Ralph sits in the tunnel, stuck in traffic, he reminisces over scenes of his life and speculates about the future and the state of culture. The reader travels with Ralph through memories of his childhood, the army, and life in college on the GI Bill.

In the opening, the presently unnamed narrator is stuck in rush-hour traffic four blocks from the Lincoln Tunnel from New York to New Jersey. His radio goes out, leaving him with nothing to occupy his mind. Finding a break in traffic, he makes it into the tunnel. The narrator ruminates that the tunnel can make men man, recalling a well-educated man who was deathly afraid in the tunnel and sold his home in Princeton to live in a dirty New York apartment. He thinks of the tunnel as purgatory. He sees college students up ahead, and his mind runs to his own college days.

In "A Fistful of Fig Newtons or the Shoot-Out in Room 303," the narrator is in his apartment, drinking. He says to call him Dave, but that it's not his real name. Beneath him, picketers are protesting, and the narrator throws down a paper airplane with a note from God, claiming that he's coming to get them all. He's flipping through the television channels, and only escapes the news of the strike by watching PBS. The guest speaker happens to be a man the narrator knows from college, now a professor, name Umbaugh. Umbaugh is discussing the results of boredom. The narrator casts his mind back to his college days.

The narrator is attending a Midwestern college on the GI Bill after getting out of the army, living in an ugly concrete dorm. It's Friday night, but the narrator is broke and has an exam Monday morning, so he's stuck at the dorm for the weekend. He remembers that he's stashed a large package of Fig Newtons, his favorite delicacy, and since the dorm is relatively deserted, he digs them out of the closet to have a 2 a.m. feast.

However, the narrator's solitary enjoyment is short-lived. The smell of Fig Newtons is detected, and the narrator hears noises approaching his door. Goldberg, known as "Pig-out" and "The Slob" due to his enormous appetite, looms in the doorway, demanding Fig Newtons. The unwritten rules of dorm life require that the narrator share, and soon both men are guzzling down cookies. Then, Big Al Dagellio appears in the doorway. He's a star football player, and he's after Fig Newtons, too, though he calls them "cookies" to the narrator's annoyance.

Finally, the scholarly Umbaugh arrives, bringing beer. Soon the four students are drinking and eating. Goldberg is enjoying the feast, and he rushes to his room for a salami to add to their revelry. After the feast is gone, Umbaugh begins subtly needling Big Al. Umbaugh looks down on sports and wrote a letter to the editor lambasting university football. Big Al begins getting angry at Umbaugh, and Umbaugh takes out a box of chocolate laxatives, Boomo-Lax, and eats one.

Umbaugh suggests a contest. Everyone will bet $50. On each round, each player will eat one Boomo-Lax, and then there will be a three minute wait. The last man left in the room wins. The four students begin the game. As they play, the rest of the dorm residents begin gathering in the doorway, watching and betting on the outcome. After six rounds of no action, Goldberg suddenly rushes from the room, into the bathroom. As they begin passing the box around for the seventh round, the narrator's intestines suddenly feel like they're exploding. He rushes from the room, too, and sits in a toilet stall, moaning with pain, a few doors from Goldberg, who is going through his own hell.

When the narrator returns to his room, the contest is still going on. The two remaining players are on round twelve. Umbaugh is just announcing round fourteen when Big Al cries out and falls to the floor, soiling the narrator's room irretrievably. Big Al's friends carry him to the restroom, and Umbaugh, victorious, offers to buy his friends breakfast. Big Al is too sick to play in the next day's game, and the school is defeated. The narrator comes out of his reverie, in his apartment, watching Umbaugh on TV. He suddenly realizes that Umbaugh must have bet against his own team and disabled the star player.

Opening and A Fistful of Fig Newtons or the Shoot-Out in Room 303 Analysis

The book A Fistful of Fig Newtons is partly novel and partly a collection of short stories and essays. Because the storyline takes place inside of the narrator's mind as he is stuck in the Lincoln Tunnel traffic jam, it flits around through time, presenting the narrator's life in snippets of memory. In the first episode, the narrator is in college after getting out of the army. The narrator says to call him Dave, but warns that that's not his real name. He remains anonymous throughout the story, until the very end.

The narrator's anonymity makes him an "everyman" character, and the narrator himself is more of an observer of life than a protagonist. In the story of the laxative contest, the narrator is a participant, but he's not an active mover. He is the second person out of the contest, a mediocre performance in a mediocre life, where the narrator always falls squarely just on the lower-middle part on the bell curve. The narrator's averageness makes him the perfect everyman.

The contest of Umbaugh versus Big Al is one of brains versus brawn, a competition that recurs later in the story. Brains will always outwit brawn in the story, although the brainy characters like Umbaugh seem generally distant and snobbish, separated out as an

elite. The brawny football player is at least understandable to the narrator. The narrator has neither brains nor brawn, and has no power over either.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

The Light at the End of the Tunnel Summary

The narrator is again sitting in the Lincoln Tunnel. He thinks about how many great ideas are invented on the toilet. His car is beginning to overheat. He wonders why he goes through all this torture when the reward at the other side is only New Jersey. In "The Light at the End of the Tunnel," the narrator ruminates about New Jersey. He sees the Margate Elephant, a large wooden elephant that has stood on a New Jersey beach for a century, as representative of New Jersey. He also mentions the Flagship, a building made to look like a ship on the New Jersey highway.

As the narrator tries to quantify "New Jersey," he notes that New Jersey is always the butt of comedians' jokes. New Jerseyites are reckless drivers and chronic tailgaters, recognizable anywhere. New Jersey drivers learn their habits from the New Jersey Traffic Circle, mad constructions to the uninitiated driver. Then, the narrator mentions the crowded summer New Jersey beaches, where one man sneezing blew the top off his next-door neighbor's sandwich. The narrator also relates a high-class party planned by a friend, which was ruined by the hordes of New Jersey mosquitoes.

The narrator identifies "New Jersey Nostalgia," the tendency of all New Jerseyites to long for home, and he recalls rushing to a real New Jersey pizza parlor he found while in Colorado, gorging himself on real New Jersey pizza and beer. New Jersey is truly the light at the end of the tunnel.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel Analysis

"The Light at the End of the Tunnel" describes the narrator's love-hate relationship with New Jersey. The gaudiness of New Jersey reflects for the character the messy, low nature of mankind. Even the upper-crust New Jersey party is invaded by mosquitoes. No one is able to rise above nature and be better than base, animal humanity. This idea of New Jersey is also how the narrator views American culture.

The American culture builds up Utopian ideas, but it translates them into mimicry of elegant or exotic things and crassly commercial constructs. This is exactly what the narrator points out in New Jersey. The Margate Elephant is a false elephant. It is constructed to evoke a type of Utopian perfection, but in reality the giant wooden elephant is just gaudy and surreal. The narrator compares it to the Statue of Liberty, a giant woman standing in New York Harbor with a torch. The gaudiness ends up looking dingy and false, but behind it there is a human striving for something grand and great.

The traffic circles of New Jersey are another human construct. They are intended to make it easy to get through intersections, without having to stop traffic at lights or stop signs. They end up being confusing and creating maddened drivers tearing through New Jersey. No matter how grand and great mankind tries to become or what we strive

for, the result seems to be something awkward, pretentious, or dysfunctional. The narrator seems to look lovingly on foibles and follies, though, since they are human.

The nostalgia of New Jerseyites defines New Jerseyites as a clan, bound together. This is another recurring element in the book. Humans group themselves together in clans, defining themselves as groups. This creates brotherhood, but it also creates conflict.

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 41-65

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 41-65 Summary

Stuck in the tunnel, the narrator thinks it's an awful thought, that New Jersey is the light he's aiming for. His car continues to overheat as traffic crawls to a stop. He thinks of the Statue of Liberty, and Disneyland, a truly American construct of false utopia. This leads him to think of childhood, a true utopia. Then, his mind wanders to his summer camp, Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee.

In "The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness," the narrator and his boyhood friends Schwartz, Flick, and Kissel read a notice about a summer camp in the Michigan woods. Their scoutmaster Mr. Gordon gives them brochures, mentioning special rates for the scout troop. That night, the narrator's father comes home, in a great mood from rolling a six-hundred series in bowling. Despite the enormous expense, his father agrees to send the narrator to camp.

The narrator anxiously awaits the upcoming adventure, promptly delivering his sign-up form to the mailbox and running around buying clothes and supplies for camp. He will be a "Chipmunk," one of the first-year campers. The night before he leaves, he can't sleep. At 5:45 the next morning, he's on his way to the bus, leaving from Chicago. At the bus, he meets Captain Crabtree, one of the camp leaders, who efficiently gets the boys on the bus and makes sure they all have Chipmunk caps to wear. The older campers, in blue jackets, are called Beavers.

As the bus starts to leave, a fat Chipmunk starts to cry. He doesn't want to go and starts to have a tantrum. Captain Crabtree orders him to stop with commanding authority, and the Chipmunk goes back to his seat. As the bus moves off on its three-hour trip, Captain Crabtree leads the campers in the "Nobba-WaWa-Nockee Loyalty Song," sung to the tune of "Old MacDonald."

The Beavers' blue jackets have an emblem on them, and Kissel thinks it looks like a squirrel with an ice cream cone. One of the Beavers, Dan Baxter, verbally assaults him for mistaking the Beaver holding the Sacred Golden Tomahawk of Chief Chungacong. Suddenly, the fat Chipmunk starts having another tantrum, an expert performance. This time, Captain Crabtree's authoritarian manner doesn't work. Crabtree physically lifts him up to carry the boy back to his seat. The boy retaliates by vomiting all over the captain. They stop the bus, and the captain gets off to clean up in the rain. Flick compares the boy to a skunk, and it becomes the boy's nickname. The bus makes one stop, at a gas station, and the boys notice Skunk refueling at the attached diner.

The bus arrives at the camp in the pouring rain, which hasn't stopped the mosquitoes, and the campers assemble in a hall, where Colonel Bullard, the head of the camp, swears the boys in with an oath and a secret wolf call. Afterwards, the narrator, Schwartz, Flick, Skunk, and two other boys are all assigned to Mole Lodge. One of the camp counselors, Morey Partridge, leads them to their cabin. On the way, he lets them know that bad behavior is given demerits, which result in the loss of privileges like ice cream.

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 41-65 Analysis

In "The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness," the narrator has his first experience at summer camp. The summer camp has military overtones, with titles of "captain" and "colonel" for the camp's leadership. The newly arrived campers being pulled away from their fun for clean-up duty echoes the narrator's later stint in the army, where he'll pull KP or latrine duty. As in the army, the boys seem interchangeable. The characters are moved along in groups, assigned barracks, and pushed through a machine meant to make them men. The narrator's first experience away from home teaches him what to expect in the world. Camp sounds like fun, but the narrator finds boredom, work, and conflict instead of fun.

The narrator's main role is as an observer of what goes on around him. An average boy, he becomes another pawn amidst all the boys, muddling through camp life, struggling with the tasks assigned to him. He is, again, an everyman. Skunk, on the other hand, is above average. Although much younger, Skunk is much like Umbaugh. He detests the physical games and activities of camp life. He is an intellectual, and he is coolly detached from those who seem beneath him. Skunk first proves himself to be above average in his temper tantrum performance (where he, like Umbaugh, uses coarse physical excretions to defeat his enemies).

Camp life shows the characters again divided into groups. The boys are all Chipmunks. They feel a sense of camaraderie through their designated group, and they are distinguished by their hats. Soon the boys come to realize that there is a downside to the dynamic of belonging to a group. Creating a bonded tribe means that those outside are "others." Conflicting tribes, the Chipmunks and the Beavers, will erupt into conflict.

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 66-92

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 66-92 Summary

A bell rings, and a stampede of campers starts running by. It's hamburger day, and the campers from Mole Lodge join the fray to run to the mess hall. After a chaotic meal, the boys head to forestcraft, a boring lecture about how to find which direction is north if you're lost in the forest. Three Chipmunks arrive late, and their names are taken for demerits. Schwartz falls asleep and earns two demerits. Afterwards, the boys are conscripted for cleanup detail, picking up trash around the camp, including cigarette butts. The sergeant is dying to find and punish the culprit who's been smoking. He says the boys are lucky for getting cleanup, since they won't have to do it again for a week. The boys longingly look at other campers canoeing in the lake.

After dinner, the boys have the night off. They discover the bathrooms have a long line and no stalls, inhibiting the boys from relieving themselves once they finally get in. After a long exhausted day, the boys' sleep is inhibited by noises in the woods, and fears of a Thing in the Woods, lurking ready to attack. The next day, they do leathercraft. The narrator tries to copy a picture of an Indian on a horse looking at a sunset, on a four-foot square piece of leather. Kissel makes a shoulder holster for his father's bourbon bottle, and Flick works on a catcher's mitt. One of the Beavers, Jake, comes in and starts making fun of all their projects.

That afternoon, Captain Crabtree leads the boys on a hike, and one of the campers stirs up a hornet's nest. The captain tells them all to stand still, while the narrator unknowingly hides in a clump of poison ivy. Standing still fails to work, and the captain is routed by the angry hornets. When the boys go for swimming lessons, they've already been frightened by rumors of a monster in the lake. One of the campers thinks he feels it, driving all the boys screaming out of the lake. At that night's weenie roast, Schwartz burns his tongue on a charred weenie. The narrator's stick lights on fire, and he knocks fifty-seven campers' weenies into the fire. He eats his second weenie raw, and gets sick from the uncooked food. It's letter-writing night, and the narrator writes, "I am at camp," only later adding a short note about Schwartz burning his tongue and the "funny thing" in the lake.

The next day, the campers finally get to go canoeing, but they do more capsizing than rowing. Flick and the narrator get stuck going in circles in the middle of the lake. Meanwhile, Jake emerges as a clear ne'er-do-well leader among the Beavers, harassing the Chipmunks along with his sidekick Dan Baxter, and running panty raids on the girl's camp across the lake. One day, the sergeant catches Dan Baxter with a cigarette. The sergeant puts a bucket over Baxter's head to hold in the smoke and

makes him smoke the whole pack until Baxter gets sick. Any Chipmunk who dares to laugh at the incident is punished by Dan and his friend Jake.

The culminating event of the summer is the treasure hunt. Each lodge competes. They are given clues to follow, which lead to the Sacred Golden Tomahawk of Chief Chungacong, hidden somewhere around the camp. The winning lodge wins a Woodsman Award. Schwartz has been elected to lead Mole Lodge. The boys can't make heads or tails of the first clue, a rhymed riddle directing them north past Honest Abe's work, up Everest, and beneath the "oldest one." The boys head off, disorganized, and all fall into a ravine. They notice Skunk is missing. Jake Brannigan and his crew come across the Mole Lodge, and send them off toward a fence, where the boys run across some kind of animal in the dark. They flee back to camp.

Colonel Bullard is just berating the boys for returning without the prize when Skunk appears, carrying the Golden Tomahawk, which he had deduced was never "hidden" at all, but in its display case. Mole Lodge is victorious. The next day, all the Chipmunks are promoted to Beavers, and the narrator immediately begins badmouthing the incoming Chipmunks along with Jake Brannigan.

The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, pages 66-92 Analysis

At the camp, all the things the narrator has looked forward to turn out to be disappointments. This type of disappointment will follow the narrator throughout his life. Just like the light at the end of the Lincoln Tunnel being New Jersey, no promise in the narrator's life is as good as the anticipation. He realizes that his leathercraft artwork is a wreck. He can't manage to handle a canoe and gets dumped in the lake. A forestcraft lesson is just another boring lecture. He is crowded along through camp like a cog in a wheel, harassed by the older boys. No experience is what its PR promises it to be.

The bullying of Jake and Dan is a cycle. Just as the older boys bully the younger boys, they are themselves bullied by the camp counselors and leaders. The humiliating punishment that befalls Dan for smoking, where he is forced to make himself sick in front of crowds of onlooking boys, exemplifies this. Dan takes his own humiliation out on the younger boys. The narrator turning on the new recruits once he gains the status of Beaver completes the cycle.

Skunk doesn't show his true intellectual ability until he coolly abandons the Mole Lodge to solve the treasure hunt on his own. Skunk is not part of the lodge. He barely talks to the other boys and goes unnoticed during most of the story. Unlike the narrator, Skunk is not an everyman, but someone who rises above those around him. As such, he is also an outcast. When Skunk wins the treasure hunt, he wins it alone. The lodge merely rides on his coattails (with the narrator along as an observer).

Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives

Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives Summary

The narrator, stuck in the Lincoln Tunnel, thinks about how each generation attacks the next. He yells at the college kids in front of him. Then, he looks around his car, wondering how many hours he's spent in it. "Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives" begins with a television lecture. Proust wrote in a cork-lined room to block out all noise. Balzac had heavy curtains and wrote at night, by candlelight. The lecture is interrupted by a commercial, and the narrator, who is watching the show, realizes that his car blocks out the world, much like Proust's cork-lined room.

The narrator's mind goes back to the previous day. Travelling Route 22 in Jersey, he finds himself being tailgated. He speeds up, changes lanes, and slows down, but he can't lose the tailgater. He can see the man's face. He's nicked himself shaving and is eating a Big Mac. Suddenly, the narrator finds himself trapped behind a truck carrying flattened cars. He begins to think about the stories of the crushed cars. He imagines a 1951 Studebaker leaping off the truck and killing him.

The cars still have their bumper stickers, heralding archaic causes like LBJ, Ike, and Earl Warren. A Dodge Charger says "Warning—I Brake for Animals," and the narrator thinks of the irony someone else not bothering to brake for the driver of the now-dead vehicle. The tailgater is picking his teeth with a boy-scout knife. The narrator sees that "Walt" and "Emily" are spelled out in tape on the bumper of a yellow Coronet. He thinks about the young couple buying the car and polishing it on weekends. He pictures them growing a little older and making the payments, now with two kids in the backseat. He wonders where Walt is now. Finally, the tailgater gets off the freeway, and the narrator passes the truck-full of memories.

Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives Analysis

The entire book takes place in the narrator's mind while he's stuck in traffic in his car, with nothing to occupy himself. The narrator is separated from the world, and this is when his mind becomes creative. He reminisces and imagines. "Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives" is an exploration of this phenomena. In this episode, the narrator is engaged in a conflict, so he becomes an active part of a struggle, unlike in previous episodes. He is the Umbaugh to the tailgater's Big Al. The narrator pits his mental power against the physical aggressiveness of the tailgater.

However, the narrator only uses his mind by retreating into it. Unlike Umbaugh, he does not act out aggressively against the aggressor. Unlike Skunk, he does not compete. The narrator uses his mental abilities as an escape mechanism. He isolates himself, observing instead of interacting, the role he's become accustomed to. His ability to observe, however, is what makes the narrator a good writer.

The Marathon Run of Lonesome Ernie, the Arkansas Traveler

The Marathon Run of Lonesome Ernie, the Arkansas Traveler Summary

In the Lincoln Tunnel traffic jam, the narrator thinks of how much he loves cars. He thinks of women he's known, and suddenly pictures a girl's face. He struggles to place her, and then he remembers. In "The Marathon Run of Lonesome Ernie, the Arkansas Traveler," the narrator recalls his army radar company, Company K, which has just been issued new equipment and ordered to pack. Zynzmeister, the intellectual, verbally spars with Gasser, who stuffs candy bars into his luggage. All the men are nervous about being sent into combat, and Zynzmeister jokes that they're decoys to draw fire, since their radar never works.

The men assemble for Lieutenant Cherry, who informs them that they're shipping out to an undisclosed location on a closed troop train. The train approaches ominously. Corporal Elkins, the squad's driver, glumly notes that his worst fears have been realized. The troops are introduced to Major Willoughby, the train troop commander, and Captain Carruthers, the deputy commander. The men are checked into the train and ordered not to leave their seats and to ask permission to use the bathroom. They are herded onto the train, The Georgia Peach.

The narrator finds his seat, and Gasser sits next to him, while Zynzmeister quips about the lack of luxury. The train moves out, and the narrator has just gone to sleep when Lieutenant Cherry wakes him. The narrator, Gasser, and Ernie have been chosen randomly for KP duty. He tells them they'll work four hours on, four hours off for twenty-four hours, and then they'll be excused from KP for sixty days.

The men head up to the mess hall car. Their company members laugh at them for pulling KP duty by making chicken noises. The companies in the other cars are frightening looking. In the mess hall, which takes up two cars, the sergeant puts the narrator on gravy duty, and he spends long, hot hours ladling out gravy onto soldiers' food. An endless line of soldiers moves through the car. By the time one group is done eating, the next group is lined up. The narrator's wrist begins aching. The workers strip to their shorts and shoes. After long hours, they take a ten minute break. The narrator is sick of gravy. He will never touch it again after that day.

The narrator goes back to his gravy-ladling toil. Finally, one of the men asks about the promised four-hours off, but the sergeant laughs. There will be no four-hour respite. The men are sweaty and thirsty, catching only occasional breaks. The narrator switches to Jell-O, which is even more difficult to serve than gravy. The compartmentalized mess kits don't stop the food from all slopping together. After ten or fifteen hours, the narrator finds himself falling asleep while ladling, and waking himself with his own snores.

During one of the breaks, the Signal Corps men question an engineer about what army engineers do. He takes offense, and they needle each other. Soon, it's back to ladling. The narrator is serving up gravy again. His mind flits wildly, imagining a gravy-worshiping religion. Soon, the mess sergeant calls him off ladling and sends him, Ernie, and Gasser to wash pots and pans. The pile of encrusted pots is like a sentence in hell. When they are finally relieved, they rush back to the mess car, which is finally empty.

The mess sergeant is smoking a cigarette. The men take refreshing, cool apples. The sergeant tells them they're released from duty, and he gets them to help open the car door, bringing in refreshing cool air. The men watch the countryside roll by. A girl goes by in a car and waves back at the soldiers. She's the girl who appeared from the narrator's memory. The men speculate about the pretty young girl, and the sergeant guesses the older man with her is probably her husband. He warns the men not to talk about the pretty girls, or the locals will come after them with guns.

The train slows to a stop, and outside the men see a sign for beer. When the sergeant heads to another car, the men can't resist. The narrator gets out two dollars and offers to pay for the beer if one of the others will go get it. Ernie goes out with the money, and Gasser and the narrator watch as he goes into the store. Then, the train slowly begins to move. Ernie doesn't notice at first. He's heading back with the beer. It looks for a moment as if he'll make it, and then he falls. The narrator holds on to Gasser, so he can lean out of the train to try to get Ernie, but they fail.

Gasser and the narrator head back to their company. They determine not to tell Lieutenant Cherry what happened, but the narrator can't hold up under the pressure and tells what happened. Cherry, horrified, warns them not to tell anyone what happened. Ernie is gone forever.

The Marathon Run of Lonesome Ernie, the Arkansas Traveler Analysis

The book never talks about the narrator's wartime experiences. The destination of Company K remains a mystery for the reader, just as it is a mystery for Company K as they ship out. War is separate from everyday experience, and this is a novel about the everyday, not about the exceptional. Instead, the writer focuses in on a horrendous stint of KP duty as the narrator heads off into the unknown.

The narrator's experience on the troop train parallels his journey through the Lincoln Tunnel in some ways. The narrator is heading off toward a far-away destination, and during his journey, he is trapped in a horrific experience. He has no way out of the day-long KP duty, just as he has no way out when trapped by a tailgater behind a truck, and just as he has no way out when trapped in traffic creeping slowly through the Lincoln Tunnel. As in all these situations, the narrator's salvation is turning inward, to his own imagination. He ruminates about gravy and army food as he becomes oblivious to the entire outside world.

The narrator's whole army experience makes him separate from the world. His company is cordoned off in its own train car, and the theme of competing groups arises again in the conversation with the engineer. The engineer is part of a separate clan than the radar men, and he is defensive from their first contact. The men, part of the same army, are separated by their differing groups. The narrator is also isolated by the fact of his KP duty. When the men open up the train door after KP duty is done, they look in wonder at the world outside. It's almost as if the world has disappeared. Sending Ernie out for beer is an attempt at contact with the world, but it is a failed attempt. Ernie, and the beer, are lost.

Sociology 101 (Hip Diversion)

Sociology 101 (Hip Diversion) Summary

Back in the Lincoln Tunnel, the narrator thinks about the people he knew in the army. A van pulls up next to him, and he thinks that Ernie probably never saw a van. Thinking about cars, he imagines a sociologist lecturing on car culture. In "Sociology 101 (Hip Diversion)," the narrator gives his imaginary lecture. He discusses the Van Culture and contrasts it with the Camper Crowd. Camper people are family people, politically conservative, and middle-aged in mentality. Van people are bearded hippies who eat granola and yoghurt, don't believe in marriage, and remain teenagers despite aging into their fifties. They vote only with minorities.

Both groups plaster their cars with bumper stickers, the campers with right-wing, family-value propaganda, including the names of all their family members, their hometowns, and CB numbers. The van people counter with left-wing, environmental propaganda, as well as generic statements of "Love" and "Peace." He finds the environmentally conscious bumper stickers ironic, considering the pollution that vans put out.

The narrator finds both group smug, though he hesitates to use the demeaning word. These car classifications, he says, are surpassing ethnic, racial, and economic classes. He identifies a Used School Bus Tribe as a subset of Van Culture and notes that vans are a staple of the drug trade. Ironically, they used to be advertised as family vehicles. Similarly, the happy, family, outdoorsy vehicle that's known as the camper is used by the mafia as a modern-day whorehouse on wheels.

Camper people drive slowly, stopping traffic behind them, unaware of other drivers. Meanwhile, van people cavort wildly across the roadway in their unsafe, bulky vehicles. He relates a conversation with a cop, who pulled a bunch of people out of a burning van. It was speeding at 95 miles per hour. No one was killed; the cop says drunks and addicts are protected. The narrator says that Van Culture can have a serious affect on culture, mentioning Charles Manson, and ending by reminding the students that the lecture material will appear on a test.

Sociology 101 (Hip Diversion) Analysis

The narrator's imagined sociology lecture focuses on groups forming within the culture. This element of human nature has been touched on in nearly all the episodes of the book. The narrator focuses on how human beings define themselves. The Van Culture and the Camper Crowd define themselves by their vehicles. They also define themselves by politics and attitudes toward family, sexuality, and society.

Though the two groups are very different and even adversarial to each other, the writer also focuses on how they are similar. Both groups are self-satisfied, believing that their own group is better. This is common among every group. The group a person belongs

to is always the best group. The narrator also makes fun of both groups. Both kinds of vehicles, so valued by their respective subcultures, are used for crime. Drug dealers sell drugs out of vans, and the mafia runs prostitution out of campers. Both drivers are dangerous. The campers hold up traffic, while the vans run rampant, careening through the streets. However smug the groups may be, they both have their very human follies.

Lemons on the Grass, Alas

Lemons on the Grass, Alas Summary

The narrator, stuck in the Lincoln Tunnel, thinks how important cars are, like horses in the past. Then he thinks of all the expressions about horses in the English language. He recalls an article he wrote for Friends, a magazine published by General Motors. In the article, "Lemons on the Grass, Alas," the narrator meets his friend Howard for lunch at Les Miserables du Frite. Howard works for B&W, a PR agency. Howard is depressed. He reads the narrator a classified ad trying to sell an almost new car for half the retail price because it's a "lemon."

The narrator thinks Howard is upset because his client is the car manufacturer, but Howard's client is the NLGA, the National Lemon Growers Association. They spend millions trying to improve the image of the lemon, but the term "lemon" as derogatory persists. Howard tells his friend about the BNAs, "Bad News Accounts." He gets together with other PR executives, working for bad accounts. Prescott Schuyler III represents the ABA, American Baloney Alliance, who can't get away from "baloney" meaning nonsense or lies. Herbie Morrison represents the TBPA, the Turkey Breeders' Protective Association, and "turkey" is always used to describe plays that flop.

The NLGA traced the origin of the term "lemon" to a man who lost a race in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1903, and they've tried to smear the man who started it all. They also elected a National Lemon Queen and published a Lemon Lovers' Cookbook, which was a flop. The narrator reminds his friend that others are worse off, and Howard thinks of Sylvester Snead at Y&R, who killed himself. He started the BNAs, and killed himself because of his account, the ICM, the International Crock Manufacturers. He couldn't stand hearing "It's a crock!" anymore.

Lemons on the Grass, Alas Analysis

The narrator's job is a writer, ironically, considering that his grand letter home from camp consisted, in his first draft, of the simple statement, "I am at camp." The narrator also characterizes himself as self-defeating. He has drifted through most of his life, following orders and retreating into himself to observe around him. Perhaps his self-defeating nature keeps him at the comfortable, average, everyman level he's accustomed to. As a writer, the narrator uses his tendency to be an observer to bring life to the reader.

Again, in this episode, the writer is not an active participant, but an observer. He is twice removed from the reader, since the narrator of the article is not necessarily the narrator of the book. The article is a fiction inside of a fiction, and the narrator of the article is a parody of the narrator of the book.

The narrator finds humor in everyday foibles and oddities of human experience. The story of the PR executive in charge of improving the name of lemons is a commentary

on the folly of language. Many of the turns of phrase and idioms in the English language are arbitrary, but it's impossible to impose a new order on something that grows up naturally out of human experience. In this episode, the narrator also touches on the idea of groups. The group of lemon growers pits itself against the car manufacturers. Each group fights for its own product, creating conflict. If, as Howard suggests, people used "banana" instead of "lemon" to indicate a nonfunctional car, the banana growers' PR executive might be ready to jump off a bridge.

The Lost Civilization of Deli

The Lost Civilization of Deli Summary

Stuck in the Lincoln Tunnel, the narrator remembers his editor's dismay and General Motors' displeasure at his article. A cop heads past him toward the obstruction ahead. He remembers a movie about men building the Lincoln Tunnel, and thinks that working men are never the heroes anymore. A bus with a big gin ad on the side, showing a tropical beach, stops beside him, and he thinks of the ad agents toiling over the attractive scene. In "The Lost Civilization of Deli," the narrator imagines a future archaeological dig at a lost city, buried in the sea during the last Ice Age and recently re-emerged, called enigmatically "Big Apple." Many theorists believe it must have been an agricultural society. They don't know what to make of such fragmentary titles as "Fun City" and "Queens Plaza Ind." What's left of art and literature tells the archaeologists nothing of daily life.

The expedition leader is about to give up on the dig when they unearth a vault labeled "TV 60 SEC COMMERCIALS," filled with reels of film and a projector. Back in their laboratory, they figure out how to work the projector, and scientists meet to view the films. The mysterious golden arches of a MacDonald's commercial are impressive, as is the frantic primal dance of a Pepsi commercial. The leader assigns scientists to discover what a commercial was and why they were made, and what "TV" is. The theories center around some sort of religion. The next commercial is a Chevy commercial, and they speculate on the nature of the machine. The leader thinks it's a residence. They think the dog might be a higher, sentient species.

The find will certainly fund future research, but the implications are staggering, and the scientists agree to keep the films secret, for now. The scientists briefly discuss the curious acronyms found throughout the remains of the society. The next commercial is a Purina Cat Chow commercial, with singing cats: meow, meow, meow, meow. The audience is stunned. They've heard of cats, worshipped by the Egyptians. They put it aside for special study.

The films were found in "Madison Ave," and they relate the term Ave to the Latin word Ave meaning prayer or sacred song. Perhaps the commercials are a scripture. The next commercial is for Kentucky Fried Chicken, and they think the Colonel must be a priest. The next commercial shows shoppers squeezing Charmin toilet paper. The leader thinks they must have been worshiping those white rolls. If only they knew what the rolls were for, they would find the heart of the civilization!

The Lost Civilization of Deli Analysis

In "The Lost Civilization of Deli," the narrator imagines what the culture of New York might look like to people of the future with no preconceived knowledge of it. The

narrator sees the crass and gaudy lowest-common-denominator culture of the average everyman. The future archaeologists in this fantasy don't get information on everyday life from art and literature, because art and literature focus on an ideal, not on the reality of real people's existence. The Margate Elephant is more emblematic of the reality of life, as the narrator sees it, than an imagined ideal.

The narrator chooses to focus on TV commercials as the information the archaeologists uncover about the society they're studying. TV commercials reflect the everyday life of our commercial culture. We're surrounded by forces asking us to drink and eat and buy products. Outside of the context of the culture, the commercials seem like religious relics to the viewers. The exuberant colors, dancing, and music all has an element of tribal worship.

The culture of New York is a culture of "others" in the episode. Though the New Yorkers are no longer present, they are bound together by being part of a group, New Yorkers. From the outside, they are mysterious. More than that, the archaeologists degrade the New Yorkers as primitive, tribal creatures. Because the New Yorkers are different and separate from the archaeologists, they must be somehow less than the archaeologists. Again, the existence of two rival groups creates conflict, and seemingly there cannot be two separate groups without them being, on some level, rivals.

The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929

The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929 Summary

Continuing through the Lincoln Tunnel, the narrator remembers Mr. Whipple from the Charmin commercials. The front end of the car behind him suddenly collapses, and the looks on the occupants' faces remind the narrator of the Johnson Smith catalog. In "The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929," the narrator recalls the Johnson Smith catalog. Boys order books recounting stories of white slavery. The catalog offers exploding cigars, false teeth, and stink bombs, and it's purely American. The catalog is highly expressive of life in the 1920s, advertising revolvers for cyclists and ladies. Revolvers make users prepared for war or shooting their own food.

The gag items are unkind, including squirt rings and itching powder. A bootlegger cigar is telling about Prohibition. The "cigar" is a masked flask. The catalog also sells badges for lodges and professions, as well as get-rich-quick products like mushroom gardens or key chain stamping machines. Plus, there are magic tricks and joke books, filled with jokes still heard today on TV.

The narrator extols the chatty caption-writing, quoting captions for a book on the horrors of white slavery and another on a black-eye disguise for boys. The personal style makes for good reading, and the illustrations are classic. The surreal illustration of joke teeth with a false tongue, the oaf wearing the enormous vibrating eye, and the swollen thumb all entertain. The catalog contains dozens of joke items that are soap imitations to be substituted for real items: cheese, biscuits, gumdrops, cigars, pickles, and more.

The mail is essential at the time and connects rural America with the world. Johnson Smith offers correspondence courses in everything from ukulele playing to whistling, the only available education for many. The catalog also contains books offering the secrets to riches, such as how to cure corns. The catalog appeals to the superstitious, too, offering knowledge of clairvoyance. Appealing to the violent, brass knuckles and coshes are also for sale. Warnings against imitations are plentiful, and the narrator concedes that fly-by-night false mail-order businesses were common.

The narrator also credits Johnson Smith for being ahead of its time in realizing that advertisement must be entertaining. Throughout the catalog are little jokes, just for entertainment. The narrator concludes that the Johnson Smith catalog is just a humorous relic today, but for those of tomorrow, it will be a telling artifact of American culture.

The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929 Analysis

The narrator again finds humor in the raunchy foibles of everyday people. The first episodes of the book set up the narrator's focus on the lowest common denominator. The center of the Fig Newtons episode is on bathroom humor and an explosion of

feces. The central event at the beginning of the summer camp episode focuses on vomit. The reality of bodily functions becomes humor, gross as it is. Here again, the gross and base becomes humorous and telling about human nature.

The gag items found in the catalog are mean-spirited at best, from giving someone a fake piece of chocolate made of soap to attacking someone with an exploding cigar. Even a whoopee cushion is crude, at least. The humor comes from torturing someone else and laughing at his or her misfortune. This is reminiscent of when the narrator is given KP duty on the troop train. His fellow company-members heckle him as he goes to KP, making fun of him for his misfortune. The misfortune of another is humorous. In a world of disappointment, if someone else is unfortunate, at least you've escaped this time.

The Johnson Smith catalog preys on all sorts of human foibles, including greed (in the guise of get-rich schemes), superstition (in books on clairvoyance), and violence (in its offers of guns and brass knuckles). The underbelly of mankind is exposed, and the narrator, as a consummate observer, appreciates it.

Lost at C

Lost at C Summary

Back in the tunnel, the narrator considers coming into the tunnel late at night to paint a fake crack on the wall to freak out drivers. The cars move slowly forward, and the narrator ruminates on the unknowability of God. "Lost at C" relates a childhood memory or the narrator. The narrator is sitting in Mr. Pittinger's class, knowing that his academic career is finished. He traces the roots to first grade. The narrator's last name is near the end of the alphabet, so he is always seated at the back of the class. Everyone else comes before those at the end of the alphabet, and from the back of the class, it's impossible to see or hear.

The kids at the back of the class live in constant fear of being called on. They develop defenses. Helen Weathers sweats, shielding herself in a haze. Martin Perlmutter is so nondescript that he's ignored and sits perfectly still. One day, he is unaccountably called on, and he gets out of it when his nose starts gushing blood. Schwartz escapes by scrunching down in his desk. Zynzmeister takes comfort in religion, clicking his rosary beads. The narrator shifts in his seat, so he's always behind other kids. He's also developed a vacant stare, practices mind control by chanting "don't call on me" to himself, and is developing a "cute look" to use on teachers.

The kids at the back of the class occasionally catch a word, like "marsupial." Schwartz tells them, after class, that marsupials lay eggs, and that's the narrator's sum total knowledge of marsupials. One day, the narrator hears the Bolivia exports tin, and forever after he uses this knowledge in cocktail parties and to impress his Uncle Carl. The narrator's father believes his son is highly intelligent. Finally, the narrator graduates middle school, his fakery undiscovered, though his name is misspelled on his diploma. In September, he receives a notice for high school registration.

The narrator and his friends ride the bus to high school the first day. The narrator is determined to finally learn something. Terrified, he makes his way to his home room. He finds himself seated in the back of the class again, behind a huge football player. The classes are pre-assigned, and after a pep talk by the homeroom teacher, the narrator heads off to his first class, anxious to start a career of real learning. Schwartz, Flick, and other old school friends are in the class, and again, they're seated alphabetically. The narrator strains to hear, and learns that the class is algebra. His mind boggles at adding x's and y's. The back row puts up their defenses.

At home, the narrator's parents are impressed with their son's accomplishment of learning algebra. In class, the narrator is terrified of being called on. Fakery works in all his other classes, but algebra is terrifying. The whole class will be graded on the final plus in-class performance, and the narrator has so far narrowly avoided questioning. At home, he tries to study but understands nothing. Two days before the final, the narrator's luck runs out. As his mind wanders on the warm spring day, he's called to the

front of the class and asked the value of c in a mind-bogglingly complex equation full of inscrutable x's and y's. He cowers before the equation, until in a burst of inspiration he says that c is 3. His teacher is dumbfounded that the narrator solved the equation. Schwartz accuses him sulkily of studying. The teacher is so impressed that he excuses the narrator from the final exam, asking him to help grade papers instead. Failure is averted.

Lost at C Analysis

Throughout most of the narrator's life, he floats in the middle, among a group of others just like him. In his school career, his last name puts him just slightly lower, in the back of the class, at the beginning of the end of the line. The narrator retreats inside himself. Just as the narrator is alone inside his car on his journey through the Lincoln Tunnel, he is alone in his seat in the back of the class. He can't see or hear what the teacher is doing, so he retreats into his own mind, focusing on evading being called into active duty.

The narrator calls himself self-defeating as a writer. In school he is also self-defeating and self-deprecating. He believes that he floats through classes on the strength of his double-talk and his cute look, fooling teachers into letting him slide through life. Yet, when the narrator is called to the front of the class in cold, hard algebra to determine the value of c in an equation, the correct answer seems to come to him through inspiration. The narrator has tried to study algebra at home, and he believes he's failed. However, his performance may indicate that the narrator has more of a spark of intellect and ability than he gives himself credit for. He doesn't behave like an Umbaugh or a Skunk, but the narrator quietly turns himself into a thinker and a writer.

The theme of disappointment appears in this episode. The narrator sees high school as a new start and a chance to put behind him the old way of going to school, not trying, skating through classes, and never knowing what's being taught. However, when he gets to high school, he finds more of the same and slips into his old roles. Throughout the book, the narrator finds all his new adventures and experiences disappointing in a similar way. The foibles and failures of humanity are always present.

Ellsworth Leggett and the Great Ice Cream War

Ellsworth Leggett and the Great Ice Cream War Summary

The narrator thinks back on his high school trickery, as he makes his way through the Lincoln Tunnel. A buzzer goes off in his engine. There's still no radio reception. His mind wanders to Mr. Leggett. "Ellsworth Leggett and the Great Ice Cream War" begins with the narrator returning to his home town after being away for years. As he drives through the now-decayed town in a nondescript rental car, he sees an old landmark, the Igloo ice cream parlor. He's amazed it's still in business after all these years. The narrator stops in the parking lot and walks in, remembering his childhood. The ice cream counter is just as he remembers it, and the narrator sits down. He recognizes Al behind the counter and orders "the regular." The narrator and Al recall the great ice cream war.

On a hot July Friday, the narrator is playing softball in the park with Schwartz and his other friends. Kissel starts clowning around, dramatizing how thirsty he is. Everyone starts getting thirsty, and Schwartz suggests opening the spigot on the ball field and starts banging on it with a bat. The boys all join in, and soon they've started the water. They drink greedily, but as they are walking home, the groundskeeper tells them that the water isn't drinkable. It's unfiltered river water. The boys argue about who's to blame as they head home. Flick mentions that his grandfather drinks kerosene to cure colds, and the other boys are impressed. They all head off to their homes.

At the narrator's house, his mother is cooking meatloaf and peas, and his brother is playing on the kitchen floor. The narrator's father drives up and comes in the screen door, heading straight for the last beer. The narrator's mother tells him that Mrs. Kissel's refrigerator caught on fire. She serves supper to distract her husband from the hated Yankees and tells how Mrs. Kissel threw dishwater on the fire and finally had to get the hose. After dinner, the family goes for a ride in the narrator's father's Pontiac. It's a family treat. Randy gets in trouble for kicking his mother's seat. They pass Mr. Kissel, who's drunk again. They drive up to the lake and watch the sparks from the mill across the lake, like fireworks in the hot summer sky.

The narrator's father suggests getting some ice cream at the Igloo, and they begin driving into town. They find a crowd of people out in the streets, and the crowd gets thicker the closer they get to the ice cream parlor. A few blocks away from the Igloo, they have to grab a parking space and walk the rest of the way. They see people come by carrying multiple cones of triple-dip ice cream. Some of the people in the crowd begin to fear the ice cream will run out. An ice cream war is going on.

A new, corporate-owned ice cream parlor called the Happy Cow has moved in across the street from the Igloo, offering 20-cent triple-dip ice cream cones to beat the Igloo's

25-cent price. The war is on, and the Igloo's window now advertises 12-cent triple-dips. The family gets in the long line waiting to get their ice cream. Mr. Leggett can be seen inside, supervising. Across the street, the Happy Cow starts advertising 10-cent triple-dips, and soon the whole crowd has moved. Mr. Leggett counters with 7 cents. The Happy Cow manager calls the corporate office, and soon the Happy Cow offers 3-cent triple-dips. Mr. Leggett deals the final blow: FREE ice cream. The crowd goes mad with ice cream. The Happy Cow has been driven out.

Ellsworth Leggett and the Great Ice Cream War Analysis

The narrator continues in his role as an observer in the Great Ice Cream War. He witnesses another contest between brains and brawn. The steadfast Mr. Leggett represents brains, reacting to his corporate competition with agility and intelligence. The Happy Cow represents brawn, a big corporation backed by money and muscle. The contest is fueled by the malleability of the masses. The people of the town may dislike big corporations coming in and running small businesses out of the town, and yet they are swayed by a few cents' discount on ice cream to herd into the Happy Cow instead of the Igloo. The basest instincts of humanity govern behavior, and in this case, that instinct is to buy the cheapest bargain.

The Ice Cream War doesn't occur until near the end of this episode. Instead, the narrator depicts his childhood friendships and his life at home. His family goes out to look at the lights of the mill across the lake on a hot July night. The narrator, always the observer, builds a nostalgic picture of family life in small-town Indiana. His father may not be too smart or understand the political situation. His mother may never take the rollers out of her hair. His brother may be a pain. Still, the picture of small-town home life is one where human foibles are lovable and in fact make life worth living.

The Barbi Doll Celebrates New Year's and Closing

The Barbi Doll Celebrates New Year's and Closing Summary

The narrator enters the last few hundred yards of the tunnel. His mind wanders, and he finds himself singing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again." "The Barbi Doll Celebrates New Year's" begins as the narrator is waiting for his final release from the army. The soldiers assemble before a captain, who reads of their names and gives them their paper. The captain calls them "misters" and releases them. Gasser heads off down the street. Zynzmeister packs away his library, philosophizing about their release.

The narrator remembers Lieutenant Cherry getting angry over an argument between some of the men about Ava Gardner's breasts, and Zynzmeister blames Cherry's desperation at being in charge of Company K. Zynzmeister leaves, and the narrator heads to the bus station. He gets a burger while waiting for the bus, and the waitress makes him pay for his coffee after he tells her he's been released from the army. He sits in a cramped seat at the back of the bus, and in the middle of the night, he gets off in Indiana. He passes the house of his old crush, Daphne Bigelow. He sees the Warren G. Harding School, his old grade school. It's after two-thirty in the morning when he knocks on the door of his childhood home.

The narrator's mother answers the door, and the narrator uses an old trick to open the sticky front door. Back in his familiar kitchen, he tells his mother he's home for good. He's waited to surprise them. His mother makes him a sandwich, as his father comes downstairs, crashing into a coffee table in the dark. His father is enthusiastic, but the reunion is awkward. Tired, the narrator heads to bed. The next morning at breakfast, his father is comfortingly the same White Sox fan. The narrator's father mentions New Year's, and the narrator realizes he needs a date. Accidentally swearing, the narrator shocks his parents. His father goes off to work, and the narrator gets ready to go out.

The narrator stops at the drugstore for a soda, and the girl who used to work behind the counter is gone. The owner doesn't remember him. Heading down the street, he runs into a girl he remembers from high school, Barbara Jena Dorthoffer, known as Barbi. She was head cheerleader, one of the popular girls. She is the first character to name the narrator: Ralph Parker. Barbi says Ralph has changed, and when he asks her out for New Year's, she agrees to a date.

Ralph's father lends him the car for his date, and his parents are impressed that he's dating Barbi, the reverend's daughter, who is involved in all kinds of charitable works. Ralph looks through the paper for a suitable New Year's event and settles on a dance with an orchestra at the Ambassador Starlight Roof. He makes a date for the expensive event.

When Ralph picks up Barbi, he drops his keys in the snow and needs to get the spare pair from beneath the car. Then, as they're driving to the dance, Barbi makes him stop at a sordid bar, the Kit Kat Klub. She knows the bartender and orders "the regular," a flaming tower of shots called a Pousse Café au Vinnie (the bartender). She also knows the bass player. The owner's drunk wife spills the narrator's drink, and a man in the bathroom tries to pick the narrator up. Barbi proceeds to get drunk on the expensive drinks, until Ralph insists on leaving. He carries Barbi away, while she insists she wants more drinks. Once they're in the car, it's already midnight. Barbara throws up all over Ralph's father's new seat covers. He drops Barbi off at her father's rectory. A new year and a new life out of the army have begun. In the closing, the narrator finally makes his way out of the Lincoln Tunnel.

The Barbi Doll Celebrates New Year's and Closing Analysis

Just as beginning high school is supposed to be a new start in the narrator's school career, getting out of the army is supposed to be a new start in his life. Just as high school turns out to be a disappointment, the narrator is doomed to disappointment as he starts out as a free man, back in his home town. The narrator's journey begins at the bus station, where he buys himself a cheeseburger. Even this is disappointing, since when he tells the waitress that he's finally free of the army, she tells him that it means he'll have to pay for his cup of coffee. His new beginning is off to a rocky start.

The narrator looks forward to surprising his parents with his return, but this too is a disappointment. His mother first is afraid of the stranger at the door at 2:30 in the morning, and then she can't open the door. Even when the door is open, she is so startled that she leaves him standing out in the snow for a minute. She can't grasp his surprise when he tries to tell her. The home he remembers is the same, and yet different, and there is an atmosphere of not being able to come home again that's reinforced when his army ways interrupt his family life, when he accidentally swears in front of his parents.

The narrator's final and most impressive disappointment is his grand New Year's Eve date with the reverend's daughter. The narrator intends to embark on a new life, as a free man, in the world of adults. Instead, he finds himself out of control of the situation, pulled along by his date to a sleazy bar, where the situation becomes more and more disastrous. His troubles in the army are over, but trouble never goes away. The narrator has hit, not a glorious new era, but yet another in the constant series of life's disappointments.

Characters

Ralph Parker

The narrator of A Fistful of Fig Newtons remains unnamed throughout most of the book. During the first episode, he says to call him Dave, though that's not his name. He chooses to remain anonymous while he reveals a dark underbelly of his life. The narrator is trapped in traffic going through the Lincoln Tunnel, and his mind flits from episode to episode of his life, to fantasies and commentary on society, and back to his situation in the Lincoln Tunnel. The book chronicles the inside of the narrator's mind as he travels the dark path between New York and New Jersey.

During the last episode, the narrator's name is revealed: Ralph Parker. Ralph grows up in a small Indiana town with a group of boyhood friends. Destined to sit in the back of the class, he learns nothing at school. At his much-awaited summer camp, Ralph miserably goes from disappointing task to disappointing task, whether it's cleaning detail or his much-dreamed-of canoeing, which turns out disastrously. Ralph floats through life, at the mercy of what's around him. He joins the army and works in a Radar company. A reputed intellectual, Ralph always feels like an ordinary or below ordinary guy.

The army is much like summer camp. Ralph is ordered around, forced into difficult details like KP. He witnesses his friend Ernie being left off the troop train, but in all his adventures, Ralph is more of a witness than a participant. Ernie is the legend who is left off the train; Skunk is the hero at camp. Mr. Leggett is the hero that runs the ice cream war. Ralph merely witnesses these grand events. After getting out of the army, Ralph comes home again, where he has a disastrous New Year's date. He goes to college on the GI Bill, where he witnesses another grand event, Umbaugh's laxative contest. Ralph eventually becomes a writer and moves to New Jersey, a home he seems to both love and hate. Ralph is a nostalgic character, lovingly remembering his Indiana boyhood.

Schwartz

Schwartz is one of Ralph's childhood friends who goes to Warren G. Harding Middle School with him and to Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee, where he is a member of Mole Lodge along with the narrator. Schwartz gets demerits for falling asleep during a boring forestry lecture during the first day of camp. Later, Swartz burns his tongue on a charred weenie during a weenie roast, and Schwartz's swollen tongue is one of the few things the narrator writes home about in his compulsory letter to his parents.

Schwartz is always seated at the back of the class, along with the narrator. His defense to stop from being called on is to hunch down in his seat to make himself invisible. Schwartz is stocky, and the narrator says that the looks like a fire hydrant. Schwartz is

annoyed with the narrator when he is able to successfully solve an algebra problem in front of the class, accusing the narrator of studying behind his back.

On the day of the great ice cream war at the Igloo, Schwartz plays softball in the park with the narrator. When the boys get thirsty, Schwartz suggests opening the spigot on the ball field to get some water and starts banging on it with a bat. Later, the groundskeeper tells the boys that the water they drank was unfiltered river water.

Schuyler Umbaugh

Umbaugh is an intellectual at the Midwestern college the narrator attends. Umbaugh gets Big Al Dagellio, "Pig-out" Goldberg, and the narrator into a laxative-eating contest. He causes the football star Big Al to be too debilitated to play in the next day's game, and the narrator is convinced Umbaugh made his money betting against their college team.

Goldberg

Goldberg is known throughout the narrator's dorm for his piggish eating. His friends call him "Pig-out," and others call him the Slob. Goldberg contributes a salami to the feast of Fig Newtons and beer that goes on in the narrator's dorm room. He is the first one to run to the bathroom in the laxative-eating contest.

Big Al Dagellio

Big Al is a dim-witted star football player at the Midwestern college attended by the narrator. Big Al competes in the chocolate laxative eating contest and is certain that he'll win. He makes it through thirteen rounds before collapsing and missing the next day's game, which the state college loses to Michigan.

Flick

Flick is one of Ralph's childhood friends who goes to Warren G. Harding Middle School with him and goes to Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee. Flick comes up with Skunk's nickname, comparing his vomit to a skunk's defense.

Kissel

Kissel is one of Ralph's childhood friends who goes to Warren G. Harding Middle School with him and goes to Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee. Kissel makes a shoulder holster for his drunken father in leathercraft, to carry his bourbon bottle. At the softball game on the day of the great ice cream war, Kissel is the one who says he is thirsty and

begins fooling around, dramatizing his thirst. The same day, his mother's refrigerator catches on fire.

Mr. Gordon

Mr. Gordon is the scoutmaster who gives the boys information about Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee.

Mother

The narrator's mother is always cooking in the kitchen and wearing aluminum rollers in her hair. She is a romantic who appreciates Bing Crosby music, which her husband despises.

Randy

Randy is the narrator's young brother. He's too young to go to camp when the narrator goes, and he annoys his mother by kicking the back of her seat in the car. When the narrator comes home from the army, Randy is still serving in the army.

Father

The narrator's father is a loud, complaining, but happy man. He's a White Sox fan, and he enjoys complaining about the government, his bosses, and all the world's idiots. He hates psychiatrists but likes to tell people they ought to get their heads examined.

Captain Crabtree

Captain Crabtree is one of the leaders of the summer camp, Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee. Crabtree accompanies the kids on the bus to the summer camp, and he has the conflict with Skunk that ends up with Captain Crabtree covered in vomit.

Dan Baxter

Dan Baxter is one of the Beavers, the older kids at the summer camp, who tortures the new Chipmunks. He is Jake Brannigan's sidekick.

Skunk

Skunk earns his nickname when he has a temper tantrum on the bus to Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee. Captain Craptree tries to physically put Skunk, an overweight boy, into his seat, and Skunk vomits all over him. Flick nicknames the boy Skunk, and his real

name is never mentioned. Skunk doesn't talk to the other campers who are all assigned to Mole Lodge. On the night of the treasure hunt, Skunk gets frustrated with his panicky lodge-mates, and he goes off on his own. He reasons that the tomahawk is probably not hidden in the woods at all but is still in its case, and he finds it there and retrieves it. Skunk's speech is intellectual, and he clearly looks down upon the camp leaders.

Colonel Bullard

Colonel Bullard is the military head of Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee.

Jake Brannigan

Jake is a criminal leader among the Beavers who harasses the Chipmunks without mercy.

The Tailgater

The narrator nicknames the tailgater "Blue Jowls." He follows the narrator down the freeway, trapping him behind a large flatbed truck.

Zynzmeister

Zynzmeister is the highbrow-talking intellectual of Company K, the narrator's army radar unit. Zynzmeister is also, as a young boy, always seated at the back of the class, behind even the narrator, where he clicks his rosary beads in prayer that he won't be called on.

Gasser

Gasser is a member of Company K, the narrator's army radar unit, who is known for hoarding candy bars. He is stuck on mess hall detail with the narrator on the troop train.

Ernie

Ernie is a member of Company K who is assigned to KP duty with Gasser and the narrator on the troop train. Ernie gets off the train to get beers for the three men after their arduous KP duty, and the train starts up again. Though he runs for the train, he can't make it. Ernie is never seen again and becomes legendary in the Signal Corps as a lost soldier.

Lieutenant Cherry

Cherry announces to Company K that they are shipping out on a closed troop train and later sends Ernie, Gasser, and the narrator for KP duty on the troop train.

Corporal Elkins

Elkins is Company K's driver and a friend of Zynzmeister, who verbally spars with Elkins.

Major Willoughby

Willoughby is the train troop commander on the sealed train that takes Company K off to its unknown new assignment.

Captain Carruthers

Carruthers is the deputy commander on the troop train, whose job is to make sure the troops get where they're going.

Howard

Howard is a character from an article the narrator wrote for a magazine. In the article, Howard is a friend of the narrator, who shared KP duty with him in the army. Howard is a PR man working for B&W, a Madison Avenue agency. He is upset because his client is the National Lemon Growers Association, who are angry because the word "lemon" continues to be used as a degrading term for a car that always breaks down.

The Leader of the Dig

The leader of the dig is an imaginary character that the narrator makes up, a future archaeologist who is in charge of an excavation of what was once New York City.

Mr. Pittinger

Mr. Pittinger is the narrator's freshman high school algebra teacher, who seats him at the back of the class and never calls on him until close to final exam. Mr. Pittinger is so astounded that the narrator can answer his question that he excuses the narrator from his final exam.

Mr. Leggett

Mr. Leggett runs the Igloo ice cream parlor in the narrator's home town. Mr. Leggett refuses to back down from a price war with the corporate-owned ice cream parlor that has just opened up across the street. He starts out offering 12-cent triple-dip ice cream cones, and in the end he gives away ice cream for free to run the corporate owned ice cream parlor out of business.

Al

Al works behind the ice cream counter at the Igloo.

Barbara Jean Dorthoffer

Known as Barbi, Barbara Jean Dorthoffer is the daughter of a reverend and known for her charitable works. She was a popular cheerleader in high school. Ralph asks her out for New Year's his first week home from the army, and she accepts. Barbi drags Ralph to a bar in a scummy part of town, where she proceeds to get completely intoxicated and throw up on the new seat covers in Ralph's father's car.

Objects/Places

The Lincoln Tunnel

The entire story chronicles the thoughts and memories that pass through the narrator's mind as he drives through the Lincoln Tunnel from New York to New Jersey, stuck in traffic.

Fig Newtons

The narrator loves Fig Newtons. While the narrator is in college, he tries to sneak a snack of Fig Newtons, which turns into a dorm party of four men, ultimately leading to a laxative-eating contest.

Boomo-Lax

Boomo-Lax laxatives taste like chocolate bon-bons, but they go off like hand grenades in the intestines. Umbaugh challenges three of his dorm-mates to a Boomo-Lax eating contest.

The Margate Elephant

The Margate Elephant is a giant wooden elephant constructed on a New Jersey beach.

New Jersey

New Jersey is the "light at the end of the tunnel," and the home of the narrator as an adult. Though New Jersey is cheesy, the narrator loves it.

Indiana

The narrator has fond memories of his childhood home in Indiana.

Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee

The narrator goes to Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee, in the woods of Michigan, for his first summer camp experience.

Chipmunk Caps

Chipmunks are first-year campers at Camp Nobba-WaWa-Nockee, and they must wear bright green beanies with a yellow arrowhead on the front at all times to designate them as first-year campers.

Sacred Golden Tomahawk of Chief Chungacong

The Sacred Golden Tomahawk of Chief Chungacong is the artifact that the campers must find on the treasure hunt near the end of summer camp.

The Georgia Peach

The Georgia Peach is the sealed troop train on which Company K moves out to an undisclosed location.

Les Miserables du Frite

In an article the narrator writes for General Motors, the narrator has lunch with his friend Howard at Les Miserables du Frite, an expensive restaurant attended by expense-account executives, where no one has ever paid in cash for years. The customers all try to look like they're at business meetings.

The Johnson Smith Catalog

The Johnson Smith catalog is a catalog filled with practical jokes, get-rich-quick schemes, books about white slavery, study-at-home courses, joke books, fake food, guns, and other miscellaneous items. The narrator believes the Johnson Smith catalog is telling about early twentieth century American culture.

The Igloo

The Igloo is an ice cream parlor in the narrator's home town.

The Kit Kat Klub

Barbi drags the narrator to the Kit Kat Klub, a sleazy bar, on New Year's Eve.

Themes

Cultural Divisions

Throughout A Fistful of Fig Newtons, characters are divided into groups and separated out from others by these cultural groups. Umbaugh represents a clan of literary intelligentsia, while Big Al represents a clan of sportsmen. At the summer camp, the first-year campers are separated out as Chipmunks, while the older boys are Beavers. Inevitably, these groups come into conflict. Chipmunks are reviled by Beavers because the Chipmunks are different. They are "others" that the Beavers can intimidate and harass. Similarly, Umbaugh and Big Al have mutual distain for each other.

In the army, the soldiers in different occupations feel a sense of superiority in their own group. The radar company that the narrator belongs to is derided by an engineer that the narrator talks to while on KP duty. The narrator wishes that he could let Zynzmeister go to town on the engineer, verbally destroying the engineering company. Group divisions have become "us" and "them" designations.

In "Sociology 101," the narrator defines the Van Culture and the Camper Crowd. Even a predilection for a certain vehicle creates a group that is then divided from others. The Van Culture and the Camper Crowd are opposites, creating a sense of conflict and tension between the two. In "Lost at C," the students who sit in the back of the class become a clan in themselves, and when the narrator gives the correct answer to a question, he defies that clan. Schwartz identifies him as a traitor, turning his back on his group instead of maintaining a warlike stance against the others. Throughout the book, group designations create cultural divides, which naturally creates conflict.

Brains versus Brawn

In A Fistful of Fig Newtons, brains often come into conflict with brawn. The narrator often finds himself as an observer and recorder of these contests instead of a participant. The first such contest is between Umbaugh and Big Al. Umbaugh is undeniably brainy. He is an intellectual and opposed to sports at the university. Big Al is undeniably brawn. He is a completely ignorant football player with no intellectual knowledge at all. He is barely able to keep up a conversation with Umbaugh. Big Al is a lout, the only character who doesn't contribute something to the midnight feast. Meanwhile, Umbaugh is a cold, snobby traitor. Neither is particularly likeable, but Umbaugh is the winner. Brains triumph over brawn, because Umbaugh controls the game and knows exactly what he's doing.

At the main character's summer camp, the main character witnesses another conflict between brains and brawn. Skunk, unknown to any of the other campers, has brains. Like Umbaugh, he talks in a highbrow manner and thinks himself superior. He looks down with disdain at the military-type summer camp with all its games and activities. His opponents are not just the campers and the camp's leaders but the oafish brawny

Beavers, Jake and Dan. Skunk easily defeats them all by outwitting the people who devised the treasure hunt.

Although the intellectual characters in the book seem snobby, cold, and often unlikeable, the main character himself becomes more "brain" than "brawn." He uses intellectual language to seem intellectual, defeating algebra with the phrase, "I used empirical means." He is part of a radar company in the army, and in the company, his area is considered the brainiest. The narrator even has his own brains versus brawn competition, when he is trapped by a tailgater and uses his mental powers of imagination to survive the situation. However, the main character is not competitive, retreating inside himself instead of attacking his foe.

Disappointment

The narrator lives with disappointment throughout his lifetime. As he moves forward from era to era in his life, he finds that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Each new beginning brings the opportunity for great things to happen, but the narrator is constantly disappointed. No great things happen to him. Life, at every corner, is the same, because human beings are always the same.

When the narrator heads off to summer camp, he sees it as a grand adventure. However, he ends up being bullied by the older boys, forced into a cleaning detail, capsizing in his canoe, and falling into poison ivy. Life in the camp is not better than life in school. The narrator's disappointments continue when he passes from grade school into high school. He believes that he'll finally be able to listen and learn in class, but he is soon confronted with an incomprehensible algebra class, where he is stuck in the back of the room (alphabetically), just like in grade school. Life doesn't change. He just grows older.

More disappointment waits the narrator when he gets out of the army. He goes back to his hometown, but things have subtly changed. The girl who used to work at the drugstore is gone, and her boss doesn't remember him. He feels like he should be a grown man, in control of his own life and destiny. He makes a date for New Year's, but he soon finds himself out of control. His date drags him to a sleazy bar and proceeds to get drunk. His imagined evening never materializes. He is vomited on, just like Captain Crabtree of his camp days was vomited on by Skunk. It doesn't matter. He is entering a new stage of life, but life is always the same.

Style

Point of View

The book "A Fistful of Fig Newtons" takes place inside the main character's head as he heads on a long, hot journey through the Lincoln Tunnel in stop-and-go traffic. The book is written in first person from the main character's perspective. Through most of the novel he remains unnamed, an everyman, and his name is only revealed by an acquaintance in the last episode of the book. The narrator often acts as an observer instead of an active participant in events. He lives inside his own mind, while he relates the lives of others.

The narrator's perspective changes over the course of the book. In the episodes when he recounts his childhood, his perspective is that of a young boy. As he grows up, his perspective shifts into adulthood, often becoming nostalgic. One of the stories embodies this change in the narrator, beginning with the narrator at a point in his adulthood looking back on his childhood. The story of the Ice Cream War begins with the narrator going back to his hometown after many years and finding The Igloo still standing.

In addition to nostalgic reminiscences of the narrator's past, the book contains essay-like episodes and flights of the narrator's imagination. These are written in an essay style, but they reflect the narrator's point of view of life. He may be talking about the Johnson and Smith catalog, but he's communicating his own impressions of the meaning and importance of advertisements for whoopee cushions and false teeth.

Setting

The settings of "A Fistful of Fig Newtons" range over the narrator's life. His childhood takes place in a small town in Indiana, near Lake Michigan. The narrator's childhood town is idealized, an unpretentious, safe, and pleasant place, where the sparks of the mill can be seen across the lake. However, in keeping with the theme of disappointment, when the narrator returns to his hometown many years later, the town has been taken over by tawdry, sleazy businesses and strip malls. The section of town where the narrator is hauled off by Barbi into a sleazy bar seems to have overtaken the nostalgic hometown, except for The Igloo, which stands as a symbol of yesteryear.

In the narrator's adulthood, he lives in New Jersey and commutes into New York. New Jersey becomes the narrator's home, and he is attracted to the cheesy, commercial gaudiness of the state. The Margate Elephant, a giant wooden animal, oversees the beach. A building gaudily decorated as an old time river boat is permanently anchored by the roadside. The colorful, commercial nature of the New Jersey he knows strikes at the heart of something real about humanity and is reflected in the sixty-second commercials that future archaeologists find and hail as the essence of Big Apple culture.

Perhaps the most important setting of the novel is the main character's mind. He is trapped inside his car in the Lincoln Tunnel, under the flowing Hudson River. Layer after protective layer traps out the world, and the main character retreats into his haven, his own mind. In his mind, archaeologists of the future live, as does the Johnson and Smith catalog, meetings with imagined PR executives, impromptu sociology lectures, and all the other tidbits describing human nature and culture, as the narrator sees them.

Language and Meaning

In "A Fistful of Fig Newtons," the intellectual characters speak in a highly stylized way, using long words and formal sentence structures that separate them from the other characters. Conversation between Umbaugh and Big Al is humorous because Umbaugh lectures in a highbrow manner, while Big Al replies with unfinished syllables, incomplete sentences, and swear words. Language reflects the state of the mind.

The main character, growing up, uses language to hide behind. As a student at school, he double-talks his social studies teachers by throwing out terms like "subjective" and "objective" and saying that nothing can be quantified. At home he quips that algebra is merely abstract mathematics, overwhelming his parents with pride at his intellect, despite the fact that the narrator doesn't know what "abstract mathematics" really is. Language is a pretension to knowledge, as the narrator shows when he uses the fact that Bolivia exports tin to pretend to a vast and comprehensive knowledge of foreign affairs.

When the main character returns from the army, he has changed. He has grown up and become tanned. His first day home, he unthinkingly swears in front of his parents. His language reflects his culture, and he has acquired a new culture of the army. His parents are shocked. Such words are not allowed in their culture, the culture of the main character's boyhood. Language is an essential aspect of culture, one reflected in the Johnson and Smith catalog and in the future archaeologists' interpretations of the tidbits of writing they find from the Big Apple.

Structure

The structure of "A Fistful of Fig Newtons" is not a traditional structure for a novel. The book lies halfway between being a novel and being a collection of short stories and essays. Instead of being divided into chapters, the book is divided into episodes, each with its own title. Each episode is preceded by a short scene of the narrator in his car, inching through traffic through the Lincoln Tunnel from New York to New Jersey. These scenes take place inside the narrator's head, and the book chronicles the narrator's thoughts and memories as he wades through the traffic jam. The book begins as the narrator enters the Lincoln Tunnel, and it ends with him emerging out the other side.

The episodes present the narrator's life story, but they only give small glimpses into different periods of his life. Readers see one night during the narrator's college experience; they see one summer at summer camp. The readers see the narrator

shipping off to active duty in the army and getting out when his stint is over. The book presents the narrator's experience of school and of the Ice Cream War. These small bits, presented non-chronologically, create a piecemeal picture of the narrator's life.

Interspersed within the narrator's life story are pieces of commentary about the world and flights of the narrator's imagination. Instead of learning about what the narrator has done (or even his name), the reader learns what the narrator thinks. The narrator is a character who observes but who retreats inward, and the novel chronicles the inner life of this character.

Quotes

"I, however, was like one of those poor yaps who gets sucked into a bar fight and begins swinging wildly at everything in sight, only to wind up with a broken hand from hitting the gum machine and thirty days in the can." A Fistful of Fig Newtons or the Shoot-Out in Room 303, p. 23

"Within moments the bedraggled mob, covered with lumps and scratching unashamedly, huddled in the living room, myself among them, taking solace in the obvious fact that Mother Nature bites and stings all men, rich and poor alike, especially in New Jersey." The Light at the End of the Tunnel, p. 37

"If we hadn't been on this great detail, we might have been wasting our time playing ball or puffing on butts." The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness, p. 69

"It was then that my mind really took off. Here we were, sealed in our own little noisy, smelly projectiles, hurtling over the landscape toward...what?" Marcel Proust Meets the New Jersey Tailgater, and Survives, p. 98

"Was I on the verge of an original discovery involving gravy as the universal healer, a healer which could bind mankind together once they had discovered that the one thing that they had in common was my lovely, lovely gravy?" The Marathon Run of Lonesome Ernie, the Arkansas Traveler, p. 127

"Both groups, The Van Culture and The Camper Crowd, seem to enjoy plastering their respective vehicles with various bits of propaganda material designed to prove, apparently, to the world at large that the souls and hearts of the inmates of said vehicle are in the right place." Sociology 101 (Hip Division), p. 141

"'The NLGA, for your information, is the National Lemon Growers Association, and I can tell you, the lemon industry has had it up to here with all this bad-mouthing lemons. Every time some fatheaded car company turns out a bummer, what does everyone call it? A lemon! Why a lemon, I ask you? Why not a cantaloupe, or a banana?'" Lemons in the Grass, Alas, p. 152

"One of the scholars hissed in the stunned silence, 'Is it possible that it was a whole damn civilization that worshipped food?'" The Lost Civilization of Deli, p. 164

"The simplest activity was, to use a popular phrase of the day, 'fraught with danger.' For example, the 'Young America Safety Hammer Revolver' is described as 'very popular with cyclists.' Apparently, to the reader of the day, no explanation was necessary." The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929, p. 178

"Medical science has finally begun to realize that those of us at the end of the alphabet live shorter lives, sweat more, and are far jumpier than those in the B's and E's and

even the M's and L's. People at the tail end of the alphabet grow up accepting the fact that everybody else comes first." Lost at C, p. 188

"The old man was quick to shift allegiance to the side of the best deal. I guess it was at that moment that I learned one of the great lessons of my life: that everyone has his price." Ellsworth Leggett and the Great Ice Cream War, p. 243

"I was going to enter the New Year with style, grace, and elegance, the way my new life was going to be." The Barbi Doll Celebrates New Year's, p. 271

Topics for Discussion

How does the narrator's character change from childhood through adulthood?

Why isn't Daphne, the narrator's high school love who he thinks about when he returns home from the army, a character in the novel?

What is the narrator's view of women? Why are there so few women characters in the novel?

Compare the narrator's experiences during summer camp with the narrator's experiences during the army. How is the narrator's summer camp like the army, and vice versa?

Why does the narrator feel strange and uncomfortable when he returns home from the army?

What is the narrator's relationship with his car? What do cars represent for the narrator?

In "Lost at C," is the narrator really as lost in algebra as he believes himself to be? How intelligent or unintelligent is the narrator?

Does the narrator fit in more with the brainy characters or with the brawny characters in the book?