

# **The Flamethrowers Study Guide**

## **The Flamethrowers by Rachel Kushner**

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## Plot Summary

"The Flamethrowers" tells the story of a young woman known only as Reno (the name of her hometown) as she builds a new life and discovers her sense of self in both New York City and Italy. Reno's story is intertwined with the story of Valera and his rise to becoming a powerful and wealthy industrial tycoon in early twentieth century Italy. The two main characters are tied together by Sandro Valera, Valera's youngest son, who became Reno's boyfriend when she moved to New York.

The novel opened with Valera murdering a German soldier using a motorcycle headlamp during World War One. Reno's story began when she travelled to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Nevada to complete a time trial on a motorbike with the intention of photographing the tracks in the salt as a piece of art. However, once she got there, Reno crashed her motorbike during the time trial. The novel from there flips back and forth between Reno and Valera's storylines. For this plot summary they will be condensed into one summary for each character.

Valera grew up in Egypt where he had an infatuation with a young woman called Marie who spurned him in favor of a Frenchman who had a motorcycle, triggering a lifelong obsession with the vehicles in Valera. As a young man, Valera moved to Milan where he began hanging around with a politically radical motorcycle gang. Valera and his friends all volunteered to fight for Italy in World War One and were assigned to a motorcycle battalion called the Arditi. Half of their battalion were killed in the war. Valera expanded his business into exporting rubber from Brazil during World War Two and the men employed to harvest the rubber were treated very badly.

Reno moved to New York to become an artist and struggled to find friends or a way to connect herself to a new city. Reno got a job as a receptionist at a film studio and became romantically involved with an older, successful artist called Sandro Valera. Sandro was an heir of the Moto Valera motorcycle company founded by Valera. Sandro arranged for the motorcycle Reno rode at the salt flats. After Reno crashed, she was taken in by the Valera Team who was there to set a new land speed record. They agreed to help her because she was Sandro's girlfriend. They asked Reno to drive their car and set a new land speed record for women.

Reno set a new land speed record and became the fastest woman in the world. The Valera Team wanted her to come to Italy to do a promotional tour. Sandro initially objected to the idea but later relented. Sandro and Reno went to Italy together and Reno met Sandro's family who were very rude to her. The Valeras were anxious because of the protests going on at their factory and throughout Italy. Reno caught Sandro cheating on her and left the Valeras with their groundskeeper, Gianni, who took her to Rome where a big demonstration was being held. Gianni was a member of the Red Brigade paramilitary organization and Reno helped him with his work.

Reno returned to New York and discovered that Sandro had started a new relationship with a younger woman. Sandro's brother was kidnapped and murdered by the Red



Brigades and Reno felt guilty for the help that she had given them. During the blackout in New York City Reno rode her motorbike freely through the streets, while Sandro waited on a grounded plane for the lights to come back on.

In the final chapter, Reno recounted helping Gianni escape from Italy across the French border.



# Chapters 1 – 4

## Summary

In Chapter 1, “He Killed him with a Motorbike Headlamp (What he had in his Hand)”, Valera – a soldier in the Italian army fighting in World War One – witnessed a fellow soldier, Copertini, die. Valera stopped riding his own motorbike in order to remove the headlamp from Copertini’s motorcycle, because Valera wanted it for himself. While doing this, Valera was discovered by a lone German soldier. Valera pounced on the German and killed him using the headlamp.

In Chapter 2, “Spiritual America”, a young woman in her twenties whom the reader will only ever know as “Reno”, the name of her hometown, recalled her time driving a motorbike across Nevada in the 1970s. Reno didn’t know her father when she was growing up and was mainly raised by her uncle Bobby, a trucker, alongside her cousins Scott and Andy.

Reno lived in New York and was in a relationship with an Italian man called Sandro, a successful artist 14 years older than her. Before Reno left New York for her motorcycle journey across Nevada, a woman called Helen Hellenberger had attempted to get Sandro to exhibit his art in her gallery. In retrospect, Reno thought that Helen was trying to seduce Sandro right in front of her.

In Nevada, Reno planned to race across the salt flats on her motorbike and photograph her tracks as a work of art. Many New York artists at the time were interested in the Midwest but few were actually from there, like Reno. After she’d finished driving for the day, she tried to find a motel but they were all full. The sleazy son of the owner of a motel attempted to convince her to spend the night with him in exchange for a place to sleep, but she declined. The maintenance man, Stretch, took pity on Reno and let her have his room for the night because he was working. The next day, Reno left the motel and went to race at the salt flats. When the time came for Reno to race, she crashed her bike.

Chapter 3, “He had Come a Long Way to That Moment of Quick Violence”, covered Valera’s childhood growing up in Egypt. Valera was in love with a French girl called Marie who lived in a convent next door to the Valera family home. One day, Valera saw a motorcycle parked outside of the convent. A young Frenchman came and got onto the bike and Marie sneaked out of the convent and drove away with him. Valera was crushed. He decided he needed to get a motorbike.

Six years later, in 1906, Valera left Alexandria in Egypt and moved to Milan, Italy, where his father had launched a successful construction business. In 1912, Valera was a student in Rome, about to finish his university degree. He began hanging around at the Caffé Aragno, which was frequented by young politically radical subversives who rode motorbikes. He became one of their group and began racing motorbikes around the city.



In Chapter 4, “Blanks”, Reno recalled the time after she had first moved to New York. When she first arrived in the city her intention was to call a man from Nevada called Chris Kelly whom she had known at art school and who she believed would help connect her to the art scene and social life of New York City. Reno started visiting a diner near her apartment where she became friends with the waitress, who called herself Giddle. One night, Reno went into a bar after hearing some Nina Simone music as she was walking by. Inside she met Thurman and Nadine, a very wealthy man and the beautiful but troubled woman with whom he was cheating on his wife. Later that night, they introduced Reno to an artist who she will later find out is called Ronnie Fontaine. Reno told Ronnie that she had a Moto Valera motorcycle and Ronnie told her that he knew one of the Valera family. Reno took Ronnie back to her apartment and they had sex. Reno gave Ronnie an old brown Borsalino fedora hat which she’d found in a nearby bar and kept. Reno didn’t know Ronnie’s name and he left during the night while she slept, so she never found out.

## Analysis

Chapter 1 establishes the connection between the Valera family, motorcycles, and violence, during the moment when Valera used a motorcycle headlamp to murder a German soldier. This combination is a central motivating force for all of the events in the novel, both in Valera’s narrative and in Reno’s. Valera’s own life was defined by his violent attitude and his love of motorcycles, and Reno’s relationship with Sandro was defined by the violent legacy created by the Valera company and the man who founded it.

Valera’s response to the death of his fellow soldier, Copertini, characterizes Valera as an individualist who cares more about his own safety and success than the lives of the people around him. This trait will become more pronounced in later chapters during Valera’s expansion into the rubber industry in Brazil.

When the reader is first introduced to Reno she was at a stage in her life where she was unsure of who she really was or what she wanted from life. This tentative and unsure attitude towards her self-knowledge and self-expression is symbolized by the author’s decision not to give the character a name. The protagonist will only ever be known as “Reno”: a nickname given to her by someone else, reflecting the character’s uncertainty about who she really is.

Reno’s plan to race the salt flats as fast and photograph the results for her art is a metaphor for her approach to life as a whole. She didn’t have a specific plan about where she wanted to get to or what she wanted to achieve but was instead interested in gaining new experiences and waiting to see what happened to her, so that she could later use those experiences to fuel her own art. Waiting is a central theme in the novel. Reno felt that she was always waiting for her life to happen. She couldn’t see that her life was happening right in the moment and that she was growing and changing at a remarkably fast speed: her personal growth sped along in the novel as fast as her motorbike, although Reno felt like she was standing still.



Sandro's interaction with Helen Hellenberger is early evidence of his tendency towards infidelity. Reno's narration looks back on this time in her life in retrospect and the author uses foreshadowing techniques to make it clear to the reader that her relationship with Sandro does not end well. Throughout the novel, Reno will recall moments when she saw signs that Sandro was being unfaithful to her, which are clear to her in hindsight but which she chose to ignore at the time.

Reno's interest in Land Artists, who were inspired by the aesthetics of the Midwest, reflects her attitude to life. Unlike those New York artists who were interested in the Midwest in an intellectual way, removed from real experience, Reno had actually lived the life the other artists were using to fuel and inspire their work. Reno valued life experience over following an artificial or ambitious route to developing her art career.

Valera's obsession with Marie introduced the theme of Misogyny in the novel. The chapter depicted women as objects that men could own (like motorcycles) and which could be acquired by men with sufficient money and power. This kind of attitude will be criticized by Italian feminists in later chapters during the demonstrations in Rome.

Throughout the novel, Reno will look to men (usually older men) to provide her with a connection to the world and help to give her a sense of purpose and meaning in her life. When Reno first moved to New York she was depending on Chris Kelly, an old acquaintance from her art school in Nevada, to connect her to the art world in New York. When she discovered that the number she had for him had been disconnected, she no longer had any idea how to create a life for herself in this new place, and she carried on calling the number despite knowing that it had been disconnected. The night that Reno met Ronnie Fontaine is a significant turning point in the novel and one that Reno will look back on with nostalgia. Reno projected her desire to find a man to connect her to her new life on to Ronnie Fontaine the first night they met. She continued to think of Ronnie as someone who could change her life for a number of years, until the night Ronnie explained to her why they could never be together. Whether or not the night Reno and Ronnie spent together had been kept secret from Sandro becomes a significant question for Reno, and the reader, later in the novel.

In the early chapters of the novel the Borsalino hat symbolizes Reno's failed attempt to forge a romantic connection with Ronnie. Later, it comes to signify the casual, sometimes callous, attitude both Ronnie and Sandro have towards women.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Valera characterized in Chapter One?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does the author choose not to reveal Reno's real name?



## Discussion Question 3

What do motorcycles represent to Valera and Reno?

## Vocabulary

squadron, battalion, filament, poplars, severed, constraint, awning, irrigation, reckless, smitten, placid, silhouettes, molten, plumes, entwinement, provenance, spectrum, pedigreed, perforations, glisten





## Chapters 5 – 8

### Summary

In Chapter 5, “Valera is Dead”, Valera reflected on his first motorcycle ride and realized that the old version of himself had died and he had become a new person. A young man called Lonzi, from a wealthy Milanese family, was the unofficial leader of the group of people Valera had begun hanging around with at the Caffé Aragno. The men were convinced that Italy had become stale and lethargic and that a new kind of world was coming, but they could not yet predict what it would be like. Lonzi said that in the future women would be reduced to silent entities whose sole purpose was the sexual satisfaction of men.

When World War 1 began, the gang from the Caffé Aragno all volunteered and ended up in motorcycle battalions. Half of the gang was killed during the course of the war. After the war Valera used his family’s money to produce his own line of motorcycles. Valera reflected that women were trapped in time and men moved at a different speed, which meant that as men aged they became interested in younger women rather than women their own age.

In Chapter 6, “Imitation of Life”, Reno got a job at film studio working as a receptionist and “China girl”: a woman used as a stock photograph at the start of film footage to be used by projectionists to make color corrections which would ensure that the colors on screen looked natural. Reno began making her own films by filming the chauffeurs standing and waiting by limousines near her apartment. Giddle told Reno about a sociologist who worked in the diner as a way of gathering data for her research.

Reno’s boss Marvin told her that there was a man who’d seen her working at the studio and was asking about her. Reno agreed to meet him for a date. The man was Sandro, a famous artist and member of the Valera family, and they became a couple. On their first date, Sandro gave Reno a hand job in a movie theater. Reno and Sandro saw a man drowning in the river and Sandro rescued him. The man had been trying to commit suicide. On their third date Reno went to Sandro’s apartment where she met Ronnie Fontaine, the man she slept with in Chapter 4, and discovered that Ronnie and Sandro were best friends.

In Chapter 7, “The Little Slave Girl”, Reno learned that Sandro and Ronnie had become friends when they worked together as security guards at the Metropolitan Museum when they were 18 years old. Reno spent a lot of time with Ronnie and Sandro looking at art and Giddle condescendingly referred to the two men as Reno’s tutors. Reno came up with her plan to photograph her tracks on the salt flats and Ronnie told Sandro that he should help her by getting her a Moto Valera motorbike. Sandro was annoyed by the suggestion. He wanted nothing to do with his family’s business or with Italy in general. He would tell people that he was Romanian, not Italian, and deliberately mispronounce



items on the menu at Italian restaurants. Sandro acquired a motorbike for Reno and told her she had Ronnie to thank for it.

In Chapter 8, "Lights", the narrative returned to the moment after Reno's crash on the salt flats, described in Chapter 2. After she crashed, Reno was worried she would be taken away in an ambulance, which she couldn't afford, so she lied and told the medics that she was there with the Valera race team. She explained to the Valera team that she was Sandro's girlfriend and they agreed to take her in and treat her injuries from the crash. The Valera team was at the salt flats so that their star driver, Didi Bombonato, could break the land speed record. Their attempts to beat the record were interrupted by news from Italy that workers at the Valera factories were on strike. The mechanics of the Valera team who were in Nevada also went on strike in solidarity. When the strike ended, Didi raced the course and broke the record. The season was coming to an end and the Valera team wanted to find a way to make sure the Americans wouldn't have a chance to race on the salt flats and beat Didi's record until the following year. They asked Reno to race Didi's car and keep the track occupied by breaking the land speed record for a woman.

## Analysis

Valera and the gang at the Caffé Aragno were far-right extremists who would eventually become involved in the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia and Benito Mussolini's Fascist government in Italy during World War Two. Their early years together of freedom and ease are a stark contrast to the lives of the far-left extremists of 1970s Italy who are depicted living in poverty and being oppressed by the police.

The attitudes towards women that Valera encountered during these years would go on to influence his own marriage and his son Sandro's attitude to women and reinforce the theme of Misogyny. The idea of women as disposable objects meant only for the satisfaction of men has a clear influence on Sandro's behavior towards Reno, even though Sandro thinks of himself as a feminist. At this stage in the novel, Valera believed that his interest in younger women was a sign that men could escape time in a way that women could not. Valera recanted this view later in the novel when talking to a young Sandro.

Reno's work as a "China girl" is also symbolic of the misogyny of the times depicted in the novel and the way women were kept on the margins of society, thought of as objects and ornamentation rather than individuals in their own right. This attitude is summed up in the use of China girls who literally exist on the edges, in the margins, of film stock and are there as a general reference for all human skin tones rather than to represent themselves as individuals. There was no need for these images to only be of women (and certainly no need for them to be conventionally attractive women dolled up with makeup and sexy outfits) but such women were used for the entertainment of the male projectionists who would use their picture as a color reference. As Marvin mentioned in a later chapter, this use of white women as the reference point for skin tones raises issues of racism without ever directly addressing the topic of race.



The theme of older men having relationships with younger women continues when Reno recounts the beginning of her relationship with Sandro. Reno's narration contrasts with the way her character behaves in the story because the narrator is speaking from a place of greater maturity and can look back on the naïve actions of her younger self. The author uses humor to underscore the differences between Reno the narrator and Reno when she was younger. When reflecting on how excited she was during her first date with Sandro, Reno's narration states wryly: "On that day, nothing could have seemed more romantic to me, no other scenario more like real courtship, than a Chinese movie and a hand job under a coat."

The tension between Ronnie, Reno, and Sandro caused by the time Reno and Ronnie had sex and the question of whether Sandro knew about it, will run throughout the novel and continue to be questioned by Reno even after the end of her relationship with Sandro. Ronnie's influence on Reno's life is arguably equal to Sandro's and Reno continued to wonder about Ronnie's feelings for her throughout her relationship with Sandro.

Reno's crash at the salt flats is a significant turning point in the novel because it brings her into contact with a part of Sandro's life which he had kept secret from her. Further to this, it is the first real instance of Reno taking matters into her own hands rather than waiting for someone else to guide her towards a decision (although the fact that she had to tell the Valera team that she was Sandro's girlfriend in order to get them to take her in somewhat undermines the independence of her actions here).

The solidarity between the mechanics on the Valera race team and the workers in the Valera factories in Milan is Reno's first taste of the radical politics and demonstrations she will become involved in once she goes to Rome. Didi Bombanato is characterized as someone removed from the masses and who thinks of himself as more important than the people who put in the work behind the scenes which led to his success. This aligns him with old Valera, who was undisturbed by the terrible working conditions of the men who worked for him in Brazil. Men like Didi and Valera are from a different class to people like the mechanics and Reno. Reno naturally felt she had more in common with the mechanics because they represented people like her and the people she had grown up around.

## Discussion Question 1

What effect did Lonzi have on Valera's life?

## Discussion Question 2

What techniques does the author use to foreshadow the end of Reno and Sandro's relationship?



## Discussion Question 3

In what ways are Ronnie Fontaine and Sandro Valera similar characters? In what ways are they different?

## Vocabulary

degrading, tremble, prestige, nostalgia, aristocratic, legitimate, condescending, vinyl, erotic, charade, contours, contemplation, calibrated, chasm, emancipation, vigil, instinctual, chivalry, pompadours, encampment



## Chapters 9 – 12

### Summary

In Chapter 9, “It Was Milk”, Valera became involved in the burgeoning rubber industry in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, during World War Two. Native Brazilians (referred to in the novel as “Indians”) were employed as rubber tappers in the rainforest and would work on credit, meaning that Valera did not have to pay anyone up front in order to start exporting the rubber. The conditions the natives worked in were brutal and the workers were just barely able to survive. Valera was successfully producing his own motorcycles and was now expanding into the tire industry. Benito Mussolini, the Fascist Prime Minister of Italy, had requisitioned Valera’s stock for the military and Valera’s company was now devoted to making replacement parts for Nazi Germany’s troops. Valera had to develop his tire business in secret, but it flourished nonetheless. The chapter ended in 1945 with the death of Mussolini and the allied liberation of Italy.

In Chapter 10, “Faces”, Part 1, Reno broke the land speed record with The Spirit of Italy car owned by the Valera Company. When Reno returned to New York Sandro told her that he’d decided to do his next show with Helen Hellenberger. The Valera team contacted Reno, through Sandro, to ask her to come to Italy the following spring to do a publicity tour alongside Didi Bombonato. Sandro thought this was a ridiculous plan. Ronnie told a story about visiting Texas. He was taking his friend’s pet rabbits to Texas but they died on the way. Sandro and Reno visited Ronnie’s apartment where they saw a photograph of a girl who Ronnie had been seeing casually. Ronnie said he had the girl on layaway.

In Chapter 10, Part 2, Reno went to a dinner party at Stanley and Gloria Kastle’s house. Stanley had a replica of a mid-nineteenth century Colt revolver that Sandro had given him. Reno was introduced to Burdmoore Model, who had been part of an anarchist collective in New York called The Motherfuckers, which had now disbanded. Burdmoore told Reno that the time for that sort of collectivist action would come again. Another artist at the party, John Dagg, tried to convince Helen Hellenberger to view his art but she seemed bored and uninterested. Stanley played the guests some tape recordings of himself talking. Later in the night, Talia Valera, Sandro’s cousin, arrived at the party.

In Part 3, a group went out into the city after the party. They went to a bar called Rudy’s. Giddle greeted Reno with a hug and then poured her drink over Sandro’s head. Ronnie told Sandro he was holding Reno back by not letting her go to Italy. Ronnie convinced Sandro’s cousin Talia to punch herself in the face so he could photograph her afterwards.

Chapter 11, “The Way We Were”, recounted the exploits of Burdmoore’s anarchist group The Motherfuckers.



In Chapter 12, “The Sears Mannequin Standard”, Reno and Sandro were mugged. Sandro shot the mugger in the hand with the replica revolver he’d taken from Stanley’s apartment. Reno told Sandro to stay with the mugger while she called for an ambulance. She waited for Sandro in their apartment but he didn’t come home for several hours. In the morning, Helen Hellenberger called to help Sandro find a lawyer. In the aftermath of the mugging, Sandro changed his mind and suggested that he and Reno should go to Italy so she could participate in the Moto Valera publicity tour. Reno met up with Ronnie, Giddle, Burdmoore, and Sandro at Rudy’s. She noticed the girl from Ronnie’s photograph—the layaway girl—watching them, but the girl didn’t speak to them and Reno didn’t mention that she had seen her.

## Analysis

Chapter 9 explores the differences between the ways the rich and the poor experience oppression and exploitation. Valera was, in many ways, oppressed and exploited by the Fascist regime in Italy who requisitioned the stock of his factories and required him to devote his business to manufacturing motor parts for the army of Nazi Germany. Valera’s freedom was curtailed because his government did not permit him to expand into the tire industry, which is what he wanted to do. However, because Valera was wealthy and well-connected, the oppression and exploitation to which he was subjected didn’t have much of a negative impact on his life. Valera’s wealth and connections allowed him to circumvent the restrictions of his government and pursue his own interests illegally, without facing any consequences for doing so. Rather than facing any consequences for resisting the limitations placed upon him, Valera thrived and became even wealthier.

In Chapter 10, the author continues to foreshadow the end of Reno and Sandro’s relationship by detailing the evidence of Sandro’s infidelities which Reno failed (or refused) to acknowledge at the time. When Reno returned to New York after her crash on the salt flats it was clear to her that Helen Hellenberger had been with Sandro in his apartment. Further foreshadowing of Sandro’s infidelity occurred in Chapter 12 when Helen’s phone call implied that Sandro had been with her the previous night and again when Giddle poured her drink over his head.

The girl on layaway functions in the novel as an echo of Reno’s past self. While Reno is growing and maturing, the layaway girl is still at the phase in life that Reno was at when she first arrived in New York and when Reno, too, became infatuated with Ronnie Fontaine. The progress of the layaway girl’s life continues one step behind Reno throughout the novel, haunting Reno with an image of her younger self.

The car, The Spirit of Italy, and its name, are symbolic of the political struggles going on in Italy during the 1970s and the fight for which Italians could or should lay claim to being “the spirit of Italy.” Does Didi Bombanato, the successful and exceptional, but arrogant and selfish, racecar driver and world record holder represent the spirit of Italy? Or is the spirit of the country better represented by the team of mechanics and medics who made Didi’s success possible and who stood in solidarity with the factories workers



in the Valera factory in Milan, rather than only focusing on their own goals and interests in beating the world land speed record while they were in Nevada?

The arrival of Talia Valera is a major turning point in the novel as it is this character who will ultimately bring about the end of Reno and Sandro's relationship. Reno does not introduce herself to Talia. Reno's attitude of refusing to engage with or form connections with other women occurs throughout the novel and ultimately leads to Reno making decisions which will haunt her for the rest of her life.

John Dogg is set up as a caricature of an over-eager ambitious wannabe in Chapter 10 in order to expose the hypocrisy of the art world in a later chapter when he has become the talk of the town.

The description of Burdmoore Model's involvement in the violent acts of The Motherfuckers stands in contrast to Sandro's approach to weapons and violence. Although many of the acts committed by The Motherfuckers were morally reprehensible, they were motivated by a desire to overturn a society which they felt unfairly oppressed the poor. Sandro's attitude to violence is more self-interested. He admires guns for their machinery and the way they have been constructed, rather than engaging with their purpose which is to do harm to other human beings. In contrast to Burdmoore, the violence Sandro committed was selfishly motivated. Sandro shot a young man, seriously injuring his hand, in order to defend his wallet, which Reno later discovered contained only \$8.00 and the telephone number to a nearby restaurant. What Sandro was really defending was his right not to be accosted by desperate people and his right to his own property, regardless of the tiny real worth of that property.

## Discussion Question 1

What was Valera's attitude towards his workers in Brazil?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did Sandro disapprove of Reno's proposed trip to Italy?

## Discussion Question 3

Were the actions of the Motherfuckers justified?

## Vocabulary

repulsive, indebtedness, unencumbered, credo, unaccustomed, suffused, emulsions, densities, sedimenting, finicky, requisition, treatise, ratcheted, orgy, perimeter, reconcile, vitality, goiter, detours, austerity



# Chapters 13 – 15

## Summary

The first part of Chapter 13, “The Trembling of the Leaves”, detailed the living conditions of the men employed as rubber tappers in old Valera’s tire business. Many of the men died on the job and their deaths were explained away in official records as “yellow fever” but in reality these men had been shot and killed for trying to escape. They worked on credit and never made any money: however much rubber they collected they were always told that it would be taken off the money they owed the company for food and the cost of bringing them to the Amazon in the first place. The second part of the chapter was told from the perspective of an indigenous Brazilian man trying to escape by running away through the jungle.

In Chapter 14, “The Rules of Violence”, Reno and Sandro went to Italy and stayed with Sandro’s family in their villa near Lake Como. Sandro’s mother, Signora Valera, and his brother Roberto, were unfriendly towards Reno. Sandro showed Reno where his father was buried: next to his headstone was an equally ornate headstone for Sandro’s mother’s bulldog. Reno met Signora Valera’s lover, a novelist called Chesil Jones, who spoke in long monologues and never listened to anything Reno had to say. Sandro bought Reno new clothes to wear while they stayed with his family. The servants in the Valera villa made Reno uncomfortable and she suspected they resented serving her alongside the Valera clan. Reno was most unnerved by the groundskeeper who she suspected was watching her.

Over dinner one night the family discussed the death of an Italian industrialist called Feltrinelli who had died trying to sabotage Milan’s power supply whilst working with a pro-Soviet group of rebels. The Valera family disagreed about whether his death was an accident or murder. Later Sandro argued with his mother because she had been rude to Reno, and Chesil Jones started lecturing Reno about skiing, not knowing that she’d been a ski racer. The next day Sandro’s cousin Talia arrived at the villa. Talia and Signora Valera were very close and got on very well. On Talia’s third night in the villa she arrived at dinner wearing the brown fedora that Reno had given Ronnie the first night they had met.

The next day the workers in the Valera factory went on strike. Elsewhere, a high-level manager at the Fiat Company was kidnapped. Roberto and Signora Valera were very concerned about their company and their personal safety. Armed guards were stationed at the Valera villa. Didi Bombonato, the Valera race driver, was kidnapped by a radical leftwing group called the Red Brigades which put an end to Reno’s hopes of going ahead with the publicity tour for her land speed record.

The Valera family—Sandro, Roberto, Signora Valera, and Talia—all went into the city for a company meeting. Reno decided to stay behind at the villa, despite Sandro’s suggestion that she should come with them and film the striking workers. Reno changed





her mind and got a ride with the groundskeeper who was following the Valeras into Milan to deliver some forgotten papers. When Reno arrived at the Valera factory she discovered Sandro having sex with Talia. Reno left the factory with the groundskeeper, Gianni, who was going to Rome.

In Chapter 15, “The March on Rome”, Gianni took Reno to Rome. Reno was introduced to Gianni’s friends, who were making radio broadcasts advising the people of Rome about the upcoming political demonstration in the city. Gianni’s friends were kind to Reno and gave her food and a place to sleep. Reno helped two of Gianni’s friends, Bene and Lidia, deliver flyers about the demonstration. Reno saw a film crew making a documentary about a mentally disturbed teenager who was pregnant.

Reno joined the demonstration and began filming some of the protestors. She saw Gianni who pulled her down a side street just as the police began to release tear gas. Reno dropped her camera. Lots of the protestors donned gas masks because they, unlike Reno, had been waiting for this to happen. Many of the protestors smelled of gasoline which reminded Reno of her cousins Scott and Andy, but she reflected that she couldn’t make any other connection between this world and Scott and Andy’s world.

Reno started travelling with Gianni who used her as cover by telling officers at security checkpoints that Reno was the wife of Sandro Valera and Gianni was taking her shopping. Gianni told Reno that the Valera family was going to pay for the things they’d done and that they would see justice. Gianni argued with his lover Bene. Bene and the other women in the group shunned Reno and no longer spoke to her. In the narration, Reno stated that she bitterly regretted everything that happened afterwards but the reader is not yet informed what happened or why she regretted it.

## Analysis

Valera’s ability to circumvent his own exploitation and oppression is in stark contrast to the lives of the rubber tappers who were “employed” by Valera in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, but who were essentially slaves in all but name. These men were oppressed and exploited by the men who were in charge of the plants and by Valera himself. But unlike Valera, the rubber tappers had no wealth, no connections, and no way to escape from their oppression. Their poverty trapped them in a life of exploitation. When Valera attempted to circumvent and escape the limitations placed on him through the use of his wealth and connections he was rewarded with even greater wealth. When the rubber tappers attempted to circumvent or escape their own exploitation, they were punished with death.

Reno and Sandro’s visit to Italy opened a new chapter in Reno’s life and also brought an end to her relationship with Sandro. Reno’s difficulties in the Valera villa were largely caused by class difference. She didn’t understand the rules and customs of the wealthy family she was staying with and this made her feel like an outsider. Reno felt particularly uncomfortable because of the servants in the house who caused her to feel like she had no privacy and that she was an intruder. The appearance of the groundskeeper, who the



reader will later find out is called Gianni, is initially connected with Reno's feelings of not fitting in and of being judged by the servants at the Valera family home. His presence is an ominous one and Reno's fear of his observance and his judgement creates a sense of foreboding which foreshadows his involvement with Roberto's murder later in the novel.

Chapter 14 is the moment in the novel where the two main narrative strands—the stories of Valera and Reno—finally collide, which is symbolized by Reno looking at old Valera's tombstone. The history of Valera's company, the wealth his family have accumulated, and the resentment of the workers they have mistreated, boiled over during the months that Reno spent in Italy and resulted in radical political action being taken against the wealthy elite, including the kidnapping of prominent industrialists.

The reader was led to believe that Reno's exploits with her motorbike were building towards something which would crystallize during her visit to Italy. Her childhood interest in the race driver Flip Farmer, her race across the salt flats and the photographs she took after her crash, and her chance to drive The Spirit of Italy and become the fastest woman in the world all seemed to be preparing her for a next step that was not yet clear. When Didi Bombanato was kidnapped, it became clear that whatever all of these events could have been leading to, it was no longer going to happen. Reno reached a dead end, which was further underscored by her discovery of Sandro having sex with Talia and the subsequent end of their relationship. Reno's relationship with Sandro had been the central and defining feature of her life since moving to New York (it was Sandro who introduced her to the art scene in New York, who got her the motorbike she needed to race the salt flats, and who arranged for her trip to Italy.)

Reno was back to square one, alone, and searching for a new life for herself. In an echo of her behavior when she first moved to New York, she turned to a man, Gianni, to offer her guidance and a sense of purpose in her new undefined life.

In Rome, Reno attempted to film the demonstrations so that she could use them for her art but she became so involved in the uproar that she lost her camera. Once again this is symbolic of Reno living her life and gaining experiences rather than drawing on things she doesn't understand or hasn't experienced purely for the sake of art. This is contrasted with the filmmakers who exploit the young pregnant woman for the sake of their film. These men are not involved in this young woman's life, nor do they personally have to face any of the struggles that they are depicting in their film. They are less interested in the suffering of the subjects than they are in the potential recognition they would receive if the film was accepted into the Venice Film Festival.

Reno's inability to form close relationships with women causes her problems once she becomes involved with Gianni and his friends in Rome. Throughout the novel, Reno has turned to men to help her find purpose and meaning in her life whilst shunning relationships with women. Reno found other women threatening and avoided trying to engage with them. Reno avoided forming a connection with Gloria Kastle when they first met and did the same when she first met Talia. When Talia appears at the dinner table wearing the hat that Reno gave Ronnie, it heightens Reno's sense of jealousy towards



Talia as well as foreshadowing the moment when Talia will take Sandro away from Reno, just as she has apparently taken Ronnie.

In a radio broadcast, Gianni's lover Bene spoke to the female demonstrators telling them: "Sisters... men can put you in touch with the world. We see that. Men connect you to the world, but not to your own self." Throughout the novel Reno consistently tried to use men to connect her to the world, when what she really needed to do was discover a sense of self. With Gianni, she once again chose to follow a man rather than forge her own path. In the narration, Reno presented this incident as if she had no choice but the reader can see that she had a choice between choosing solidarity with the other women in Rome or choosing to follow the lead of a man she hardly knew, and she chose the latter. This decision will haunt Reno for the rest of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Were Valera's business practices ethical?

## Discussion Question 2

What were the differences between the way Reno was treated by the Valera family and the way she was treated by Gianni's friends? What are the reasons for the two groups behaving in such different ways towards Reno?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the relationship between the treatment of the Valera's workers in Brazil during the Second World War and the demonstrations in 1970s Rome?

## Vocabulary

quota, unraveled, entrenchment, peon, incisions, skedaddle, titubation, monogrammed, spleen, upheaval, subdued, promontory, geometric, obelisks, nymphs, affectless, trifecta, inventory, hesitant, debris



# Chapters 16 – 20

## Summary

In Chapter 16, “Hookers and Children”, Reno returned to New York. John Dogg, the pushy artist from the Kastles’ dinner party, was showing a collection with Helen Hellenberger and was now in a relationship with Nadine, who had been with Thurman the night Reno first met Ronnie. Reno was amused to discover how successful John Dogg had become when she returned from Italy because when she left everyone showed disdain for his pushy tactics but now he was being lauded by the same people who used to make fun of him.

Reno was staying with Gloria and Stanley Kastle because she didn’t want to return to her and Sandro’s shared apartment. Sandro wanted Reno to come home. Reno kept secret the fact that she had helped Gianni while she was in Italy. Reno went to Sandro’s apartment to collect her clothes and the repaired Moto Valera motorcycle. Sandro and Reno didn’t speak to each other. Reno rode the motorcycle away through the streets of New York.

Sandro didn’t come to John Dogg’s opening but Ronnie was there. He followed Reno when she left the party. Ronnie told Reno that his brother had been killed in a car accident. At John Dogg’s opening, there was a woman wearing a dress that had a see-through window in the back that exposed her buttocks.

The following week Reno found out that Sandro’s brother Roberto had been kidnapped. Ronnie had a new exhibition and Reno attended the opening. The night of the opening Reno learned that Roberto had been killed. At the opening, Reno saw Sandro with another woman: the girl on layaway, who had previously been with Ronnie. They didn’t speak. Ronnie’s exhibition consisted of photos of women with beaten up faces, including a photograph of Talia taken after she’d punched herself in the face. Reno went to a dinner party with Ronnie after the opening and Ronnie told a story about working on a boat as a child. Later, when they were alone, Ronnie told Reno that Sandro had been cheating on her with various women the entire time they were together.

Chapter 17 listed a series of potential titles for the autobiography of Ronnie Fontaine.

Chapter 18, “Behind the Green Door”, described the New York blackout of 1977, which resulted in looting, arson, and other criminal behavior across the city. Reno was in a movie theater showing pornography when the power went out. She rode her motorcycle through the darkened streets of New York. She saw Burdmoore Model directing children to destroy property and participate in other acts of rebellion. She saw Henri Jean using his pole to direct traffic due to the absence of traffic lights.

Chapter 19, “The Day Rome Was Founded, April 21”, recounted Sandro’s childhood. He had been preoccupied with a set of toy soldiers which were meant to depict the battalion



his father, Valera, had fought with in World War One: the Arditi and some assault company dolls called The Flamethrowers. Valera took Sandro to see some striking workers when he was a young boy although he never subjected Roberto to anything so distressing. Valera explained this was because Sandro was going to become an artist and Roberto was not. Valera said that some men become emotionally stunted in their later years, which makes it impossible for them to relate to more emotionally mature women of their own age, which is why such men end up in relationships with much younger women. Valera said that Sandro would come to understand this one day.

Back in the present day, Sandro reflected on the destruction of his relationship with Reno while he waited to take a flight to Italy to comfort his mother after Roberto's death. When he took the layaway girl to Roberto's funeral his mother accused him of abusing the young women he had relationships with and said that he didn't really love them. Sandro had tried to distance himself from Talia when she first came to New York, telling her that he was in a relationship with Reno. He reflected that he could have sustained his relationship with Reno but that he hadn't. The day Reno caught Sandro with Talia at the tire plant he had returned to the villa and waited there alone for a week in case Reno came back.

When Roberto died, the layaway girl had been in the right place at the right time for Sandro to seek comfort. Ronnie had been grateful to Sandro for starting a relationship with the layaway girl because it stopped her from following him around. Sandro was stung when his mother accused him of abusing the women he had relationships with. Sandro was in the process of returning to Italy alone when the blackout hit.

In Chapter 20, "Her Velocity", Reno recounted what happened when she left Rome with Gianni. He planned to escape Italy by skiing over the Alps and across the French border. Reno crossed the French border legally in a car and waited for Gianni on the other side. She waited for a long time and was unsure whether he would ever come.

## Analysis

When Reno returned to New York she was not the same person she was when she first arrived in the city or when she left for her trip to Italy with Sandro. Ronnie explicitly tells Reno this at one point ("Yeah, you look like you've grown up a little") but the author also uses other techniques to indicate to the reader that Reno has changed and grown during her trip to Italy.

When Reno first started to integrate with the art crowd in New York she was an observer of the others, unsure of herself and unsure what to make of what everyone else was saying to her. She spent her early years in New York watching, listening, and learning. When she returned from Italy, Reno was able to see through the performances and insincerity of the people around her in a way that she was not able to in the beginning. The first example of this is John Dogg who, when Reno left New York, was treated as an outsider whom everyone looked down on. Upon Reno's return, he was being feted as the next big thing. He was also in a relationship with Nadine, who Reno met the first



night she became involved in this crowd. When she returned to New York, Reno was able to observe the artifice and sadness of Nadine, how anxious and insecure she was, in a way that Reno didn't notice or understand earlier in the novel.

Another key example of Reno's growth is her response to Ronnie complaining about her leaving his opening (Reno said "Fuck you" and Ronnie responded: "You really are growing up.") Earlier in the novel, when characters such as Helen Hellenberger and Signora Valera were rude or condescending towards Reno, she would stay silent, not responding or sticking up for herself. This response to Ronnie showed that she had gained confidence and authority and was no longer willing to let people walk all over her.

The girl on layaway continues to function as Reno's echo during the final chapters of the novel. Gloria criticized the woman with the see-through dress at John Dogg's opening because public displays of nudity had become a cliché on the art scene and Gloria thought the woman was being unoriginal. In the narration, Reno countered that although public displays of nudity were not new: "it's new to \*her\*... She's on \*her\* timeline, Gloria, not yours or anyone else's." The girl on layaway is an echo of Reno who exists at an earlier point in the timeline of their lives: just like Reno, she was once infatuated with Ronnie, but then progressed to a relationship with Sandro. Before the end of the novel Sandro will end his relationship with the girl on layaway just as his relationship with Reno eventually came to an end.

Chapter 19 is an unusual chapter in the novel because it is the first chapter told from Sandro's perspective. This chapter weaves together the two narrative threads of the novel—the story of Valera's rise to wealth and power and Reno's journey of self-discovery—through the character of Sandro. It is revealed at this point that the two separate threads of the novel have never really been about Reno and Valera: they have always been about Reno and Sandro and the nature of their relationship. Whereas Reno's story is defined by the future, by what she will become, Sandro's story is defined by his past: how the history of his father has shaped and defined the man that Sandro has become. The author also uses Chapter 19 to reveal the ways the old Valera's attitude to women shaped Sandro's attitudes to women and, ultimately, shaped Sandro's treatment of Reno. Valera had a selfish and callous attitude towards his wife, just as he had a selfish and callous attitude towards his workers, drawing together the novel's themes of feminism and workers' rights.

Valera's history of ruthless expansion and mistreatment of the poor had defined the way Sandro would live his life. Although Sandro naturally empathized with the oppressed people of Rome during the demonstrations in the 1970s, he knew that he could never join them because he was one of the people they were protesting against. Reno, on the other hand, was from a similar background to the demonstrators in Rome and felt naturally drawn to helping them.

Sandro's childhood interest in the Arditi battalion of dolls is a metaphor for the politics in the novel as a whole. All of the battalion was engaged in the business of war, but some of them had access to different weapons. Men like Valera had access to the best guns



and also rode motorbikes meaning that when things got difficult they had the best chance of killing their enemies and the best chance of being able to escape from the battle unharmed. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the soldiers known as The Flamethrowers. The Flamethrowers, Valera explained to Sandro, were clumsy weapons and their “tanks were cumbersome and heavy and they were obvious and slow-moving targets and if they were ever caught they were shown no mercy”. The Flamethrowers are a metaphor for the demonstrators in Rome, the rioters in New York during the blackout, the Motherfuckers, and abused and mistreated women like Reno and Nadine: people who didn’t have access to the kind of “weapons”—either literal or social—that wealthy men like Valera had access to.

Due to their wealth and status men like Valera and Sandro could glide through life using whatever unethical tactics they chose without having to face the consequences of their actions. In contrast, the poor of the world only had access to the most basic and rudimentary forms of attack (such as kidnapping industrialists and rioting in the city streets) and, unlike the wealthy, faced serious consequences for their actions if caught.

The final chapter is deliberately inconclusive because it reflects the main lesson that Reno has learned in the course of the novel: that there are no conclusive answers coming, no one event that will indicate that “life” has begun, and no one person who can define the life of another. Reno has learned to find a way to be comfortable with the uncertainty of waiting to see what happens next.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the depiction of John Dogg change throughout the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

What role does the girl on layaway play in the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the physical and emotional differences between Sandro's situation and Reno's situation when the power goes off?

## Vocabulary

strategically, fractured, naturalism, plummeted, transmitting, lacquer, escapading, sparse, reverence, discretion, redoubling, despicable, frivolous, lavish, vulgar, elaborate, humane, noxious, inglorious, gauntlet



# Characters

## Reno

Reno is the central character/protagonist. The protagonist is never identified by her real name, only the name of her hometown, which was a nickname given to her by one of the other characters: Ronnie Fontaine. This reflects the central theme of the novel as a whole, which is Reno's voyage of self-discovery. Reno's lack of a solid identity, sense of self, or sense of purpose is reflected in her lack of a name.

The main traits that marked Reno out from the other characters were the fact that she spent more of her time listening to others than talking about herself and that she was more interested in living her life for the sake of living her life, rather than for the sake of collecting experiences which she could later use as part of her art. (This trait contrasts in particular with the character of Ronnie who turned every event in his life into a semi-fictional and self-aggrandizing anecdote he could perform in bars and at dinner parties.) Reno, unlike other Land Artists, was actually from the Midwest, not simply adopting an interest in the region for intellectual purposes and this marked her out from the art crowd in New York and the wealthy Italians she met through Sandro who are aware of her home region only through photography books.

Throughout the novel Reno consistently turned to older men to guide her choices and decisions. When she first moved to New York she was dependent on the idea that once she contacted Chris Kelly (a graduate a few years ahead of her from her art school in Nevada) he would be able to connect her to the art world in New York and her new life there would begin. Once she arrived in New York, Reno became instantly infatuated with Ronnie Fontaine the night she met him because she believed that meeting him was the moment she had been waiting for, whereas Ronnie thought of their liaison as a one night stand.

When Reno met Sandro he really did fulfill the promise of introducing her to a new world and a new social clique to which she would not have had access without him. When Reno discovered the fragility and infidelity inherent in her relationship with Sandro whilst in Italy, she was once again alone and unsure of herself and once again turned to a man, Gianni, to guide her next steps. This was the final time in the novel that Reno chose to follow a man rather than her own instincts and it led to disastrous results and her implication in the murder of Sandro's brother. Reno's discovery of Sandro's mistreatment of her, followed by her poor decision-making in relation to Gianni, meant that Reno returned from her trip to Italy, back in New York, both older and wiser.

## Valera

Valera is the secondary lead in the novel and the protagonist of the sections not told from Reno's perspective. Valera grew up in Egypt in the late nineteenth century and





fought as a young man for Italy in World War One, 1914-1918. Valera's story charts his rise from a student and motorbike enthusiast on the streets of Milan in the 1910s to a wealthy and powerful business tycoon during the Second World War and the post-war years.

Valera consistently gave greater importance in the novel to his own success than to the welfare of others. This is most clearly depicted in the chapters devoted to the working conditions of the rubber tappers working in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil. The workers were essentially slaves, who were never going to receive any payment for their backbreaking work and who were murdered if they attempted to escape, all while Valera and his business associates grew increasingly wealthy as a result of their labor.

A key component of Valera's characterization is his attitude towards women, which was formed by his early obsession with a young woman called Marie. Valera thought of Marie in similar terms to a motorcycle: an object which he coveted and wanted to own. Valera's attitudes to women were influenced by the misogynist Lonzi who believed women should be silent entities meant only for the sexual satisfaction of men. Valera believed that men became interested in younger women because men were free from time in a way that women were not, but later confessed to his son Sandro that it was really because some men became emotionally stunted and could only relate to younger immature women.

Although Reno and Valera never met or crossed paths except for the moment when Reno saw Valera's headstone during her visit to Italy, Valera's behavior had a big impact on Reno's life because it was Valera who shaped Sandro into a man who would mistreat her.

## Sandro Valera

Sandro Valera is the son of Valera and the boyfriend of Reno. He plays the role of both love interest and mentor in the novel. Sandro is 14 years older than Reno and was already a famous and successful artist when Reno first met him. He was known in his social circle for dating women who were much younger than him (when Reno told Burdmoore Model that she was with Sandro he responded, "What are you, eighteen years old?") and after the end of his relationship with Reno he began dating an even younger woman, the also-nameless girl on layaway.

Sandro served as a mentor to Reno, teaching her more about art than she'd managed to learn whilst at art school, and introducing her to a successful and influential social circle. He also helped guide her towards making her own art. However, Sandro was reluctant to use his family connections to help Reno and both times he did so (by getting her a Moto Valera motorbike to use for her time trial at the salt flats, and taking her to Italy for the publicity tour with Didi Bombanato) he only did so under pressure from Ronnie Fontaine. Reno's potential success threatened Sandro's dominance as the paternal/mentor figure in their relationship. As Ronnie put it, "she's the fastest chick in the world, Sandro. And you're slowing her down." Chapter 19 put forward the argument



that Sandro was emotionally stunted which was why he continually had relationships with immature and insecure women who were much younger than him.

Sandro's life was defined by the life of his father, Valera, and by the end of the novel it becomes clear to the reader that the Valera chapters were really the story of Sandro and how he came to be the man he was when he first met Reno. Sandro was an artist by nature and personality who felt a natural affinity with the working people of the world and the struggles they faced, but who could never truly join or support their struggle because his family background meant that he was a representative of the things the workers were fighting against, rather than their ally. Sandro found empathy and understanding for his situation through his friend M, who was the son of a member of the military dictatorship in Argentina who was guilty of many atrocious crimes. The sons were unable to escape from the sins of their fathers.

## Ronnie Fontaine

Ronnie Fontaine is an artist in New York. Ronnie is Sandro's best friend and an object of unrequited love for Reno. Ronnie and Sandro had known each other since they worked together as security guards at the Metropolitan Museum when they were 18 years old. Ronnie is as much of a mentor for Reno as Sandro (Giddle refers to the two men as Reno's "tutors") talking to her about art and encouraging her to make her own. Ronnie convinced Sandro to help Reno by getting her a motorbike and taking her to Italy, but Reno felt it he was more motivated by criticizing and aggravating Sandro than he was by helping her.

Ronnie had a traumatic childhood and a criminal brother who was killed in a car crash towards the end of the novel. Rather than directly addressing or discussing the traumas of his earlier life, Ronnie turned his life into a series of semi-fictional partially true anecdotes through which he revealed his thoughts and feelings in layers of metaphor and enigma.

## Gianni

Gianni is a groundskeeper at the Valera villa in Milan and an influential member of the radical Red Brigade collective in Italy. Gianni was working at the Valera villa during Reno's visit to Italy in order to spy on the Valeras and pass on information about their whereabouts and security arrangements to other members of the Red Brigade. After Reno caught Sandro with Talia she didn't want to return to the Valera villa, so Gianni took her with him to the demonstrations in Rome.

Gianni and Reno bonded after Sandro's infidelity because Reno thought of Gianni as someone who had recognized that Reno was out of place amongst the wealthy Valera family. Reno initially interpreted Gianni's coldness and distance as signs of chivalry and respect but later reflected that there was no greater meaning to his behavior and he really was just being distant with her.



By going along with Gianni's plans without asking him what he was doing or why he was doing it, Reno was eventually implicated in the kidnap and murder of Roberto Valera, Sandro's older brother.

## Giddle

Giddle is a waitress in a New York diner and was the first friend that Reno made when she moved to New York. Giddle is frequently condescending to Reno and was also disloyal to their friendship by having an affair with Sandro. In stark contrast to Reno, who focuses on living her life for the sake of living without a direct plan for the future, Giddle thinks of everything she does in life as a performance and a part of her art.

Notably, Giddle is Reno's only female friend. Reno consistently pushed away the opportunity to form close personal relationships with other women in the novel, depending instead on the male characters to help guide and shape her.

## Talia Valera

Talia Valera is Sandro's cousin. Talia is the catalyst for the destruction of Sandro and Reno's relationship which was brought about when Reno discovered Sandro having sex with Talia. Talia also slept with Ronnie, Reno's unrequited love interest, which Reno discovered when Talia appeared at dinner wearing a hat that Reno had given Ronnie.

Unlike Sandro, who attempted to distance himself from the Valera family, Talia had adopted the family's name even though her real surname was Shrapnel. She enjoyed the glamor and prestige associated with being a Valera and was much more comfortable with her wealth and privilege than Sandro.

Reno reflected that she admired Talia but that she wished to see her "contained instead of celebrated" for the qualities that Reno admired in her. This reflects Reno's naivety in depending on egotistical men rather than reaching out to form friendships with strong independent women.

## Burdmoore Model

Burdmoore Model was a leading member of the anarchist collective The Motherfuckers. When he first met Reno he told her that the time for anarchist protest and collective action would come again, and that time does indeed come again towards the end of the novel when Reno observes him leading a gang of children during the rioting that erupted during the 1977 New York blackout.



## Gloria and Stanley Kastle

Gloria and Stanley Kastle are a married couple of artists living in New York, with an open marriage that involved Gloria having affairs with multiple different men during the course of the novel, including Sandro. When Reno first met Gloria she sensed that Gloria was very angry with Reno for displacing her in Sandro's life. The Kastles play a largely comic role in the novel due to their unusual relationship and their insistence on openly taunting each other in front of other characters.

Although Gloria is initially introduced as an enemy for Reno, the Kastles later became Reno's allies when she returned from her trip to Italy. The Kastles allowed Reno to stay with them and stood by her when Sandro criticized her for refusing to reconcile with him. Gloria also stood by Reno when Sandro showed up to Ronnie's opening with a new girlfriend. This reflects Reno's maturity and growing sense of self: at the start of the novel she was unable to see other women as anything but a threat, but upon her return to New York she started to form closer bonds with the women in her life.

## Helen Hellenberger

Helen Hellenberger is a gallerist and one of the women with whom Sandro cheated on Reno. The artist characters in the novel compete for her attention because her influence allows her to make or break their careers. John Dogg was very pushy and insistent with her at the Kastles dinner and both Sandro and the Kastles tried to convince her to view Reno as an interesting up-and-coming artist.

Like Gloria Kastle, Helen is initially depicted as a threat to Reno, due to her attraction to Sandro. After Reno's return to New York, and her subsequent maturity and less-threatened attitude towards other women, Reno was able to see Helen's positive traits, such as her refusal to exhibit Ronnie's misogynist photography collection.

## Signora Valera

Signora Valera is the wife of Valera and the mother of Sandro and Roberto. Although she is very wealthy she is also very mean with her money and her lover, the novelist Chesil Jones, told Reno that she was such a spendthrift that she would count the slices of ham in the refrigerator at night in order to make sure the servants hadn't stolen anything. Signora Valera was rude and condescending towards Reno throughout her time staying at the Valera villa in Milan. Chapter 19, told from Sandro's perspective, puts forward the argument that Signora Valera became so mean because she was mistreated by her husband.

As with Gloria Kastle and Helen Hellenberger, the portrayal of Signora Valera is softened in later chapters. In Chapter 19, Signora Valera confronted Sandro over his mistreatment of the women he had relationships with and accused him of abusing them.



## **Roberto Valera**

Roberto Valera is Sandro's older brother and the oldest son of Valera. Unlike his younger brother, Roberto was a businessman who took over the running of the Moto Valera company after the death of his father. Roberto was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigades during the demonstrations in Italy as punishment for the crimes committed by the Valera family during the history of their company.

## **Didi Bombanato**

Didi Bombanato is an Italian racecar driver who Reno met after she crashed her motorbike on the salt flats. Unlike the mechanics, doctors, and other workers associated with the Valera team who were in Nevada to break the land speed record, Didi did not wish to strike in solidarity with the workers in Milan and was very annoyed when his own interests were disrupted by the industrial action.

## **Scott and Andy**

Scott and Andy are Reno's cousins from back home with whom she grew up. They are the symbol of her background and upbringing and how her past kept her separate from the wealthy people she mixed with in New York and in Italy. During the demonstrations in Rome, Reno was saddened by the thought that working people from Nevada, like Scott and Andy, were not rising up against the wealthy elite who were oppressing them in the way that the Italian working class were doing.

## **The Girl on Layaway**

The Girl on Layaway is an echo of Reno who haunts her throughout the novel, always one step behind Reno on their shared timeline. Reno was infatuated with Ronnie and then the girl on layaway was infatuated with Ronnie. Reno was in a relationship with Sandro and then the girl on layaway was in a relationship with Sandro. The reader never discovers the girl on layaway's real name, just as Reno's real name is never revealed.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Moto Valera Motorbikes

Moto Valera Motorbikes are symbols of different things for Reno and Valera. For Valera they symbolize his passionate individualism and his desire to pursue his own dreams regardless of the cost. For Reno, her Moto Valera Motorbike represents her sense of self. Although inherently tied up with Sandro, who got the bike for her, Reno's motorbike symbolizes the woman she has become during her years in New York (a woman who is partially defined by the lessons she learned through her relationship with Sandro, but who is independent nevertheless). The bike allowed Reno to ride freely through the streets of New York during the blackout, while Sandro was on a grounded airplane, unable to get anywhere without the assistance of others.

## The Flamethrowers

The Flamethrowers of Sandro's Arditi battalion dolls depicting the Italian army during World War One, are symbolic of the novel's politics as a whole. Soldiers like Valera had the most advanced and efficient weaponry, and the ability to quickly extract themselves from battle by riding motorbikes, which was symbolic of Valera's wealth and privilege in life which allowed him to commit crimes against other human beings and be rewarded with even greater wealth. In contrast, The Flamethrowers had the crudest weapons available to them and suffered the greatest consequences when they were caught, like the Red Brigade in Rome who were punished for their acts of murder against industrialists in a way Valera and his associates were never punished for their acts of murder in the Amazon rainforest.

## Pickwick Towel

The Pickwick towel is a towel a friend from home gave Reno from the hotel where she worked. The towel symbolizes Reno's past and her heritage as a working class person from the Midwest. The towel is mentioned during Ronnie's most extensive anecdote (about the period in his childhood which he apparently spent working on a wealthy couple's boat), where Ronnie claimed that he could not remember anything of his past self except for a woman who looked like Reno and had a faded pink towel. The towel is a symbol of Reno's fixed past in contrast to Ronnie's past which he is forever distorting and fictionalizing.

## Borsalino Hat

The Borsalino Hat is symbolic of Reno's unrequited love for Ronnie Fontaine. Reno gave the hat to Ronnie the first night they met when Ronnie came back to her apartment but left before she woke up. The hat called back memories of their one night



stand for Reno who wondered throughout the novel whether that night meant anything to Ronnie or not. The hat returned when Talia wore it to dinner one night during Reno's visit to Italy, revealing that Talia had slept with Ronnie. This highlights Talia as a threat to Reno and foreshadows her impending affair with Sandro.

## **Limousine Chauffeurs**

The limousine chauffeurs whom Reno filmed as part of one of her first art projects when she moved to New York are symbolic of Reno's attitude to life, her dependence on other people to connect her to the world, and her sense that she is permanently waiting for something to happen. The chauffeurs wait all day for their employers to return to their limousines, unsure if or when their employers will return and their skills as drivers will be put to use. This reflects Reno's sense that she was waiting for the opportunity to become who she was supposed to be. The chauffeurs are echoed in the final chapter of the novel as Reno waited for Gianni by her car and came to the conclusion that sometimes she will have to give up waiting before she has found any answers.

## **Spaghetti Bolognese**

When Reno arrived in Rome with Gianni he took her to an apartment where she was welcomed by his friends and associates and offered a plate of Spaghetti Bolognese. This was symbolic of the difference between the wealthy elite and the working class people of Italy. In contrast to the Valera family, Gianni's friends welcomed Reno and treated her well, not because she was someone they knew, but because they felt it was the right thing to do. In this way, the plate of food symbolized solidarity between ordinary people.

## **Replica Colt Revolver**

The replica colt revolver which Sandro used to shoot a mugger in the hand is symbolic of Sandro's attitude towards violence. The violence committed by the Red Brigade in Italy and The Motherfuckers in New York, however morally questionable, was carried out with the intention of improving society on behalf of the poorest and the most oppressed people in the world. In contrast, Sandro's act of violence was purely selfish and meant only to protect his own rights and his own property (which amounted on this occasion to eight dollars and the phone number to a nearby takeout place.) This marks Sandro out as a member of a privileged elite, who was able to get away with (and even be praised for) his act of violence while protesters in Italy were tear-gassed by police and arrested for their crimes.

## **The Spirit of Italy racecar**

The Spirit of Italy racecar is symbolic of the political struggles going on in Italy during the 1970s. The success of the racecar is partially due to the enigmatic and talented



driver Didi Bombanato, but also partly due to the team of engineers, mechanics, and medics who built the car, maintain in, and protect Didi from injuries he might sustain by driving it. The question of whether the exceptional individual or the collective of the team as a whole should be most valued echoes the question at the heart of the uproar in Italy: is it men like Valera—ruthless individualists—who represent the spirit of Italy, or the people at the demonstrations in Rome who stand together in order to fight their oppressors.

## **Bolex Pro Camera**

Reno's Bolex Pro Camera is symbolic of her attitude to life and to art. Every time Reno tried to use the camera to create a work of art, she ended up living a life experience instead of documenting it. Instead of making a film at the salt flats, she ended up racing *The Spirit of Italy* and becoming the fastest woman in the world. Instead of filming a couple kissing outside of a factory in Milan, she ended up discovering Sandro cheating on her with Talia. When she tried to film the demonstrators in Rome she ended up dropping the camera (losing it permanently) when she was tear-gassed by the police. This is symbolic of Reno's priorities at this point in her life, wherein gaining experiences was more important to her than creating art.

## **The Girl on Layaway**

The Girl on Layaway is symbolic of Reno's past self. She followed the same path as Reno throughout the novel, always one step behind her. Like Reno, the girl is never given a real name and is instead referred to only by a nickname given to her by Ronnie Fontaine. She serves to remind Reno of her past self and as evidence of how much Reno has changed and grown during the course of the novel, despite Reno's feeling that she is always waiting when she is really moving forward at high speed.





# Settings

## New York

New York is the location of Reno's dreams where she hopes to discover herself and become a successful artist. It is depicted as a vibrant place full of outlandish and interesting people, but also a harsh and unforgiving place where it is difficult to flourish and connect with other people.

## Nevada

Nevada represents Reno's past, whereas New York represents her future. For most of the characters in the novel Nevada may as well be a fictional place, because they are familiar with it only through books and other works of art. For Reno it is the place where she grew up which defined the person that she was before she moved to New York.

## Valera Villa

The Valera Villa was an unhappy location for Reno where the class differences between herself and Sandro were made apparent in a way that was not as obvious when they were living in New York. Reno felt that the servants resented having to serve someone from her background when they were employed to serve wealthy people like the Valeras. Reno couldn't adjust to the lack of privacy caused by the constant presence of servants, and was surprised by the relaxed ease with which Sandro dealt with what was, to Reno, such an alien situation.

## Rome

Rome is the location of the political demonstrations with which Reno became involved with after running away from her relationship with Sandro. The city contrasts with Reno's experiences at the Valera villa, where she was only exposed to a wealthy and unfriendly elite. In Rome, she was greeted with friendship and solidarity and became part of a movement. However, her willingness to go along with this movement without questioning Gianni's plans led her to bitterly regret her time in the city.

## Sandro's Apartment

Reno moved into Sandro's Apartment shortly after their relationship began as a matter of convenience because the boiler in her own apartment was broken and the landlord was refusing to fix it. Despite living there with Sandro, Reno always thought of it as his space rather than hers. This reflects Reno's lack of a sense of self: she was dependent

on Sandro and allowed her life to be defined by his, slotting herself into his space in the world rather than carving out a space for herself.



# Themes and Motifs

## Coming of Age

The novel's main theme is Coming of Age, which is the central premise of both Valera and Reno's stories. Valera's Coming of Age is defined by external pursuits such as power, wealth, and machines, whereas Reno's story is defined by more internal issues like self-discovery, love, and solidarity. The novel covers the entirety of Valera's life from childhood until death, whereas only a short few years of Reno's life during her twenties are covered. Reno's life cannot be viewed and judged in totality in the way that Valera's can, which the author reflects by using a more straightforward, chronological, third person prose style in the Valera sections, and a non-chronological, first person narrative that occasionally cedes the narrative voice to other characters for the Reno chapters.

Valera's wealthy father paved the way for Valera to himself become a very rich man with diverse business interests across the world. This privileged start in life also allowed Valera to exploit others on his own quest for success by making his fortune from exporting rubber from Brazil and using slave labor to tap the rubber from trees in the Amazon rainforest. Despite all the success Valera achieved during his life, the novel questions the value of his legacy by exploring the negative impact his wealth had on Valera's son Sandro's emotional health. The question of whether Valera's business deals and relentless pursuit of personal success were worthwhile is foregrounded during the one moment in the novel's narrative when Reno and Valera cross paths. Whilst staying at the Valera villa in Italy, Sandro showed Reno his father's tombstone. Despite Valera's immense success during life, he was buried next to Signora Valera's dog, Gorgonzola the First, who had been given an equally ornate headstone as her husband had been given. Valera's pursuit of success (whether by exploiting the indigenous people of Brazil or manufacturing weapons and machinery for the Nazis) brought death, violence, and destruction into the world, and all that Valera had to show for his achievements after his death was a headstone of roughly the same stature as his wife's pet bulldog.

Reno's Coming of Age journey is made apparent in the chapters after the end of her relationship with Sandro and her return from Italy to New York. The clearest example of her changing sense of self is her ability to view other people around her in a more nuanced way, less driven by her own insecurities. Upon her return to New York, Reno was ready to admit that her previous condescension towards John Dagg stemmed from her own privately held and strongly felt desire to be a successful artist, which caused her to be embarrassed by encountering the same ambitious attitude in someone else. Reno is also more open-minded towards women like Gloria Kastle and Helen Hellenberger who she had previously only thought of as potential threats to her relationship with Sandro. Unlike the Reno who quietly tolerated being insulted and condescended to at the Valera villa, the Reno who returned to New York was more than happy to respond with "Fuck you" when Ronnie annoyed her. Reno's new sense of self is symbolized by her repaired Moto Valera motorbike, which ties her to her past through



its association with Sandro and everything that happened in Italy, but also speaks to a new and as yet undefined future.

## Life as Art

In New York, all of the characters exist on a spectrum from reality to performance and their characters are defined by the extent to which they think of their own lives as a performance or a work of art.

The most extreme example of this is Giddle, who doesn't make any art in a traditionally recognizable sense, instead thinking of her entire life as a work of performance. Reno reflected that this made Giddle a very lonely person, because she didn't have any real friends, only a potential audience. Another key example is Ronnie, who revealed his thoughts and feelings through semi-fictional anecdotes meant to entertain his friends at the same time as being self-revelatory. Sandro constructed a persona which he performed in order to distance himself from his upbringing: he dressed in workers clothes like Scott and Andy, despite being very wealthy, and deliberately mispronounced items on the menu in Italian restaurants in order to distance himself from his home country. Other minor characters who lived their art include Henri Jean who carried a gigantic pole with him wherever he went, and a woman who always dressed in white.

Reno is different to the people she mixes with in New York because she was much more focused on having experiences for the sake of having experiences, rather than for the sake of turning those experiences into art. Unlike other Land Artists whose interest in Reno's homeland was intellectual and motivated by the desire to make art, Reno's interest in the West was personal and motivated by experiences that she would have had regardless of whether or not she would ever make art out of them. In fact, rather than having experiences which will inform her art, most of Reno's attempts to make art in the novel are derailed by her life experiences getting in the way. Her plan to photograph her tracks at the Salt Flats was derailed by the Moto Valera Team asking her to break the land speed record for women. Her plan to film a couple kissing at the Valera factory in Milan was derailed by the realization that the couple was Sandro and Talia. Her attempt to make a film about the demonstrators in Rome was derailed when she was tear-gassed and dropped her camera while running away with Gianni.

Reno's approach to life and art is portrayed as more ethical than the approach of the filmmakers making a documentary about the mentally disturbed pregnant teenager in Rome. The men making the film had no personal investment in the experiences they were documenting (as attested to by their blasé attitude to what had happened to the girl's baby) and were instead merely interested in the artistic recognition that the film might receive if they managed to get it selected for the Venice film festival. The author argues that treating experiences as something to be turned into art is less ethical than Reno's approach and, further to this that the art made by people who were not truly engaged by their experiences will have less value.



## Feminism, Misogyny, and Women's Rights

Feminism is an important theme in the novel and it is used to undercut the radical perspectives of many of the male characters. The mistreatment of women is a central part of the lifestyle and success of a diverse range of male characters in the novel including Ronnie Fontaine, Valera, Sandro, and Burdmoore Model. Burdmoore told Reno that the reason his anarchist collective was called The Motherfuckers was because they hated women. When a motorcycle gang helped to protect The Motherfuckers from the police, Burdmoore's wife Nadine was raped by one of them but no one did anything about it because the group was dependent on continuing an amicable relationship with these men. Sandro professed to sympathize with feminist politics and criticized his home country of Italy to Reno by telling her that rape was not considered a crime there if the rapist offered to marry his victim. Despite this, Sandro treated the women he actually knew with disrespect and dishonesty. Valera was callous and distant with his wife which influenced Sandro's attitude to women when he was growing up.

Ronnie treated women in the same way that he treated inanimate objects and consumer items, which was symbolized by his reaction to first making a lot of money from selling his art. Ronnie bought 100 pairs of jeans, 500 white t-shirts, 500 pairs of underwear, and 500 pairs of socks and declared that he would never do any laundry again. He would throw everything away after he'd finished wearing it. Ronnie treated the women in his life as equally disposable, casting them aside when they were no longer of interest to him.

Reno herself has a less than positive attitude towards other women for most of the novel, always turning to men to help guide her life and decisions rather than forming close friendships with other women. In the earlier chapters, Reno's narration focuses on the extent to which women like Gloria Kastle and Helen Hellenberger were a threat to her relationship with Sandro, whereas later in the novel Reno notices other aspects to their characters that she admired. Gloria stood by Reno and took care of her after Sandro broke her heart and Helen refused to display Ronnie's latest exhibition because she deemed it to be misogynist. The lesson Reno learned about fostering independence rather dependency on men was summed up by Gianni's lover Bene in Rome, who used a radio broadcast to advise Italian women that although men could help connect them to the world, they couldn't help women connect to themselves.

The extent to which women have been sidelined in history and ignored in favor of male voices is symbolized in Reno's work as a China girl: literally on the edges of art made by other people, rather than individuals front and center in their own right. This is also explored through the way other characters speak to each other: Reno is frequently ignored, interrupted, or condescended to by the men around her, such as the novelist Chesil Jones.



## Workers' Rights

Worker's Rights is an important theme in the political, as well as the personal, aspects of the novel. The issue is most clearly articulated in the sections dealing with the employment conditions of the rubber tappers working for Valera in the Amazon rainforest in Brazil. These men were held in slavery whilst the system which had been built around them made huge profits and Valera and his associates continued to fraudulently insist that the rubber tappers were paid labor who would one day be rewarded for their contribution to the success of the business.

The story of the rubber tappers explores the way wealthy people can exploit poor people without ever having to face any consequences for their actions. The rich control the official records and are able to manipulate the facts to exonerate themselves from responsibility, as demonstrated when the foreman wrote "yellow fever" in the log books when a rubber tapper had been murdered for trying to escape. Sandro felt entitled to his right to defend his own property (which was demonstrated when he shot a man in the hand for trying to steal eight dollars from him) despite the fact that his property and wealth was acquired by his father through the exploitation and murder of the poor.

The question of whether to stand in solidarity with other people or to strike out alone and pursue individual success is explored through the Moto Valera Team who went to the salt flats in Nevada to break the land speed record. When the team heard that the Valera factory workers in Milan were on strike, the team in Nevada also went on strike in order to support them. The exception to this was Didi Bombanato, who wished to continue with his attempt to break the land speed record without giving any thought to the striking workers in Italy and who was aggravated by the behavior of the rest of the Moto Valera team. Didi was later kidnapped by the Red Brigades in Italy, as someone who was marked out as unfairly privileged and an enemy of ordinary people.

The author uses the soldiers in Valera's battalion who carried flamethrowers as a metaphor for the struggle for workers' rights. Within the novel movements like the Red Brigades commit violent crimes for the sake of promoting their cause, including the kidnap and murder of Sandro's older brother Roberto. But the novel raises the question of whether these acts were any worse than the violence committed by men like Valera against his workers in Brazil or, indeed, whether the Red Brigades might even have been justified in using the violent methods of their oppressors against them in their fight for justice.

People involved in the workers' rights movements are portrayed in the novel as inherently kinder than the wealthy elite of Italy, at least in relation to the way they treated Reno: whereas Sandro's family were cruel and condescending, making Reno feel like an outsider and an intruder, the people that Gianni introduced Reno to were kind and offered her food, beer, and a place to sleep, despite not knowing her.



## Time

A central theme of Reno's sections is Time, whether it is discussed in terms of travelling at high speed on a motorbike or in terms of her sense that these years of her life were spent waiting for something or someone to happen to her. Valera, too, has an interest in time, believing at one stage that men were somehow free from the constraints of time in a way that women were not.

Sandro told Reno that young people have the luxury of time and that she should not rush to become an artist and should instead focus on living, because young people (young women especially, according to Sandro) are always doing something even when they are doing nothing. Reno's narrative is frequently preoccupied with time and many of the chapters begin with a sentence that locates the reader in a specific time in relation to the other events of the novel: "just over a year before", "a month after", "the year I turned four". Reno's interest in speed and skiing was connected to her interest in time and she told Sandro that "Ski racing was drawing in time". Ronnie defined Sandro and Reno's relationship as relating to time and speed, saying "she's the fastest chick in the world, Sandro. And you're slowing her down."

At the start of the novel Reno was consumed by the sense that she was waiting for something to happen and that once that something appeared her life would finally begin. To begin with, she very much expected the something to be a someone, a man specifically, which caused her to follow the lead of the men that she encountered in New York, beginning with Chris Kelly whom she followed to New York in the first place, followed by the man who she did not yet know was Ronnie Fontaine, then with Sandro and, finally, once she was in Italy, with Gianni. The girl on layaway represents the passage of time in the novel by reminding Reno of her past self and all that has occurred during the time since she was in the girl's position: how she used to be infatuated with Ronnie before starting a relationship with Sandro, how she used to be young and impressionable and how she used to look to older men for guidance.

Reno also treated non-romantic events as if they might have been the something she had been waiting for, stating after her crash at the salt flats that she had thought to herself that she had "been waiting all my life for it." In contrast, when Reno was tear gassed by the police during the demonstrations in Rome she reflected that Gianni and the other demonstrators were prepared with ways to counteract the tear gas because "They'd been waiting for this. I had not." This statement reflects the impossibility of predicting how events will unfold in life and the importance of living in each moment as it happens rather than retreating or passively avoiding connecting to your own life and identity. It also underscores that Reno had been diverted into this situation by following Gianni rather than by following her own path and her own instincts.



# Styles

## Point of View

The author uses multiple different points of view throughout the novel. The two main perspectives are Valera and Reno. Valera's sections are told in the third person with an omniscient narrator, whereas Reno's chapters are told in the first person from her perspective.

Within Reno's chapters, however, there are multiple other perspectives used in the form of extended anecdotes from other characters, most notably Ronnie Fontaine, but also Giddle, and Stanley Kastle, who take over the narration from Reno for the length of their tales. This use of point of view in Reno's chapters is reflective of her sense of self. At one point Reno reflected of the people around her: "They all talked nonstop. That is, if you didn't intervene. They were accustomed to being interrupted. Whoever was hungriest to speak, spoke. I wasn't hungry in that same way. I was hungry to listen." The author demonstrates Reno's willingness to listen to others by having the character cede her own narration to others in order to share their stories and perspectives with the reader as well as her own.

The use of first person narration within Reno's chapters allows the reader to experience her growth as a character and the greater understanding of life and the people around her that she has achieved by the end of the novel. For example, in the earlier chapters Reno's descriptions of Gloria Kastle and Helen Hellenberger reflected Reno's feelings of jealousy and intimidation, but when she returned from Italy Reno's narration gave a more complex and nuanced impression of these women, as well as of other characters such as John Dogg.

Chapter 19 is unusual in the novel because it is told from Sandro's perspective. The author draws a connection between the Valera chapters and the Sandro chapter by using a third person omniscient narrator in both. Sandro's chapter reveals that all of the previous Valera chapters have really been about Sandro, about explaining how he became the man he was when he was in a relationship with Reno.

## Language and Meaning

The author uses separate lexicons for the sections in the novel devoted to Reno and Valera. Reno's word choices revolve around time and speed. This is most apparent in the sections describing the experience of riding a motorbike but is returned to over and over again elsewhere, for example when Sandro told Reno that young people "have the luxury of time." Indeed, many of Reno's chapters open with some sort of reference to time, to how much of it has passed. For example, Chapter 4 opens with Reno stating that she "had moved to New York from Reno just over a year before," Chapter 6 with the





words “A month after the night I met the people with the gun,” and Chapter 7 with “The year I turned four.”

The language in the Valera sections is less preoccupied with time and speed, more preoccupied with mechanics and violence, reflecting the different worldviews and interests of Reno and Valera. The opening chapter uses an extended sports metaphor to describe Valera killing a German soldier, immediately creating a distance between the man himself and the violent acts he committed or was indirectly responsible for. Valera’s arrival as a young man in Milan is described with industrial and mechanical terms, commenting on the “screeching electric trams,” and the “explosions and smoke from automobiles and motorcycles.” When he began to develop his own plans to build motorcycles the language used marked Valera out as a practical man. In contrast to the dreamers around him, Valera admired “the fine lubricated violence of an internal combustion engine.”

Other characters have their own ways of speaking that help to enlighten the reader about their personalities and worldview. Ronnie Fontaine speaks mainly in metaphor (a way of shielding himself from intimacy) whereas Giddle speaks in a very straightforward manner, reflective of her desire to live her life as a piece of art rather than hide herself behind distinctions between her performances and her real life.

## Structure

The author structures the two main narrative threads in different ways. The structure of Valera’s sections is chronological, whereas the structure of Reno’s sections is non-chronological, skipping back and forth between different moments in her life as she pondered their meaning and brought a retrospective perspective to events. This reflects the different natures of Valera and Reno’s stories.

The Valera sections are a work of history: a complete and solid account of the things that occurred in his life and what motivated him to make the decisions he made. In contrast, Reno’s life was still unfolding in the novel and the author was more focused on what Reno would become, rather than what her life had been. The jumping back and forth to different moments in Reno’s narrative reflects her phase of life and the way she used her impression to slowly form her sense of self. Although used to refer to the feeling of riding a motorbike, Reno’s words “I was in an acute state of the present tense,” refer to her life as a whole. The character does not yet know who she is or who she will become, unlike Valera whose life has ended and can now be looked back on as if it was a straightforward chronological story where one event naturally led to the next event and so on and so forth until Valera’s death. Reno’s sections show that life never feels that simple or straightforward in the moment, only in retrospect.

Although events are told in a non-chronological fashion within Reno’s chapters, the chapters themselves follow a broadly chronological path: beginning by exploring her childhood and background, then her first few months in New York, onto the beginnings of her relationship with Sandro, the aftermath of her crash at the salt flats, her trip to

Italy with Sandro and the end of their relationship, her involvement with Gianni and the demonstrators in Rome, and her subsequent return to New York.

## Quotes

It was an irony but a fact that a person had to move to New York City first, to become an artist of the West.

-- Reno/ Narration (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Reno reflected on her reasons for moving to New York in order to make art that was inspired by the West. This quote reflects the primacy Reno gives to authentic experience over doing things for the sake of art. Unlike the artists she would meet in New York, Reno had real experience of the place that inspired her.

The movie followed by a walk west, the rain having ceased, the walk led by him. I wanted to be led. To see the city as he wanted me to see it.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 6 paragraph Fourth section, paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Reno remembered her earliest impressions of Sandro. This reflects Reno's attitude towards life and her preference for allowing men to make her decisions for her, rather than forging a path for herself.

The problem with the bruises is they make you not anonymous," Eric chimed in. "You're not supposed to evoke real life. Just the hermetic world of a smiling woman holding the color chart.

-- Eric (chapter 10 paragraph Part 1, paragraph 30)

**Importance:** Eric explained that Reno's injuries from her crash were interfering with her work as a China girl. This reflects Reno's sense of self in the novel which had not yet really been formed. She didn't know who she was yet, but incidents such as the motorcycle crash helped to shape her into a specific individual with a unique past, rather than a generic unformed woman.

I didn't know quite why she threatened me. She was full of life and verve and a refreshing bluntness, and yet I wanted her contained instead of celebrated for these qualities I secretly admired.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 14 paragraph Fourth section, paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Reno considered the reasons why she disliked Talia Valera. This reflects Reno's insecurities and the way she resented women who were more self-aware and self-actualized than she was, isolating herself from women rather than forging connections with them, and relying on men to help her instead.

It seemed to me that if you were poor and went to a foreign place, you met poor people who weren't all that foreign to you, like the bikers and their girlfriends I'd hung around with at the squalid bar near the train station in Florence. And the opposite was probably true, too. For the rich, the world would be a series of elegantly appointed rooms, similar rooms and legible social customs, familiar categories of privilege the world over.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 14 paragraph Fifth section, paragraph 9)



**Importance:** Reno discussed why she felt more comfortable around poor people in Italy than around the wealthy Valeras. This argument is not only significant for Reno but also for Sandro, who can never fully join the demonstrators in Italy despite agreeing with their views because he was an outcast from them in the same way Reno was an outcast amongst his wealthy family.

They asked if I was hungry. They asked if I wanted a beer. They made me a bed to sleep on. They didn't know anything about me. I was brought by Gianni and that was all the information they needed.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 15 paragraph Second section, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Reno listed what happened when Gianni took her to meet his friends in Rome. This quotation highlights the contrast between the way Reno was treated by Gianni's friends and the way she was treated by Sandro's family. More widely, it represents the difference between ruthless individualists like Valera who took care of himself and no one else, and the collectivist movements in Italy and New York that sought to improve society as a whole by taking care of everyone.

Sisters," Bene said, "men can put you in touch with the world. We see that. Men connect you to the world, but not to your own self.

-- Bene (chapter 15 paragraph Seventh section, paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Gianni's lover Bene said this as part of a radio broadcast during the demonstrations in Rome. The words cut to the heart of Reno's dilemma in the novel. Due to her lack of a sense of self, Reno endlessly turned to men (Chris Kelly, Ronnie, Sandro, Gianni) to help connect her to the world, when what she really needed to do was form a connection with herself.

But it's new to her, I should have said but didn't. She's on her timeline, Gloria, not yours or anyone else's.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 16 paragraph Fourth section, final paragraph)

**Importance:** Reno thought this after Gloria criticized a young woman wearing a revealing dress. The quotation reflects the novel's focus on time. The young woman is at a particular moment in her own life and the fact that other people have been at that moment before her does not make it any less significant for her. This idea is also reflected in the girl on layaway who follows Reno's timeline, but further behind.

Because I honestly don't think you know yourself. Which is why you love egotistical jerks.

-- Ronnie (chapter 16 paragraph 5 from the end)

**Importance:** Ronnie said this to Reno while explaining why they could never be together. Ronnie suggested that Reno's relationships with difficult and egotistical men happened because she doesn't properly know herself. The novel is a process of self-



discovery for Reno who can look back over her relationship with Sandro and see the why it was unsatisfactory in a way that she couldn't at the time.

You had to believe in the system, I thought, to feel it was wrong to take things without paying for them. You had to believe in a system that said you can want things if you work, if you are employed, or if you were just born lucky, born rich.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 18 paragraph 47)

**Importance:** Reno used these words during the blackout in New York and they reflect the politics of the novel as a whole. People are encouraged to believe that work is a necessary part of deserving to have good things in life even though there are men like Sandro in the world who can get anything they want without having to work. The system is depicted as fair but, as is apparent to the rubber tappers in Brazil, the world is inherently biased in favor of the rich.

But then his father told him the flamethrowers were a hopeless lot. Their tanks were cumbersome and heavy and they were obvious and slow-moving targets and if they were ever caught they were shown no mercy. That's not a thing you want to be, his father said

-- Narration (chapter 19 paragraph 25)

**Importance:** Valera explained to Sandro why Sandro's favorite toy soldiers were not worthy of being his favorites. The Flamethrowers are a symbol for the solidarity movements in the novel and the disproportionate punishment meted out to poor people who break the rules or use violence to improve their lives, in comparison to the wealth and social rewards given to privileged men like Valera when they violently take what they want from life.

You can think and think a question, the purpose of waiting, the question of whether there is any purpose, any person meant to appear, but if the person doesn't come, there is no one and nothing to answer you.

-- Reno/Narration (chapter 20 paragraph 7 from the end)

**Importance:** Reno reflected on the nature of waiting while waiting for Gianni at the French border. For most of the novel Reno waited for a person (a man, in fact) who would introduce her to the world and help her to define her sense of self and her life. By the end of the novel she realized that there may never be an answer to the questions she was waiting on and that she would have to press on regardless into the uncertainty of the future.