

# **A Gambler's Anatomy Study Guide**

**A Gambler's Anatomy by Jonathan Lethem**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Lethem, Jonathan. *A Gambler's Anatomy*. Doubleday, 2016.

*A Gambler's Anatomy* is a novel presented in a mostly linear structure. The protagonist, Alexander Bruno, is a world-traveling professional backgammon player. He makes most of his money playing against wealthy, overconfident backgammon enthusiasts who crave a challenge. Bruno has recently come under the management of Edgar Falk, a wealthy man involved in various international criminal activities. After Bruno suffers a surprising loss in Singapore, Falk send Bruno to Berlin to play against a wealthy real-estate speculator named Wolf-Dirk Kohler.

On the morning of the game, Bruno wakes up with a mysterious blot in his vision, and on the way to the game, he meets an attractive woman named Madchen. She is about 50 years old, like Bruno. Bruno ends up losing the game against Kohler, and during one of the rounds, Bruno suffers a nosebleed and collapses. At a hospital, x-rays show that Bruno has a cancer-like growth called a meningioma pressing against the front of his brain. One of the doctors tells Bruno that he must go to California to see a surgeon with an innovative new surgery that can help him.

The narrative briefly jumps backward to show Bruno's time in Singapore. In a high-end social club, Bruno runs into old high school acquaintance Keith Stolarsky and his girlfriend Tira Harpaz. Stolarsky is a wealthy property owner in Berkeley, California where he and Bruno went to high school. He is unruly and tackily dressed, which contrasts with the refined and coolly reserved Bruno. The next evening, Bruno plays backgammon against Edgar Falk's business associate Yik Tho Lim, and Bruno loses badly.

The narrative then resumes where it left off. Bruno is flown to his old hometown of Berkeley, where he has not been for 30 years. Stolarsky has paid for the plane ticket. He gives Bruno food, lodging, and spending money, and he says that he will pay for Bruno's medical expenses. Among Stolarsky's properties are several fast food restaurants on Telegraph Avenue and the apartment building in which he lets Bruno stay.

Bruno goes to meet the surgeon, Noah Behringer, at a hospital in nearby San Francisco. Behringer is an aging hippie who used to mostly practice medicine at music festivals, but he is confident in the surgery. The surgery itself is shown through Behringer's eyes, and once Bruno becomes conscious afterwards, he says that he himself saw the surgery through Behringer's eyes and mind. Bruno realizes that the removal of the meningioma has unfortunately returned his telepath powers, which came to him when he was 11 and which he learned to block out. Behringer does not believe Bruno, and Bruno is discharged from the hospital. After the surgery, Bruno wears a post-surgical mask to hide his face.



Bruno then returns to Berkeley and spends his time wandering aimlessly. He becomes acquainted with several of the locals, including Beth Dennis, who works in the Stolarsky owned retail store Zodiac Media, and Garris Plybon, who works in the fast food restaurant Kropotkin's Sliders. Plybon greatly dislikes Stolarsky and espouses anarchistic rhetoric, but Kropotkin's is secretly owned by Stolarsky. Plybon and Bruno are aware of this, but Bruno promises Plybon that he will not tell anyone. Later, Bruno calls Madchen on the phone, as they exchanged phone numbers when they met. He explains his situation, and Madcehn agrees to come to Berkeley to help take care of him. Meanwhile, Tira makes sexual advances on Bruno, and they have a brief sexual encounter.

Just before Madcehn arrives, Stolarsky tells Bruno that he must work for him to pay off his debt. Bruno agrees to work at Kropotkin's Sliders. Madchen arrives soon after, and she comes to Bruno's apartment to help take care of him. Bruno says that he and Madchen need to escape Berkeley, but first he goes to his shift at Kropotkin's. Afterwards, he and Madchen have a meeting with Beth and Plybon in which they plot a protest against Plybon. Bruno participates in the protest, but it is ultimately ineffective. Madchen decides to work a shift at Kropotkin's during the protest, and when Bruno returns to see her, she is gone. Plybon tells Bruno that Stolarsky took her to his house. Bruno goes to confront Stolarsky, but Stolarsky forces him away at gunpoint. In a final act of rebellion against Stolarsky, Bruno leads a group of bystanders in acts of arson on Stolarsky's various properties.

Bruno finds himself in jail, and Tira Harpaz bails him out. She reveals that Bruno's arson only helped Stolarsky, as it allowed him to collect insurance money. She then says that Stolarsky no longer has any use for Bruno, so Bruno is being sent away. Tira gives Bruno a plane ticket, which has been paid for by Edgar Falk. The novel ends with Bruno once again under the management and control of Edgar Falk. Under Falk's direction, Bruno uses his telepathic powers to cheat at games of poker against wealthy poker enthusiasts.



# Pages 1 - 54

## Summary

Pages 1 – 10: Alexander Bruno, a professional backgammon player, wakes up in a hotel room in Berlin and notices a distinct blind spot in his vision. It is new, but he has the distinct feeling that he had been carrying it with him before, simply unable to see it. He refers to it as “the blot” (3). He decides not to give it too much thought for the time being. He puts on his tuxedo, picks up his persona; backgammon set, and leaves the hotel room. On the ferry to an appointment, while looking for a dropped cuff link, he meets an attractive woman who is about 50 years old, like Bruno. She says her name is Madchen and that she is taking the ferry to her babysitting job. Bruno flirts with her and they exchange numbers. Bruno tries to sense if Madchen can read his thoughts; the narration states that Bruno once had the power of telepathy but gave it up.

Pages 11 – 26: Bruno arrives at the house of a wealthy real-estate speculator named Wolf-Dirk Kohler. Bruno has been sent there by his business manager, Edgar Falk, in order to win money from Kohler in backgammon. Kohler consistently beats his friends at backgammon and wishes to play Bruno in order to have a real challenge. They begin to play rounds of backgammon with \$1,000 stakes, although Bruno secretly has no money to put up, due to events in Singapore that the narration vaguely alludes to. At first, Bruno wins rounds easily, peering around the blot in his vision in order to see the board. However, when Kohler puts on loud jazz records and brings a mostly naked woman in a mask into the room, Bruno begins to lose badly, and the blot seems to become more of an obstacle. Bruno starts to bleed from the nose and then passes out. When he wakes up, Kohler sends him to a nearby hospital, called Charité.

Pages 27 – 46: At the hospital, Bruno meets with a doctor, but Bruno’s lack of symptoms convince the doctor that there is nothing wrong with him. Bruno leaves, and on a nearby street, he begins bleeding from the nose again. He uses the blood to mark a cube-like paving stone to look like a backgammon die, and then Bruno passes out again. Back in the hospital, two doctors inform him that Bruno’s x-rays show a cancer-like growth—called a meningioma—located at the front of his brain. This appears to be causing the fainting and the blot. One of the doctors recommends a San Francisco doctor with a revolutionary surgery that may be able to extract the growth. Bruno has a flashback to when he and his hippie mother moved from San Rafael, CA to Berkeley, CA so that his mother could live on a compound led by a guru.

Pages 47 – 54: The narrative then moves backwards to Singapore, where Bruno and Edgar Falk happen to run in to Keith Stolarsky, whom Bruno knew back in high school. Stolarsky is now a wealthy real-estate owner, still living in Berkeley where he and Bruno grew up. Stolarsky’s manner is somewhat crude, his clothes are tacky, and he is accompanied by Tira Harpaz, his girlfriend. Bruno tells Stolarsky that he is a professional gambler.



## Analysis

The narrative begins in a very inauspicious time and place for Alexander Bruno. It is implied that he has recently arrived in Berlin from Singapore, and that certain events in Singapore have led to the severe depletion of his funds. This seems to mean that a major backgammon session had gone awry, leaving him with virtually no money. Therefore, Bruno's game with Kohler represents a desperate moment. If Bruno does not beat the wealthy man, then he will have no way to pay him back, and his reputation as a gambler will likely be ruined. In addition, the mysterious blot on Bruno's vision represents a worrying sign. The one positive moment for Bruno in this first section seems to be his chance encounter with the German woman Madchen, to whom he seems to very much be drawn.

Bruno's backgammon game against Kohler represents an interesting mixture of ambiguities in terms of what causes Bruno's ultimate loss. Bruno has had a substantial career of beating wealthy, overconfident men like Kohler at backgammon, and yet his loss to Kohler seems to be an extension of his misfortune at Singapore. In this regard, it seems like there may be some large, mysterious reason for the overall turn of Bruno's luck. The presence of the blot implies that perhaps it has to do with something going on within Bruno himself. On the other hand, Bruno only begins losing the game against Kohler after Kohler puts on an abrasive jazz record and brings in the masked, mostly naked woman. Thus, it is possible that these are ploys by Kohler to intentionally distract Bruno. The scene appears to reach an anticlimax when Bruno passes out, as his health becomes a concern rather than the money Bruno has technically lost in the game.

Bruno's subsequent visits to the hospital serve to firmly establish the motif of Bruno's medical situation. In his first visit, the doctor can find nothing wrong with him, ruling out the possibility of a seizure or anything truly serious. However, Bruno's subsequent collapse right outside the hospital seems to be clear evidence that there is something very wrong. The revelation of the meningioma introduces a life-or-death circumstance into Bruno's life, somewhat similar to the desperate situation in which he attempted to beat Kohler at backgammon to rebound from his previous failure. Unfortunately, Bruno's failure to beat Kohler is followed by this major medical misfortune. Bruno, once successful and refined, is now brought to an even lower point of desperation. He appears to have no choice but to return to California, which he has avoided doing for 30 years.

When the narrative moves backwards to the events at Singapore, the reader gets a taste of what Bruno's hometown represents to him, as embodied by Keith Stolarsky. Keith is crude and loud and tackily dressed, providing a severe foil to Bruno's own well-groomed persona. The reader is also introduced to the enigmatic Edgar Falk and Tira Harpaz, who seem to act as supporting characters for Bruno and Stolarsky respectively. However, their functions are left somewhat vague at this point beyond their given roles: Falk as self-possessed handler and manager, Harpaz as witty yet disinterested girlfriend.



## Discussion Question 1

Bruno and Madchen seem to form a spontaneous connection on the ferry. What is the nature of this connection? How is it described or implied?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the structure of the scene in which Bruno plays backgammon against Kohler. What ambiguities does the scene present? How does it develop Bruno as a character?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Bruno's flashback to childhood, which begins on page 25. What significance does it seem to hold? How does it contrast with the aesthetics and realities of Bruno's present?

## Vocabulary

recede, tarpaulin, elude, desultory, perennial, pidgin, urbane, pewter, decanter, fervor, pedantic, relinquish, argot, exultation, flippant, protract, vale, tabulate, esoteric, solace, portico, pomposity, beguile, ungainly, vigil, edifice, derelict, sojourn, olfactory, apprise, palliative, martinet, robust, rebuke, sardonic, indigenous



## Pages 55 - 116

### Summary

Pages 55 – 65: The next day, Bruno, Stolarsky, and Harpaz have dinner together. Bruno admits that he has not returned to Berkeley in 30 years, and Stolarsky admits that he was up all night playing backgammon online. Stolarsky asks Bruno if they can play backgammon together later, and Bruno agrees.

Pages 66 – 80: Bruno meets briefly with Edgar Falk in Falk's hotel room. The elderly Falk has just received a massage, and he lies mostly naked on the massage table as a tactic to unsettle Bruno. Falk discusses the backgammon game he has set up for Bruno with a wealthy business associate of Falk's named Yik Tho Lim. Falk and Lim share various criminal business interests. After this meeting, Bruno goes to Stolarsky's room for the game of backgammon he agreed to. Bruno wins the first few rounds easily, and then Tira Harpaz enters with her new acquaintance, a woman from Missouri named Cynthia Jalter. The gathering becomes rowdy, and Bruno begins to kiss Cynthia Jalter. Bruno notes, with a certain amount of regret, the difference in atmosphere between this room and the refined club he had been in the day before. The outcome of the game with Stolarsky is left unrevealed, but the narrative then provides a brief account of Bruno's game with Yik To Lim. Bruno loses badly.

Pages 81 – 95: The narrative then jumps forward again to where it left off earlier. Bruno checks out of the Berlin hospital and then goes to the airport. There, he listens to a message on his smartphone from Madchen. She says she was present when Bruno passed out and that she hopes he is okay. Bruno realizes that Madchen was the woman in the mask at Kohler's house and that she had been lying about being a babysitter.

Bruno then takes a plane from Berlin to Amsterdam and then from Amsterdam to California, where his surgery will take place. He is picked up by Stolarsky, and it is revealed to the reader that Stolarsky paid for the plane ticket. It is also revealed that Stolarsky is paying for Bruno's medical expenses. Stolarsky buys him a meal at a restaurant, and then they go to Telegraph Avenue, where Stolarsky owns many businesses. Stolarsky gives Bruno some tacky clothes from a store he owns called Zodiac Media. There, Bruno meets a clerk and student named Beth Dennis. Stolarsky then drops him off at the Jack London apartment, which Stolarsky also owns. Stolarsky gives Bruno cash and a free room.

Pages 96 – 116: Tira Harpaz gives Bruno a tour of the neighborhood, showing him Stolarsky's other tacky stores such as Zombie Burger. The next day, Bruno has lunch in a restaurant called Kropotkin's Sliders, where the man working there appears to take kindly to Bruno, giving him an extra burger for free. The next day, Bruno meets with the surgeon, Noah Behringer, who gives Bruno the details of the operation. It essentially involves removing Bruno's face, removing the growth, and then replacing the face. Behringer appears to be an aging hippy, and his office is adorned with a Jimi Hendrix





poster, so Bruno is not quite sure what to make of him. However, Behringer seems optimistic about the surgery.

## Analysis

Bruno's meeting with Edgar Falk gives a deeper insight into their relationship. Falk appears to be a professional criminal operating in multiple countries, and he sees Bruno as an opportunity to make money by harnessing the backgammon player's talents. Falk's stratagem of unsettling Bruno by appearing naked before him seems to establish that their relationship is not very amicable but is based on a certain amount of control. Bruno's subsequent meeting with Stolarsky further develops the differences between the two characters. Stolarsky radiates crassness and unrestrained energy, while the refined Bruno remains cool and collected. However, he finds his collectedness broken by the collective energies of Stolarsky, Harpaz, and Jalter. The close juxtaposition between this breakdown of Bruno's persona and his major loss against Yik Tho Lim seems to imply that the two may have some connection.

When Bruno returns to Berkeley, it is the first time in 30 years that he has been back there, and Bruno's tour with Stolarsky gives some insight into why. Like Stolarsky, Berkeley appears to be quite tacky and unrefined. Businesses like Zodiac Media and Zombie Burger represent a culture of garish commercialism that clashes with the refined, tuxedo-wearing backgammon player that Bruno had turned himself into. Bruno does not mix well with the neighborhood, but he has no choice, and his surroundings and predicament slowly morph him. For example, the clothes he buys at Zodiac Media are about as tacky as Stolarsky's outfits, but Bruno has no choice but to wear them in place of his now dirty tuxedo.

Bruno and Stolarsky's relationship is rather strange and somewhat vague at this point. It is unclear to both Bruno and the reader why Stolarsky is being so generous by taking care of Bruno and paying for his medical costs. The only apparent reason seems to be that Stolarsky thought much of Bruno in high school and is now very wealthy, so he feels compelled to help his old acquaintance who has suddenly fallen into great misfortune.

It is also important to note that the tone and pacing of the novel appear to change somewhat once Bruno arrives in Berkeley. Instead of very goal-driven scenes in which Bruno attempts to coolly take control of situations, he is now rather powerless to make decision since he is in the care of others. In addition, since his environment is now unfamiliar to him, he can only wander with distaste through the neighborhood and get by until his operation. His interaction with the employee of Kropotkin's Sliders, for example, stands as an isolated scene with no readily apparent purpose. The employee will become a more important character later, but for now, the scene simply functions to highlight the aimlessness that both Bruno's surroundings and his circumstances bestow on him. Additionally, Noah Behringer represents a strange extension of the local atmosphere. He is based in San Francisco rather than Berkeley, but his hippie-like persona represents a parallel to the certain lax atmosphere of Berkeley.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Bruno's relationship with Edgar Falk. What appear to be the nature and circumstances of this relationship? What details are given, and what details appear to be omitted?

## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Keith Stolarsky and Tira Harpaz. How does Bruno appear to relate differently to each of them?

## Discussion Question 3

What appear to be Bruno's reactions and attitudes towards his new surroundings in Berkeley? Do his inner reactions correspond with his outward behaviors? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

iniquity, imperious, feral, animus, dubious, aficionado, ethereal, braze, bolster, enfeeble, berth, furrow, irradiate, hysterics, trifle, matte discretion, incognito, lament, ostensible, fiefdom, clientele, emblazon, eschew, vapid, affront, slurry, visceral, peon, innocuous, arcana, topography, oncologist, rebus, simpatico, cauterization, phantasm, audacious, jubilation



## Pages 117 - 172

### Summary

Pages 117 – 139: Just before Bruno's surgery, the novel then switches from Bruno's point of view to Noah Behringer's the novel details his thoughts before the surgery, revealing that he believes himself superior to most medical professionals. He used to work as a doctor mostly at rock concerts, and whenever he operates, he plays Jimi Hendrix music and pretends he is saving Jimi Hendrix's life. He does so during the surgery, in which he removes Bruno's face and takes out the growth piece by piece. To relieve tension in the last stretch of the surgery, he takes a moment to talk to his surgical assistants about awkward sexual encounters. The surgery is soon over, and Behringer whispers to Bruno that he has destroyed him in order to save him.

Pages 140 – 150: As Bruno recovers from his surgery, he thinks about the time he had been hospitalized in Oakland as an 11-year-old. His mother, June, had accidentally spilled a pot of hot coffee on him, giving him sever burns below the waist. She rushed him to the emergency room, where he was saved from death by infection and dehydration. A nun visited him in his room to keep him company. They played gin rummy together, and Bruno found that he could read her mind. Soon after, he experiences his first orgasm while sitting in a vibrating tub meant to speed his healing. He then recalls growing older, working at a restaurant called Chez Panisse, and using his telepathy to cheat at poker. He then came under the tutelage of Konrad, one of the restaurant managers, who taught him how to play backgammon and act like a gentleman. Bruno gave up poker for backgammon, a supposedly more gentlemanly game, even though his telepathy would be useless in aiding him at backgammon.

Pages 151 – 164: Once Bruno has mostly recovered, he is greeted by Behringer. Behringer informs Bruno that the operation was a success. Bruno notices that the blot in his vision is gone and that his telepathy appears to have returned. He tells Behringer that he experienced the surgery through Behringer's eyes because of his returned telepathy. Behringer does not believe any of what Bruno says. Bruno begs Behringer to surgically implant the Berlin paving stone where the meningioma was in order to block out the telepathy again, but Behringer refuses and quickly leaves.

Pages 165 – 172: Bruno sees that his face has been somewhat altered by the surgery, so before he leaves the hospital, he puts on a hoodie and a type of post-surgical mask that completely covers his face. He finds that the place where the blot used to be is now flooded with brightness and information. Bruno does not wish to leave the hospital in this state, forced to once again hear the unfiltered thoughts of those around him with no way to block out the noise, but the nurse taking care of him says he is not allowed to stay in the hospital any longer.



## Analysis

Part of this section provides useful exposition regarding Bruno's early life. The story of his hospitalization for burns as a boy appears to act as the starting point for the events that led up to his life as a traveling backgammon player. For instance, Bruno, gains his telepathic powers as he is recovering from his burn injury. Very soon after, he has his first sexual experience, an orgasm in the vibrating tub. This juxtaposition seems to imply that the telepathic powers are in some way related to his becoming an adult. These changes develop further as he grows older, separates himself from his mother, and finds the most refined job in the area, waiting tables at Chez Panisse, thus first acting on his interest in appearing gentlemanly. Konrad then helps him further cultivate this persona. This extended anecdote helps illustrate a narrative in which Bruno comes to harm in his life in Berkeley and seeks to escape it, forming a thinly constructed but all-encompassing persona and even forsaking his gift of telepathy in order to become more aloof and gentlemanly. Bruno's return to Berkeley then seems to act as an undoing of this change early on in his life.

Bruno's post-surgery interaction with Behringer then sheds more light on Bruno's telepathic powers and what significance they hold for the narrative and Bruno's character. The telepathy appears to be something that he could not control, and so he built up barriers in order to mute the power and leave him more separated from other people. These barriers apparently manifested in the meningioma and the blot on his vision. Once Bruno realizes this, he is eager to have the effects of the surgery reversed. This appears to mean that Bruno does not enjoy the intimacy with other people that his telepathy forces on him. However, Behringer refuses to do anything, and so Bruno's returned telepathy acts as another reversal of his circumstances. He is forced to see into the minds of others while stuck in the last place in the world he wants to be.

In the wake of losing the meningioma, which allowed for a barrier between himself and others, Bruno is distraught and wishes for the barrier to be replaced. However, since the meningioma has been destroyed, he sees the Berlin paving stone as a possible replacement. This is an important symbolic juxtaposition, as it further develops the paving stone as an artifact from Bruno's final moments of freedom in the life he had chosen for himself. Behringer's refusal to grant Bruno's wish reflects the tendency of Bruno's new environment to clash with his established self-image and force a new identity upon him. He is separated from the meningioma and the paving stone, meaning he is separated from his old life and identity. He attempts to resist the environment by using a post-surgical mask as a makeshift barrier, but as will be seen later in the novel, this desperate tactic is ineffective.

## Discussion Question 1

Examine the flashback that begins on page 140 and concerns Bruno's early life. What light does this flashback shed on Bruno's personality and his relationship with his supposed telepathic powers?



## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of Bruno's telepathy. Does it appear to be real or simply imagined? What does it seem to symbolize, and in what ways does it affect Bruno's interaction with his environment?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the importance of the post-surgical mask that Bruno insists on wearing. Why does Bruno appear to need it so urgently? What does this dynamic appear to symbolize?

## Vocabulary

monomaniacal, diligent, aneurism, caste, sluice, solipsist, vivacious, lapse, trivet, moot, intravenous, tedium, chasm, subservient, solicitude, assertion, preclude, focal, amorphous, sporadic, platitude, rarify, enunciate, recuperate, convulse, miasma, admonitory, fugue, disconcerted, divert, boorish, banter, periphery, intubate, culvert, munificent, cache, deference



## Pages 173 - 237

### Summary

Pages 173 – 197: Bruno is picked up by Tira Harpaz, who admits that Stolarsky is worried about a possible affair between herself and Bruno. She says nothing to rule out this possibility. After being dropped off at his apartment, Bruno goes back to Kropotkin's Sliders, where the employee expresses his strong dislike for Stolarsky, implying that he thinks Stolarsky is a greedy capitalist. The employee reveals that he is Bruno's neighbor in the Jack London apartment building. Later, Bruno visits the employee whose name is revealed to be Garris Plybon, in Plybon's apartment. There, Bruno re-encounters Beth Dennis (the clerk from Zodiac Media) and her girlfriend Alicia. They all claim to be anti-Stolarsky anarchists. They inquire about Bruno's life, and he says he has a girlfriend in Berlin. They offer to pay for a plane ticket to California for her out of Zodiac Media's operations money. Bruno later calls Madchen on her phone and asks her if she will come to America to help take care of him. Madchen, sensing a love connection between them, agrees to do so.

Pages 198 – 214: The next day, Tira visits Bruno again and in the course of conversation reveals that Stolarsky owns Kropotkin's Sliders, despite the restaurant's anti-capitalist theme. Plybon not only knows this, but he even does extra work for Stolarsky, despite their mutual antipathy. Tira drives them over to Chez Panisse, where Bruno worked as a young man, and they converse during the ride. Their conversation is awkward and full of misunderstandings, but each of them accepts these misunderstandings as a passably comfortable rapport. After sharing a dinner together at Chez Panisse, they go back to Bruno's apartment where they play strip backgammon and have a cursory, incomplete sexual encounter. She then tells Bruno that Stolarsky wants to see Bruno in his office soon, because Stolarsky's generosity has supposedly come to an end.

Pages 215 – 237: In Stolarsky's office at Zodiac Media, Stolarsky informs Bruno that he fired Beth for stealing company money to pay for Madchen's plane ticket. He then says that he wishes to humiliate Bruno, who had been so popular when they were young. He says Bruno must work in one of his stores to pay off his debt, and he must wear a Halloween mask while he works. Bruno agrees to this plan. Back at his apartment, he is greeted by Madchen, newly arrived from Berlin. She soothes Bruno by giving him a bath, and then they walk around the park while Madchen gives a cursory account of her life, with Bruno mentally filling in details. Bruno then tells Madchen that they need to get out of Berkeley, he proposes to win money for a car by gambling, but he says they should go see Beth's girlfriend Alicia first to ask after Beth's wellbeing. They are unable to find Alicia at the museum where she works, and when they get back to the apartment, Bruno says he is going out to make money gambling.

## Analysis

After his surgery, Bruno finds himself further assimilating into the environment of Berkeley, as his supposed telepathy appears to decrease his ability to remain emotionally aloof from others. First, he finds Tira's sexual and romantic advances becoming stronger, and he is unable to resist. Second, he finds himself fraternizing with Garris Plybon, Beth Dennis, and Alicia, who seem to represent the other side of Berkeley offensive atmosphere; while Stolarsky is the garish commercialism of the town, these other characters are its aimless anarchists, similarly off-putting to Bruno. However, despite Bruno's supposed antipathy for Berkeley and its inhabitants, his newfound need for emotional connection overrides his old habits of aloofness and further breaks down his old identity.

In light of this assimilation, Bruno calls Madchen in a desperate attempt at finding someone to help him, and their conversation reveals a surprisingly deep connection between them. This connection must have formed spontaneously on the ferry where they met. Bruno's willingness to ask someone in Europe for help demonstrates that his antipathy for Berkeley and the desperation of his situation now outweigh his desire to escape the ruins of his old life. However, this call for help also appears to be symptomatic of Bruno's newfound need for emotional connection. Moreover, the apparent purity and innocence of this connection seems contrast greatly with the confusing and possibly predatory relationships he forms with Stolarsky, Tira, and the other inhabitants of Berkeley.

Bruno's encounter with Tira Harpaz further complicates his relationship with Tira and Stolarsky. Tira and Stolarsky's open relationship seems to have caught Bruno in the middle, with Tira attracted to Bruno yet still somewhat disdainful of both men. It is still unclear why Tira and Stolarsky are so drawn to Bruno. Tira's attraction to Bruno appears to be just as mysterious as the attraction between Bruno and Madchen. Meanwhile, Stolarsky's ultimatum through Tira implies that his own motives will soon become clearer.

During Bruno's encounter with Stolarsky, Stolarsky's motives for helping Bruno seem to become clearer and are revealed to be somewhat sinister. Stolarsky appears to be chronically bored in his state of power and stability, and tormenting someone who had outshone him in their youths seems to give him some pleasure. Bruno is unable to escape Stolarsky's debt repayment plan, as Bruno has no means of supporting himself or fleeing Berkeley. In contrast, Bruno's relationship with Madchen in the following scene is the complete converse of his relationship with Stolarsky. Madchen appears to have no hidden motives for helping Bruno other than the ineffable connection of love that has formed between them. The cruelty and coldness of Madchen's father may have something to do with her need to help Bruno in his ever-worsening predicament.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Bruno's phone call with Madchen. How does this compare to their first interaction? In what ways does this second interaction characterize the development of their relationship?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the characters of Plybon, Beth, and Alicia. What appears to be their narrative function? Discuss what their relationship with Bruno is like, as well as their relationships with one another.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Madchen's backstory as given beginning on page 227. How do her experiences compare and contrast with Bruno's? What significances do their respective backstories have with regards to their relationship?

## Vocabulary

armature, refurbish, gaudy, causeway, allure, ostentatious, rigor, farce, cede, anodyne, nihilistic, vitality, abeyance, gangly, inchoate, battlement, abrade, nullification, fulmination, fathomless, goad, lore, emanate, surly, rupturing, pensive, incur, lithe, allude, filial, nominal, denizen, indiscernible, bereft, beneficiary, placate





## Pages 238 - 294

### Summary

Pages 238 – 259: Instead of going gambling, Bruno goes to Kropotkin's Sliders to work his first shift there. He wears the Halloween mask and noose provided by Stolarsky while learning from Plybon how to cook and serve the burgers. Plybon spouts anarchistic rhetoric while serving and informs Bruno that Stolarsky not only fired Beth, he evicted her and informed her dissertation committee at university of her theft. He also says that Stolarsky did not fire him as well because he sees an entertaining antagonist in Plybon. He soon leaves Bruno to manage the grill himself, and Madchen arrives, apparently pleased to discover that Bruno is here instead of gambling. The next day, Plybon and Beth recruit Bruno for a masked protest against Stolarsky, but the protest appears to gain little attention and accomplish nothing. Afterwards, Plybon tells Bruno that he saw Madchen get into Stolarsky's car and ride up the hill to Stolarsky's home.

Pages 260 – 278: Bruno borrows a bike and rides up the hill to confront Stolarsky. He throws the Berlin paving stone through the window and enters. He demands to know where Madchen is, and Stolarsky points out the hot tub outside, where Madchen is having a soak. Bruno demands that she leave with him, but Stolarsky points a gun at Bruno and says that Madchen is working for him now. Bruno reluctantly leaves and returns to Kropotkin's. There, out of frustration with his circumstances and Plybon's complete ineffectiveness as a rebel against Stolarsky, Bruno challenges Plybon to a game of backgammon. They play using the grill and burger patties as a makeshift set, but the burgers eventually burst into flames. In the ensuing fire, Bruno reveals to some bystanders that Stolarsky is the secret owner of Kropotkin's. Bruno and the bystanders then decide to go burn down as many of Stolarsky's stores as possible.

Pages 278 – 294: Tira picks up Bruno from prison and drives him to the airport, saying that Stolarsky no longer had any use for Bruno and that Bruno had "served a few purposes" (181). For example, Stolarsky was able to collect insurance money on the burned buildings. She also reveals that Madchen is being sent home on a different flight. Bruno sees that the person who paid for his plane ticket is Edgar Falk. The narrative then switches back to Singapore, where gamblers Dale Thurber and Tiago Alves have arranged a game of poker with Yik Tho Lim and a player known simply as "the Mummy" (284). The Mummy turns out to be Bruno, who winds a lot of money from Thurber and Alves with the help of his telepathic powers. Bruno appears to be working alongside Yik Tho Lim in this scheme and under the direction of Edgar Falk.

### Analysis

Bruno's conversation with Plybon during Bruno's first shift at Kropotkin's reveals the strange truth behind Plybon and Stolarsky's relationship. Stolarsky appears to keep



Plybon employed so that he will have an entertaining antagonist, similar to why he seems to have brought Bruno under his care. This dynamic is further highlighted by the anarchistic and anti-capitalistic theme of the Kropotkin's Sliders restaurant. Plybon and Bruno's reactions to their similar circumstances are vastly different, however. Plybon believes that he is the one truly in control, and that his relationship with Stolarsky benefits himself and is ultimately harmful for Stolarsky's business interests. Meanwhile, Bruno sees that both he and Plybon are completely under Stolarsky's control and powerless to harm him in any way. This point is demonstrated very clearly by the ineffective protest that follows, as well as the fact that Stolarsky so easily takes Madchen away to his home.

At Stolarsky's home, Bruno's inability to retrieve Madchen becomes clear. Stolarsky appears to have seduced her with various methods, including encouraging Madchen's drug addiction. Thus, Stolarsky has robbed Bruno of the last spot of hope in Bruno's life, as well as the last connection Bruno had to his life before being forced to return to Berkeley. The attempted arson of Stolarsky's property then seems to be Bruno's desperate final effort to strike back at Stolarsky. However, the fact that the fire is started in a confrontation with Plybon seems to suggest that Bruno's motives also include a frustration with the antagonistic, contradictory relationships that he has seen all over Berkeley. However, even this ends up benefitting Stolarsky, as he is able to collect insurance money on the properties.

As Bruno is finally sent back to Berlin due to the wills of both Stolarsky and Edgar Falk, Bruno appears no more in control of his own life than at the beginning of the novel. Stolarsky appears to have gotten all the use out of Bruno that he desires, and Bruno recognizes that he remains powerless. Back in Berlin, he uses his telepathy to cheat at poker, which is something he used to do before meeting Konrad and creating his persona of aloof refinement. Bruno appears to have accepted his new persona—that of the Mummy—and this appears to be another concession to Bruno's powerlessness. The fact that Edgar Falk paid for Bruno's ticket home seems to imply that Bruno is back under the control of Falk. Therefore, Bruno's willingness to make money in this way and to be his ultimate concession to his powerlessness.

## Discussion Question 1

What appears to be the ultimate narrative function of Garris Plybon? Discuss his relationships with Stolarsky and Bruno. What appears to be the true reality of these relationships?

## Discussion Question 2

Consider the novel from the point of view of Stolarsky and Tira. What do their goals appear to have been? Did these goals change or develop over time?



## Discussion Question 3

How has Bruno changed over the course of the novel? What do his circumstances and outlook appear to be at the end of the book, and how do these contrast with Bruno's character at the beginning?

## Vocabulary

rivulet, rime, congenial, regale, non sequitur, agitprop, mercurial, prerogative, vindictive, enigma, mirthless, demesne, circadian, impunity, artisan, pediment, vibrant, droll, cadre, abdicate, vantage, remnant, wield, lanky, absolution, ministration, emirate, roil, forlorn, incipient, panache, vicarious, sporadic, vertiginous



# Characters

## Alexander Bruno

Alexander Bruno is the protagonist of the novel. He is a professional backgammon player who travels the world and makes money playing against wealthy and overconfident backgammon enthusiasts. After a serious losing streak, Bruno collapses during a game in Berlin, and it is discovered that he has a cancer-like growth in his head. Because he has lost all his money in backgammon, he agrees to be flown home to Berkeley—which he has not visited in 30 years—by his high school acquaintance Keith Stolarsky, who also pays for the necessary medical procedures.

Over the course of the novel, the sophisticated persona that Bruno created in his youth is steadily worn away by his circumstances and the garish, commercialized environment of Berkeley. The removal of the cancer-like growth appears to result in the return of telepathic powers that Bruno had in his youth, but which he forcibly blocked out. At the end of the novel, he is forced to return to the control of his European handler, Edgar Falk, and Bruno makes a living using his telepathic powers to cheat at poker. Bruno is about 50 years old.

## Keith Stolarsky

Keith Stolarsky is an old high school acquaintance of Bruno's. They run into each other at a club in Singapore, and when Bruno is found to be ill, he offers to take care of Bruno's food, lodging, and medical expenses. However, this later appears to be a ploy to make Bruno indebted to Stolarsky so that Stolarsky may humiliate Bruno and use him for his own purposes.

Stolarsky acts as a foil to Bruno in several ways: he is rude, loud, tackily-dressed, does not care about refinement or tasteful aesthetics, and he is also very wealthy, whereas Bruno's wealth is very fleeting and generally belongs to Edgar Falk. Stolarsky owns many retail stores and rental properties in Berkeley.

## Tira Harpaz

Tira Harpaz is about the same age as Stolarsky and Bruno. She is Stolarsky's long-term girlfriend, although their relationship is a rather open one. She is very attracted to Bruno and flirts with him often. She has a somewhat sarcastic and playful demeanor, and her relationship with Stolarsky is considerably antagonistic because they often sleep with other people. She is originally from St. Louis, Missouri and studied as a graduate student in rhetoric, but she has not finished the program.



## **Madchen Abplanalp**

Madchen is a woman of about Bruno's age whom Bruno meets on a ferry in Berlin. They flirt and exchange numbers, and they appear to form a spontaneous love connection. When Bruno calls her from Berkeley and asks her to fly in from Berlin to help take care of him, she agrees. Madchen appears to be a professional prostitute, and she is present in a mask during the backgammon game where Bruno initially collapses, although Bruno does not know at the time that it is Madchen. Madchen ultimately comes under Stolarsky's control, apparently due to her drug addiction, but Stolarsky quickly sends her back to Berlin.

## **Edgar Falk**

Edgar Falk is an international businessman who appears to be involved in criminal activities. He is Bruno's handler and manager for a period of time in Europe and Asia, setting up backgammon games for Bruno and then taking part of the profits. He is considerably older than Bruno. Bruno soon comes to resent Falk's control over him, so when he flies to Berkeley, he tries to take the opportunity to sever his connection with Falk. However, Bruno eventually ends up back in Falk's control, making money at poker with one of Falk's business associates, Yik Tho Lim.

## **Yik Tho Lim**

Yik Tho Lim is a business associate of Edgar Falk. Lim appears to cooperate on criminal enterprises with Falk. He is from Singapore, and he surprisingly wins against Bruno in a game of Backgammon. This episode marks to be the beginning of Bruno's bad luck in the novel. At the end of the book, Lim works with Falk and Bruno to make money playing poker.

## **Wolf-Dirk Kohler**

Wolf-Dirk Kohler is a German businessman who made his fortune buying up properties in East Germany after the destruction of the Berlin wall. He plays backgammon against Bruno in Berlin soon after Bruno loses to Yik Tho Lim in Singapore. Halfway through the game, Kohler begins winning by a large margin, possibly due to distractions he set up, which may or may not have been intentional on his part. The game ultimately ends, however, when Bruno passes out and Kohler sends Bruno to a hospital.

## **Noah Behringer**

Noah Behringer is a neurosurgeon in San Francisco, California. He has developed an innovative new surgery in which the face is removed so that the front of the brain can be operated on. Because Bruno's cancer-like growth is at the front of his brain, he goes to



Behringer for this operation. Behringer appears to be an aging hippie. He is obsessed with Jimi Hendrix and always plays Hendrix's music during operations. He used to practice medicine primarily at music concerts. On the outside, he appears rather calm and easygoing, but his inner thoughts reveal to the reader that he is somewhat arrogant, conceited, and grandiose.

## June

June is Bruno's mother. When Bruno is a young boy, he and his mother move to Berkeley, California so that she can become part of a hippie commune led by a man who calls himself a guru. Bruno grows to despise her for her generally lax, carefree ways, and after he gets a job as a waiter at a local fine dining restaurant, he moves out to live with the other waiters. Bruno never sees her again after he leaves Berkeley to travel the world, but he sometimes wonders where she is.

## Konrad

Konrad was a manager at Chez Panisse, the fine dining restaurant in Berkeley where Bruno worked as a waiter in his youth. Konrad introduced Bruno to backgammon and trained him on the ways of refinement, sophistication, and aloofness. When Bruno returns to Berkeley 30 years later, he does not see Konrad anywhere, even when having a meal at Chez Panisse.

## Garris Plybon

Garris Plybon is the primary employee of Kropotkin's Sliders, an anarchy-themed restaurant that is secretly owned by Keith Stolarsky. Despite knowing that Stolarsky owns the restaurant, Plybon is very outspoken against Stolarsky and against capitalism in general. Plybon even does odd jobs for Stolarsky in addition to his work at Kropotkin's Sliders. Plybon also lives in the Stolarsky-owned Jack London apartments. Despite his reliance on Stolarsky, Plybon despises him. Stolarsky appears to keep Plybon around because he is an entertaining antagonist.

## Beth Dennis

Beth Dennis is an employee at a Stolarsky-owned store called Zodiac Media. She is a graduate student preparing her dissertation, but after she steals money from the store to pay for a plane ticket to bring Madchen to Berkeley, Stolarsky fires her and tells her dissertation committee about the theft. Beth Dennis then helps organize an anti-Stolarsky protest, although it does not end up being very effective.



## Dale Thurber and Tiago Alves

Dale Thruber and Tiago Alves are two wealthy poker enthusiasts who appear only at the end of the novel. They spend a night playing poker against Yik Tho Lim and Alexander Bruno. They lose much money, since Bruno uses his telepathic powers to cheat. Tiago Alves leaves the game early to go have sex with Thurber's wife. Bruno senses this through telepathy and subtly lets Thurber know, again with telepathy.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Backgammon

In this novel, backgammon symbolizes luck, fate, and control over one's own life. Backgammon is a two-person board game played with dice and wooden pegs. It is a game of chance where players strategize the movement of their pegs based on rolls of the dice. Unlike card games, everything in play is visible to both players. The outcome of the games relies heavily on chance in addition to player strategy. In the narrative, backgammon acts as the physical representation of luck and control. As Bruno's situation worsens and becomes less in his control of his life, his ability to win games of backgammon also decreases. Backgammon is also presented as a very gentlemanly game, so Bruno's declining success in backgammon also corresponds with the degradation of Bruno's crafted gentlemanly persona.

## Luck

In this novel, the concept of luck is closely connected with the game of backgammon and symbolizes the ideas of success and control. In the first chapter of the book, the narration says "Bruno had for his entire life associated backgammon with candor, the dice not determining fate so much as revealing character" (11). Therefore, luck appears to represent an expression of the characters' personalities. Bruno is so adept at backgammon because he has developed a personality of collected control and aloofness, but his luck fades when he becomes unable to maintain and express that personality. As his luck fades, he loses control over himself and his life, and thus he also loses control over the backgammon board.

## Telepathy

The concept of telepathy appears to symbolize Bruno's intimacy with those around him. The novel never definitively states whether or not Bruno truly has telepathic abilities, leaving both possibilities open. After he originally supposedly gains his telepathic powers, he cultivates a personality of aloofness to separate himself from others, and at the same time, he blocks out his telepathy. When the power is forced on him again after his surgery, he wishes for the procedure to be reversed so that he is not forced to experience this strange intimacy with others. However, the operation is not reversed, and so Bruno finds himself making connections with characters like Plybon, Beth, Alicia, and especially Madchen.

## The blot

the blot, along with the growth, appears to symbolize the distance Bruno has attempted to put between himself and other people. The blot is a blind spot in Bruno's vision that





he notices on the morning before he plays backgammon against Wolf-Dirk Kohler. It appears to be related to the cancer-like growth at the front of Bruno's brain, for the blot disappears after the growth is removed. The blot is replaced by an area of excessive brightness and clarity, and Bruno's unwanted telepathic powers reappear after the surgery as well. The meningioma served to block out his telepathic powers and the intimacy those powers forced upon him.

## **Berlin paving stone**

The Berlin paving stone symbolizes Bruno's wish to return to his old life, where he was tied to no one and was able to live out a life of sophistication and mystery away from Berkeley. After Bruno is first discharged from the Berlin hospital, he finds himself bleeding from the nose, and he uses the blood to mark a cube-shaped paving stone like a backgammon die. He carries this with him everywhere, and after his operation in San Francisco, he wants Behringer to use the stone to replace the meningioma so Bruno's telepathy will stop. Later, Bruno even uses the stone to smash open a window in Stolarsky's house, symbolizing the clash between Bruno's desired life and his current circumstances.

## **"Abide" shirts**

The "Abide" shirts symbolize Bruno's gradually changing identity. When Bruno gets new clothes at Zodiac Media, he buys several shirts that read "Abide," which is a reference to the philosophy of the lazy, easygoing protagonist of the film "The Big Lebowski." Wearing this shirt represents the beginning of Berkeley's influence over Bruno and the subsequent loss of his cultivated identity. He gradually embraces the shirts and the easygoing philosophy they evoke, even though this is in direct conflict with the persona he has assumed for 30 years.

## **Masks**

The concept of masks, both literal and figurative, appears repeatedly throughout the novel and symbolizes the barriers between the world and one's inner self. Bruno's persona is referred to as a mask, and after that persona appears to be degraded by Berkeley and then removed surgically, he demands a replacement in the form a post-surgical medical mask. This represents his need to place distance between himself and others. Masks also represent the subsequent malleability of Bruno's personality and obligations, as demonstrated by Stolarsky forcing Bruno to wear a Halloween mask while working at Kropotkin's Sliders. The other major example of the mask motif is when Madchen appears in a sexual submission mask during Bruno's game against Kohler, although Bruno does not know at the time that this is Madchen. Madchen's mask seems to symbolize the bad luck and meandering nature of her own past, which corresponds with the subsequent circumstances of Bruno, her love interest.



## Money

In the novel, money symbolizes power, influence, and the obstacles to attaining either. Bruno's relationship with money is presented as very tenuous. Even when he wins money at backgammon, he does not really consider it his own. He has won it from people who earned it, and in his arrangement with Edgar Falk, Falk likely takes much of Bruno's winnings. In Berkeley, Bruno is entirely reliant on cash handouts from Stolarsky. Therefore, Bruno's lack of money is directly connected with his inability to determine his own fate during the novel.

## Capitalism and Anarchism

The conflict between capitalism and anarchism is used by the novel to symbolize social barriers and class struggle. Stolarsky and Plybon represent mutual antagonists, where the former embodies capitalism and business interests, and the latter represents working-class anarchism. The novel presents this conflict in a somewhat humorous and ridiculous manner, with each character acting as a caricature of their own philosophy. Plybon surrounds himself with over-the-top communist imagery in Kropotkin's Sliders, and Stolarsky makes his money building ridiculous stores that sell tacky, commercialized merchandise.

## Travel

Travel symbolizes freedom and self-governance. Traveling the world is an integral part of Bruno's cultivated persona. He stays away from Berkeley for 30 years because he does not wish to have roots anywhere, and Berkeley represents the place where he had roots as a child and young man. This desire to travel directly relates to Bruno's aversion to intimacy with others, as his constant movement prevents him from developing deep relationships with others. His obligation to stay in Berkeley before and after his surgery acts as a factor in the degradation of his cultivated persona.



# Settings

## Berlin

Berlin is the capital of Germany and the first setting given in the novel. Bruno has arrived there recently after a major backgammon loss in Singapore, and he attempts to set things right by playing against a wealthy Berlin real-estate speculator named Wolf-Dirk Kohler. After Bruno collapses during their game, he is sent to a nearby hospital where the doctors discover that Bruno has a brain tumor. Bruno also meets Madcehn in Berlin, with whom he flirts, exchanges numbers, and seem to form a spontaneous connection.

## Singapore

Singapore is a sovereign city-state in southeast Asia. There, Alexander Bruno runs in to old high school acquaintance Keith Stolarsky and spends a night playing backgammon against him. The next day, Bruno plays against Yik Tho Lim, a business partner of Edgar Falk, in a game Falk had arranged. Bruno surprisingly loses this game, marking the beginning of the reversal of Bruno's luck. Bruno's run-in with Stolarsky and his subsequent loss foreshadow the steady unraveling of Bruno's life and persona, which continues over the course of the novel.

## Berkeley

Alexander Bruno first lived in Berkeley, California as a young boy, when his mother moved them there to live in a commune. Berkeley represents everything about Bruno's past that he dislikes. It reminds him of his childhood with his irresponsible mother, and it is filled with garish commercial buildings that clash directly with Bruno's own preferred aesthetic of subtlety and refinement. When he returns to Berkeley 30 years after leaving, Keith Stolarsky owns many properties in Berkeley, and the city represents a domain where Stolarsky is in control, both of Bruno and many of Berkeley's other denizens.

## Telegraph Avenue

Telegraph Avenue is a street in Berkeley, California. It appears to be where most of Stolarsky's businesses are located. Among these businesses are Zodiac Media, Zombie Burger, and Kropotkin's Sliders. Telegraph Avenue appears to be Berkeley's commercial center, filled with businesses like Stolarsky's that parody the unsubtle aesthetics of many modern commercial franchises in America.



## Kropotkin's Sliders

Of all the businesses that Stolarsky owns, Bruno spends the most time in Kropotkin's Sliders. At first, this is because he believes it to be a rival burger chain not owned by Stolarsky, but this turns out to be untrue. The primary employee, Garris Plybon, despises Stolarsky and lives in the same Stolarsky-owned apartment building where Stolarsky is allowing Bruno to stay. The restaurant embodies Plybon's anarchistic, anti-capitalistic philosophies in that it is covered with communist-style propaganda. However, the fact that Kropotkin's Sliders is a business—in addition to being owned by Plybon's enemy Stolarsky—makes this anarchistic theme highly ironic.

## The Jack London Apartments

The Jack London Apartments comprise a single apartment building, which is owned by Keith Stolarsky. While Bruno is in Berkeley, Stolarsky allows Bruno to reside there without paying rent. Garris Plybon lives across the hall from Bruno, and they sometimes gather in Plybon's apartment with Beth and Alicia to plot against Stolarsky. The Jack London also serves as the site of Bruno's romantic encounters with Madchen and Tira. The Jack London apartments have an ironic name; Jack London was a famous fiction writer whose works primarily took place in the undisturbed wilderness, but the Jack London Apartments are located in the heart of commercialized, urban Berkeley.

## Zuni

Zuni is a restaurant owned by Keith Stolarsky. It is located near the Oakland airport, where Bruno arrives in California. The restaurant attempts to mimic the atmosphere of a fine dining experience, but its facade is broken in several ways, especially when the unruly Stolarsky dines there with guests. Stolarsky takes both Bruno and Madchen to dine there after each of them land in California, and in this way, Zuni functions as a gateway for establishing the concept of Stolarsky's influence throughout the local area.

## Chez Panisse

Chez Panisse is a fine dining restaurant where Bruno works as a young man after moving out of his mother's home. At Chez Panisse, he meets Konrad, one of the restaurant's managers. Konrad helps Bruno cultivate a persona of sophistication and aloofness, and therefore, Chez Panisse is in many ways the birth site for the persona that Bruno affects during his travels around the world.

## Hospitals

Bruno is shown to be in a hospital at three different points in the novel: at the Berlin hospital called Charité after he collapses, in a hospital in San Francisco for his brain



surgery, and in a hospital in Berkeley being treated for burns as an 11-year-old. These hospitals each act as sites of great transformation for Bruno. He first discovers his telepathic powers in the hospital as an 11-year-old, he is diagnosed with a severe tumor at the Charité, and his telepathic powers return to him after his operation at the hospital in San Francisco. Therefore, they seem to represent an inherent destruction and remaking of Bruno's character.

## **Stolarsky's house**

Stolarsky's house only serves as the setting for one scene in the novel, but that scene is the climactic final in-person confrontation between Bruno and Stolarsky. Stolarsky's large, expensive house stands as yet another testament to Stolarsky's wealth, and even though Bruno is able to smash a window and break in, he is unable to rescue Madchen from Stolarsky, who has apparently brought her under his influence. Therefore, Stolarsky's house also represents the center of Stolarsky's influence.

# Themes and Motifs

## Identity

The narrative arc of the novel acts as a destruction of the protagonist's sense of self, and in this way, the book seeks to investigate the origin and meaning of identity. Bruno's preferred persona, one of aloofness, sophistication, control, and emotional distance, is something he artificially constructed with the help of his former acquaintance Konrad. Bruno then affected that persona until it apparently came to reflect his own sense of self. In reacting against the environment of Berkeley and his family connection with his mother, Bruno decided to inhabit an entirely new identity and practiced it until it came to completely define him. However, the novel repeatedly questions whether or not this can truly be considered Bruno's identity, for it often alludes to this persona as a mask, one that is forcibly removed by the effects of surgery and returning to Berkeley. Bruno starts to dress differently, act differently, and even question many aspects of his own identity. Therefore, the novel poses this question of the origins of identity to the reader.

The novel seems to suggest that environment and circumstances can have a greater affect on one's identity than one's choices or self-image. Bruno's forced return to Berkeley and his forced subservience to Stolarsky and Falk appear to define him more than his own choices are able to. His experience of the world and his methods for interacting with it are radically changed once he loses the ability to self-govern or choose his own environment. He slowly becomes complacent with his setting and circumstances, and even his attempts to thwart his reversal of fortune are foiled by circumstance and the wills of others. Bruno's identity as someone who does as he pleases is erased when he becomes indebted to Falk and then to Stolarsky. In the end, Bruno can only submit to circumstances and play the part required of him, namely the servant of Edgar Falk once Stolarsky sends Bruno back to his former manager.

While Bruno's fate is ultimately an unhappy one, the novel suggests that forced changes in identity can sometimes be beneficial. For example, much of Bruno's chosen persona is based around emotional distance from others. However, the return of his telepathy increase his tendency to connect with others. He forms bonds of friendship with some of the locals, but most importantly, he forms a romantic connection with Madchen that gives him some hope in his time of despair. Ultimately, his relationship with Madchen is unable to withstand his circumstances, but the narrative does present it as a bright spot in his life, thus arguing for certain benefits of being forced to reconsider one's own personality and identity.

## Environment

Multiple important plot points revolve around changes in Bruno's environment and location, and in this way, the novel explores the ways in which one's environment can influence one's sense of self and experience of the world. Berkeley, California is



described in such a way as to highlight its major aesthetic and atmospheric differences with the types of environments that attracted Bruno during his international travels. Berkeley is highly commercial, populated with many distasteful chain stores like the one owned by Stolarsky. It is loud and crowded and populated by very casual and easygoing people. However, Bruno has preferred places of a certain taste and class, like the upscale club in Singapore where he just so happened to run in to Stolarsky. Bruno's profession placed him in proximity to many wealthy people, but in Berkeley, he is placed in proximity to the aforementioned younger, poorer, and more casual types of people. Bruno appears highly affected by this change in environment, as the surrounding culture and atmosphere changes his image and outlook.

The novel also explores one's ability to change one's environment without having to relocate. When Bruno is stuck in Berkeley, both as a boy and as a middle-aged man, he attempts to alter his environment in various ways. As a boy, he works at the fine dining restaurant Chez Panisse, which provides the closest thing to an upscale atmosphere that Bruno is able to find in Berkeley. When he is forced to return to Berkeley as a middle-aged man, he seeks to mitigate the effect of his environment by seeking out relationships that will give him a firmer sense of self in the face of environmental influence. Bruno is drawn to Plybon for his antipathy against Stolarsky, the perceived controller of Bruno's environment. This motivation also applies to Bruno's friendships with Beth and Alicia. Meanwhile, Madchen's arrival represents Bruno's last attempt to connect with his life in Europe and Asia, and even though his connection with Madchen is thwarted, it does succeed in allowing him to temporarily block out the effects of his surroundings.

The novel appears to treat one's environment as a reflection of one's own preferences, as well as a reflection of the things that a person cannot choose. When Bruno is in control of his life, his environment reflects his own tastes and self-image, but when he is not in control, the environment reflects the tastes and personalities of those who control him. Stolarsky appears to be a living embodiment of Berkeley, the place where he has an inordinate amount of control. Similarly, the refined back rooms of Singapore reflect the personalities of Edgar Falk and Yik Tho Lim, both of whom hold influence over Bruno at the end of the novel, even after he no longer appears to identify with his old life.

## Luck and Fate

Over the course of the novel, luck appears to be analogous to one's ability to self-govern and decide one's own fate. Bruno's loss of luck at backgammon is parallel to the loss of control he experiences over his own life. As a game, backgammon relies heavily on chance, so Bruno's long history of success at the game appears to correspond to some preternatural luck. For 30 years, he is able to move about the world freely and remain independent of the will of others, but under the control of Edgar Falk, his luck begins to wane along with his ability to determine his own fate. Bruno never does regain his success in backgammon, as his games against Tira and Plybon demonstrate. He is forced to abandon the game altogether in favor of poker, a game in which he can cheat



using his telepathic powers. This appears to signify Bruno's ultimate submission to his lack of luck and free will.

However, this parallel between fate and games of chance does not always hold true for other characters, whose luck manifests in other ways. Stolarsky, for example, has no luck or skill at backgammon, but he has made a fortune on real estate and retail, an accomplishment that to him seems both effortless and unfulfilling. He is able to determine his own economic fate and the fates of others, and the only area in which he appears to have little luck is in his ability to find lasting peace and happiness. Another example would be Edgar Falk, who possesses large wealth and whose luck at games of chance is entirely dependent on Bruno's performance. Falk's influence over Bruno ultimately allows him to change luck in his favor by forcing Bruno to alter his game and methods. The novel's characters who possess the greatest luck and influence are able to derail Bruno's good fortune by exerting their power and the fruits of their own good fortune. Thus, the novel further establishes luck simply as an expression of one's ability to determine one's own fate.

Overall, regardless of individual characters, the novel presents the concept of luck to underscore the idea that none of the characters have full control over their own fate, they simply have more or less control relative to other characters, and this creates dynamics of influence and submission. No character is entirely isolated from bad fortune. Stolarsky never seems truly happy, and Edgar Falk must suffer at least temporary consequences from Bruno's backgammon losses. However, simply by virtue of having enjoyed good fortune over their lives that is far greater (at least in a monetary sense) than that of Bruno, Plybon, Beth, Alicia, or Madchen, powerful characters like Stolarsky and Falk may exercise their will more freely, both within their private lives and over the lives of the less fortunate.

## Relationships

One of the main factors of Bruno's affected persona is that he keeps himself aloof from intimacy with other people. Thus, one main consequence of the degradation of this persona over the course of the novel is that Bruno develops a number of friendships and romantic entanglements. Once Bruno's meningioma is removed and his telepathy returns (thus symbolizing the forced removal of his aloof personality) Bruno finds himself drawn to the people around him. He forms friendships that would have seemed unfeasible in his earlier life. He finds himself spending time with Garris Plybon, Beth Dennis, and her girlfriend Alicia, all of whom embody the anarchistic, alternative atmosphere of the denizens of Berkeley. Bruno also finds himself entertaining advances from Tira Harpaz before desperately reaching out to Madchen. This new tendency to search for meaning in relationships with others represents a major character change in Bruno.

The most important of these relationships is his romantic relationship with Madchen, as Bruno feels that Madchen is the only person who truly loves and understands him. This is somewhat surprising in a narrative sense, as Bruno and Madchen barely know each





other, and yet Madchen is willing to fly to the other side of the world to help Bruno. In this way, the novel appears to argue for the necessity for romantic relationships despite the inexplicable ways in which they form. It is also important to note that Bruno and Madchen never actually engage in any sexual activities, including kissing, while Bruno does have a sexual episode with Tira Harpaz, whom he generally dislikes and distrusts. This appears to stand as a testament for the importance of emotional love and understanding over physical lust.

In terms of relationships, the novel unfortunately ends in tragedy, as Bruno's friendships and his romance with Madchen are dissolved by the overwhelming influence of Stolarsky and Falk. In the end, the relationships that determine Bruno's fate are the ones he most wishes to cast off. He spends the entirety of the novel attempting to shake of the influence of Stolarsky and Falk, but he is passed back and forth between them with no say in what happens to him. While this is unfortunate for Bruno, this tragedy does serve to highlight the importance of truly meaningful and fulfilling relationships. Bruno's romance with Madchen is unsustainable in his circumstances, but it is no less important to him and his sense of happiness.

## **Anarchism vs. Capitalism**

The motif of capitalism in itself is well established both by Bruno's economic hardships and the great wealth of characters like Kohler, Lim, and Stolarsky. However, this theme is further complicated by the narrative importance of Garris Plybon and Kropotkin's Sliders, the anarchism-themed restaurant where Plybon works. Garris Plybon's anarchistic philosophy directly mirrors his antipathy for Stolarsky. However, Kropotkin's Sliders is a business owned by Stolarsky, and therefore Plybon only remains employed at Stolarsky's behest. Ironically, despite Plybon and Stolarsky's mutual antipathy, they both appear content to remain locked in their stalemate, their competition appearing to give the two men some perverse sense of purpose. In addition, Plybon also gets employment and an apartment out of the deal, while Stolarsky gets an entertaining antagonist over whom he can feel superior. This shared hypocrisy appears to satirize both sides of the conflict and highlight the ridiculousness of these two characters.

Through Bruno, the narrative treats the conflict with a greater sense of tragedy. The main material factor in Bruno's loss of control over his life is his lack of funds. He becomes indebted to Stolarsky and Falk, which gives them power over him. This is in some ways an extension of Bruno's circumstances over the course of his entire life, as he has never been very wealthy, and even as a successful backgammon player, he never felt that he truly earned money in the same way that his wealthy opponents had done so through their business interests. Bruno never felt much ownership over the relatively small amount of money he made in his gambling exploits, and so as soon as his luck collapsed, so did his tenuous grasp on his own circumstances. Eventually, in Berkeley, he attempts to react against this dynamic through Plybon's anarchistic philosophy, but this is shown to be ineffective and somewhat ridiculous, as the closest he comes to a true rebellion is an ineffective protest and acts of arson that only end up benefitting Stolarsky.

No matter what Bruno does to react against the system, either by reacting against it or trying to succeed within it, neither he nor any of the other characters are able to improve their positions or dismantle any part of the socio-economic structure. Bruno, Beth, Alicia, Plybon, and Madchen all stay firmly under the control of Stolarsky while in Berkeley, and Bruno is never able to fully escape the control of Edgar Falk. In this way, the novel appears to be criticizing economic structures, as well as satirizing the ineffective means of rebellion that serve as the only means of action by the poor and disenfranchised.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is narrated by a third-person narrator, but for most of the story, the narrator relates only Bruno's thoughts and experiences. Therefore, while the narrator is a third-person entity technically separate from the protagonist, it essentially functions as if Bruno himself were narrating. The narrator never gives the thoughts or perspectives of other characters except for a few instances, but even these instances could arguably count as Bruno's perspective as well by way of Bruno's supposed telepathic powers. When the narrative describes Bruno's operation from Behringer's point of view, this seems like a perspective shift, but when Bruno says afterwards that he experienced the operation through Behringer's perspective using telepathy, this reveals that the operation may still have been through Bruno's perspective, only seeming like Behringer's perspective because the two points of view had merged telepathically. The other perspective shifts come at the end of the novel, when two short chapters are told from Alves' and Thruber's perspectives respectively, but again, since Bruno's telepathy is referenced shortly after, then the thoughts of Alves and Thurber may have been relayed through Bruno's telepathic powers. Therefore, the book is arguably presented entirely through Bruno's perspective, despite the fact that the perspectives of three other characters are technically presented.

The presentation of the narrative through Bruno's individual point of view helps to emphasize the feeling of confusion and powerlessness that steadily builds throughout the novel. Bruno's situation becomes increasingly uncertain, and his circumstances become increasingly dire, with no clear paths to freedom or control. In addition, it makes sense that the narrative would be limited third-person as opposed to being first-person, since a large part of Bruno's story is the onset of major identity crises. As Bruno's persona is degraded by his environment and circumstances, he becomes less sure of who he really is, and the fact that the narrator and the protagonist are never allowed to fully merge preserves the feeling that Bruno is never truly known, either by himself or the reader.

## Language and Meaning

The novel deals with many ambiguous circumstances, from uncertain relationships between characters to shifting identities to the uncertainty of whether Bruno truly has telepathic powers. Thus, the language and tone of the novel mirror this ambiguity. The limited third-person narration never fully merges with Bruno, as his identity and impressions of his surroundings are constantly in flux, but the narration mostly operates in terms of Bruno's confusions and uncertainties. It distinctly presents the reader with instances in which Bruno questions himself and his surroundings, but when giving accounts of other characters' actions, it filters those actions through Bruno's inability to interpret them. The narration never clearly states the thoughts or motivations of other



characters based on their actions, because Bruno can only observe what others say or do, and he finds himself generally unable to clearly discern the other person's thoughts based on the observations.

The tone of the novel appears to move back and forth between dark and satirical, since the main character's plight appears quite a dire and uncertain one, but the novel remains intent on satirizing both the book's settings and characters. Characters are often presented as ridiculous caricatures, and the novel presents them in a humorous way while also maintaining the air of possible menace that they invoke. This air of satire also applies to the garish commercialism of downtown Berkeley, and even to the affected persona of refinement that Bruno wishes to maintain for himself. Ultimately, the novel functions as a satirical tragicomedy in which the ambiguity of Bruno's situation and the grotesqueness of his surroundings are reflected in the tone and language of the narration, as well as the characterization of the settings and characters.

## Structure

*A Gambler's Anatomy* has a generally linear and straightforward structure, apart from a few distinct flashbacks. Two of these flashbacks concern the years in which Bruno originally lived in Berkeley as a child and young adult. The other flashback concerns the much more recent events of his time in Singapore; the events in Singapore take place just before he comes to Berlin, but they are shown to the reader after the bulk of his time in Berlin has already been conveyed by the narrative. For the most part, however, the narrative is a linear progression: Bruno appears to fall ill in Berlin, he is diagnosed with a tumor in a Berlin hospital, he flies to California for his operation, and he stays in Berkeley until Stolarsky and Falk force him on a plane out of the United States. The instances of nonlinearity serve to slowly reveal Bruno's backstory, which Bruno himself is so eager to never revisit. However, because he is forced to return to his hometown, he cannot help but revisit these memories. The story of the book largely involves the breaking down of the persona that Bruno crafted shortly before leaving Berkeley, but the influence of the town steadily undoes his cultivated identity.

The novel has one additional structural break that appears at the end of the novel. Just before Bruno boards his plane out of California, he sees that his ticket has been paid for by his recent but former business manager Edgar Falk. The novel then jumps ahead a significant amount of time to when Bruno is working with Falk again. This gives the reader space to imagine how the consequences of his recent time in Berkeley have affected his current situation and his attitude towards that situation. He seems resigned to his new life and the lack of control and identity therein, and because his transition into that life is not shown, it encourages the reader to imagine that transition and its thematic significances.

## Quotes

Luck is the prince," said Bruno. "I am its servant."  
-- Alexander Bruno ("One," Section 2)

**Importance:** In its original context, this quote simply serves as a platitude by which Bruno demonstrates his refinement and sophistication. However, over the course of the novel, this idea becomes terrifyingly pertinent as Bruno loses more and more control over his life.

I don't want to be deep, the child thought. I want to quiet the voices, the crazy shrieking voices of all of you, June included. I want to be like that bird.  
-- Alexander Bruno ("One," Section 2)

**Importance:** This quote provides significant foreshadowing regarding Bruno's need for distance from others. The reference to voices seems to foreshadow the symbolic function of the blot in blocking out his telepathy, or blocking out the thoughts and voices of others.

His resentments were those of a slave. Was it time to break away?  
-- Narration ("Two," Section 3)

**Importance:** This quote helps characterize Bruno's relationship with Edgar Falk as an ambiguous dynamic of master and servant, but it also foreshadows Bruno's ultimate fate. He is unable to break away from Falk as it is revealed that Bruno has little-to-no control over the entire course of the novel.

He marveled at his twenty-four-hour descent, from that first disquieting glance of Stolarsky in the Smoker's Club to this homely immersion into Americana-style cocktail-hour debauchery.  
-- Narration ("Two," Section 3)

**Importance:** This line helps develop Bruno's antipathy for the unruly, tacky, and unrefined nature that Stolarsky represents. Moreover, it foreshadows the same antipathy that Bruno holds for the similar atmosphere that Stolarsky's domain, the city of Berkeley, embodies.

I am exiting the wider world, to return to my home of bullying, psychosis, and bad taste.  
-- Alexander Bruno ("Four," Section 1)

**Importance:** This further develops the antagonistic relationship between Bruno and his hometown, hinting at the reasons for why Bruno has stayed away for 30 years. Bullying appears to correspond with Stolarsky, psychosis with his uncontrolled telepathy, and bad taste with the city's general aesthetic of garish commercialism.



I can't go around in Berkeley anymore for risk of being lynched by my enemies, from the fields of both real estate and proletarian revolution.

-- Keith Stolarsky ("Four," Section 2)

**Importance:** This quote helps establish the antagonistic relationship between Stolarsky and the denizens of the city where he owns so much property. This dynamic also seems to function as an extension of Stolarsky's unruly, somewhat offensive personality.

He only felt that he craved destinations, anywhere far from where he was. To hear a place named was to have this desire given a focal point.

-- Narration ("Sixteen," Section 1)

**Importance:** This moment, which is presented during a flashback to Bruno's childhood, introduces Bruno's sense of wanderlust that compels him to travel the world for 30 years without returning home. This trait appears to be connected to Bruno's attraction to sophistication and aloofness.

When Bruno sealed himself in an internal distance, Konrad taught him that same distance could be externalized, worn as a cloak of unapproachability, rendering you hypnotic to others. The result was to induce the same longing you concealed.

-- Narration ("Sixteen," Section 1)

**Importance:** This flashback, which recounts Bruno's mentorship under the training of his friend Konrad, presents the origin of Bruno's cultivated personality. Bruno creates a new persona of refinement and aloofness, and it is this persona that steadily is broken down by the events of the novel.

At the last layer it felt as if they'd lifted Bruno's nose and cheeks away to expose his uncooked skull.

-- Narration ("Sixteen," Section 2)

**Importance:** This refers to the moment after Bruno's surgery when his bandages are removed. After his surgery, Bruno feels like he has no face, which is why he then insists on always wearing a mask. The logic of this appears to be that the removal of the blot signifies the removal of his ability to create emotional distance, and so he needs a mask to act as a substitute.

Stolarsky never lays a bet with less than a ten-to-one payout. It may appear he's doing charity, but trust me, you're human capital.

-- Garris Plybon ("Sixty-Four," Section 4)

**Importance:** This statement by Plybon to Bruno emphasizes the idea that Stolarsky never intended to be charitable to Bruno, and that he always intended to use Bruno's helplessness as a way of gaining control over him. The irony of Plybon's statement is that Stolarsky seems to have an equal amount of control over Plybon.



Bruno had never been out of sight of Stolarsky's operatives, he realized too late. He might even be an operative himself."

-- Narration ("Gammon," Section 3)

**Importance:** This enigmatic thought by Bruno appears to have multiple functions. First of all, it highlights the breakdown of Bruno's identity. He is no longer able to perceive his own self because he has lost his purpose and control. Secondly, it highlights the complete power that Stolarsky appears to have over Bruno, even during Bruno's final attempt at rebellion.

You served a few purposes." She wouldn't meet his eyes. "It came cheap enough.

-- Tira Harpaz ("Gammon," Section 4)

**Importance:** This statement from Tira to Bruno emphasizes the ultimate ambiguity of Stolarsky's motivations, but it also emphasizes the multiplicity of possible explanations. Tira and the narrative appear to imply that any of Stolarsky's possible motives for helping Bruno may have been his true motives, but it also implies that there may have been other motivations as well.