

# **Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture Study Guide**

**Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture by Douglas Coupland**

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# Plot Summary

This novel, perceived as revolutionary at the time it was published in the early 1990s, uses the individual stories as three good friends as metaphoric representation of the story of an entire generation - Generation X, young people born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As the narrative explores the ways the three friends struggle to define themselves and their relationships, it also explores themes related to the function and nature of storytelling, the tension between materialism and self-expression, and the power/value of friendship.

The first part of the novel (narrated in first person by protagonist Andy) focuses on the conversations that take place over a picnic lunch between life-confused Andy and his equally confused friends Dag and Claire. As they eat their grilled chicken in a run-down suburb of Palm Springs (where they all live), they indulge in their habit of telling each other stories, what they all know are fictionalizations of uncomfortable truths about their individual lives. Interspersed with these stories are expositional chapters in which background information of each of the three friends is revealed: how they all came to Palm Springs, and how they came to be friends with each other.

Part Two, written in a more diary-like style, chronicles a series of events that began a few days after the picnic. Dag disappears, but eventually calls from Nevada. In explanation, he tells the story of a young man named Otis who decided to take a tour of the sites of the nuclear bomb tests that took place in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Upon his return, he offers souvenirs to his friends, one of which Claire perceives as dangerously radioactive and refuses to have anything to do with.

Shortly after moving in with Andy to avoid what she believes to be her radioactively contaminated home, Claire is visited by Tobias, a very handsome man with whom she's lustfully obsessed. Over the course of Tobias' few days visit, Andy and Dag confront each other about the relative aimlessness of their respective lives and how they feel inclined to blame their parents for how those lives have turned out. Meanwhile, Claire's best friend Elvissa pushes Andy, Claire, Dag and Tobias into revealing honestly described important personal memories. For perhaps the first time in their friendship, Claire, Andy and Dag don't disguise their feelings and/or experiences behind the mask of a story.

After Tobias leaves, and after Elvissa moves away from Palm Springs (apparently to work at a convent), Andy and his friends make plans for their Christmas vacations. Claire admits to a helpless desire to pursue Tobias and plans to go to New York, Andy decides to visit his parents, and Dag decides to stay put. Shortly before they go their separate ways, Dag accidentally sets an expensive car on fire, but manages to escape arrest.

Traveling home (to Portland Oregon), Andy comes to realize that he has misjudged his parents and their relationship, coming to realize they are essentially decent people and that he has to take responsibility for his own happiness. When he returns to Palm



Springs, he receives a phone call from Claire who has also discovered the same thing. Having broken up with Tobias and having discovered that he is in fact involved with Elvissa (who didn't go to a convent but is in New York with Tobias), Claire tells what happened without resorting to hiding the truth behind the usual fictionalized façade. Dag, meanwhile, continues to evade facing the truth about the destruction of the car, even to the extent of lying to the police.

On New Year's Day, Andy discovers that Dag and Claire have moved to Mexico to open a hotel, and that they want him to join them. He packs up his few belongings and hits the road, on the way witnessing an intensely beautiful visit paid by a beautiful black bird to a charred black field. In celebration of the beauty of the moment, he receives a smothering cluster of hugs and laughter, an affirmation that he is perhaps, at last, on track with his life.



# Part 1, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

## Part 1, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

### "The Sun is Your Enemy"

As he watches the sunrise with his friends Claire and Dag, narrator Andy comments on his memories of traveling to a small town to watch a total eclipse of the sun (see "Quotes," p. 3-4). Employing his idiosyncratic vocabulary (see "Style - Language and Meaning"), he then describes the difficulties that brought the acerbic Claire and self-absorbed Dag to his home that night. As the sun rises, Dag demands that the three friends comment on what the sunrise makes them think about. In narration, Andy describes how Claire refers at detailed length to the sun ruining the life of a hard-working Russian farmer, and Dag refers at equally detailed length about the sun giving cancer to a beautiful Australian surfer. Andy then portrays himself as saying one thing (referring to the sun as drying up a lake) but thinking another (images of fertility). Claire comments that it's not healthy to live life in a succession of small, sunrise-like moments, suggesting they all have to take responsibility for making their lives stories. In narration, Andy comments that they all knew that was why they left their lives and came to California - "to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile in the process."

### "Our Parents Had More"

Andy narrates the beginnings of a picnic trip he takes with Dag and Claire, describing how he and his friends "live small lives on the periphery," but that since they moved to "the desert" things are much better.

### "Quit Recycling the Past"

Andy describes the rules of storytelling he shares with his friends - no interruption and no criticism, the same as the rules for Alcoholics Anonymous (which he says he's attended, describing his perception that meetings rely on those attending dredging up the deepest, most painful secrets of their pasts). He says the rules are necessary because none of the friends is comfortable about revealing their pasts, commenting on Dag's belief that everyone, including them, has a deep secret they cannot, or will not, share. He then continues his narration of the picnic, describing how he and his friends settle in an abandoned and run-down subdivision of Palm Springs.

## Part 1, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

This section introduces several of the book's key elements - its central characters and their relationships, its narrative style (short chapters, intelligent use of analytical language), its central images (in particular, the sun and light - see "Objects/Places"), and its thematic focus on stories and storytelling (see "Themes - Storytelling"). All these are developed, in various ways, throughout the novel, and play key roles in defining it as



a complex, multi-faceted examination of a particular generation's particular reaction to being alive at a particular point in history (see "Style - Setting" and "Point of View").

Another key element in the overall impact and effect of the novel is its chapter headings, which function in several ways - to illuminate the action of the chapter, to comment ironically on the experiences of the characters, or to make philosophically pointed comments on the situations in which the action plays out and/or the characters find themselves. For example, the title of Chapter 1 refers, in a fairly straightforward fashion, to the negative stories about the sun the friends speak aloud, but is also an ironic comment on how Andy, in his thoughts, experiences the sun as a source of fertility and life. This double edged relationship to the sun and its light continues throughout the novel. Meanwhile, the title of Chapter 2 is an ironic comment on why Andy and his friends perceive their place in the world, specifically their living "on the periphery" - as being, in general, less materialistic than their parents. This makes the title a manifestation of one of the novel's key themes, the relationship between materialism and self-expression (see "Themes"). Finally, the title of the third chapter is not only a comment on how the friends tell stories and on Andy's passing reference to Alcoholics Anonymous (see below), it's also a commentary on the situations of the characters as a whole. In various ways, they spend their lives recycling the past in an effort to understand themselves, let the past go and move into the future—or both. For further consideration of the value of the chapter headings see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the titles ..."

As previously mentioned, Andy's reference to Alcoholics Anonymous is noteworthy for its relationship to the chapter's title, but it is also noteworthy for what it tells us about Andy - that he did, at one point, define himself as an alcoholic. This is the only point in the book at which this aspect of his life/personality is mentioned, and it is worth questioning why. Is it part of the past he is trying not to recycle? Because it's only mentioned here, is it one part of his past that he has actually managed to move away from (as opposed to his relationship with his parents, which takes him the whole novel to transcend)? Or is he still an active alcoholic, having quit AA because of his evident distaste for the way the organization works? It's important to note that the narrative never defines Andy one way or another - as a recovering alcoholic or as an active one.

Other telling and/or illuminating elements in this chapter include the friends' choice to have their picnic in a run down community on the periphery of Palm Springs (an echo of how they live their lives "on the periphery"). Also, Claire's comment on the necessity of making lives into stories is an ironic foreshadowing of the action of the novel, which is in fact the movement of the friends towards making their lives LIVES.



# Part 1, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7

## Part 1, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Summary

### "I Am Not a Target Market"

Andy describes how he met Dag when he came to work at the same bar, and how he put together the story of how Dag came to Palm Springs (from Toronto Ontario) out of bits of Dag's stories. He describes how Dag initially saw himself as successful, a desirable "target market" for manufacturers, how Dag came to identify with the enclosure and confinement of a framed photo on his desk, and how he lost his temper with his yuppie, ex-hippie boss (for a definition of "yuppie" see "Characters").

### "Quit Your Job"

Andy narrates how Dag's arrogant treatment of a co-worker got turned against him, how he left his job without clearing out his desk, and how he became a "basement person" - moving into a dark basement apartment, living a self-consciously politically correct life, and eventually discovering that that life was as empty as his job.

### "Dead at 30, Buried at 70"

Andy's narration of Dag's story continues, with Dag describing his move into his brother's apartment in Buffalo, which he describes as being economically and socially desolate. He narrates his descent into deep self doubt and depression, a crisis of self (see "Quotes," p. 30) that he says he could only break out of if he started with a completely clean slate. That, Dag says, was the point at which he realized it was time to "split to where the weather is hot and dry and where the cigarettes are cheap." There, in Palm Springs, he met Andy and Claire.

### "It Can't Last"

In this chapter, Andy narrates his first meeting with Claire at a resort in Palm Springs where he worked, and where she was staying with her obnoxious family including her businessman father and his fourth wife. First he describes Claire's family's superficial conversation (including a sibling asking whether it's possible for humanity, which is damaging the earth so recklessly, to also damage the sun), and then his own first conversation with Claire, commenting several times that he knew right away the two of them were destined to be good friends. After narrating an attention-seeking incident involving Claire's hypochondriac, kleptomaniac father, Andy concludes this chapter with a description of Claire watching the setting sun and apologizing for causing it pain.



## Part 1, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

This section is essentially exposition, a series of stories explaining how Dag and Claire not only came to be where they are in Andy's life, but how they came to be where they are in their own lives. It's interesting to note the difference between the two stories - Andy narrates Dag's story based on what Dag has told him, while he tells Claire's story based on at least a degree of personal experience of her life. It might not be going too far to suggest there is a correlation here with the end of the novel, in which Andy and Claire both arrive at a place where their stories are no longer disguised truths about themselves, but true expressions of themselves, while Dag remains trapped in the habit of concealing personal truth with fabrication.

The other noteworthy element here is the development of the image of the sun and light - specifically, Claire's apology, which is essentially a manifestation of her (hidden?) belief that in contrast to her story in Chapter 1 that describes the sun as a killer, she truly believes the sun is a life affirming force. Again, there may be a correlation between her actions here and where she (and Andy) get to by the end of the novel - both seem, on some essential level, to see the sun as a nurturing force, and by the end of the novel both arrive at a place of new self-awareness.





# Part 1, Chapters 8, 9,10 and 11

## Part 1, Chapters 8, 9,10 and 11 Summary

"Shopping is not Creating"

This chapter consists almost entirely of a story told by Claire as narrated by Andy, a story set on Texlahoma, "an asteroid orbiting the earth" that rocket scientists always forget about and which life is permanently lived in the style of 1974 (see "Objects/Places - Texlahoma"). Claire's story is of a space traveler named Buck, who contracts a strange space disease and is forced to stay in with the Monroe family until he recovers. He romances each of the materialistic Monroe daughters in turn, trying to convince them to help him treat himself with a cure that might potentially end their lives. Only the love of the less materialistic, artistically creative third daughter is strong enough to lead her to help him, and help him she does. Meanwhile, the other two Monroe sisters comment on how foolish she was - but that they feel jealous all the same.

"Re Con Struct"

After commenting briefly that he and Claire never fell in love, "even though [they] both tried hard," Andy comments that he never fell in love and that he doesn't want to spend life alone, illustrating his point by telling a story about Edward (a story he says he wouldn't even tell Dag and Claire). As described by Andy, Edward is a self-consciously clever young man whose proper life alone becomes alcoholic, living behind a permanently closed door with only the company of a friendly dog. One day, however, the dog's friendliness becomes rabid and insane, and Edward becomes trapped - with no way out, no alcohol, and no friends. He fights his way past the dog, only to realize that ten years have passed and the world has become busier, more relationship oriented, and unafraid. Edward realizes (according to Andy) that he has no reason to be afraid either, and vows to himself to build "a silver tower [which] would stand as a beacon to all voyagers who, like himself, arrived in the city late in life."

"Enter Hyperspace"

After a brief encounter with some lost Japanese tourists (see "Quotes," p. 54), Dag and Claire urge Andy to tell them a story. He tells them the real story of how HE came to be in Palm Springs. He describes how, while working at a Japanese company with other frustrated young people. "I felt," he writes, "[like] I was being excommunicated from the shin jin rui - that's what the Japanese newspapers call people like those kids in their twenties at the office - new human beings...we have the same group over here and it's just as large, but it doesn't have a name - an X generation - purposefully hiding itself." He then narrates an embarrassing encounter with the boss in his office (which Andy describes as "hyper-space") made him recall a phrase by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. That phrase, Andy writes, described how "we are all of us born with a letter inside us, and that only if we are true to ourselves, may we be allowed to read it before we



die." He realizes that the boss was trying to show him HIS letter, and comments that he came to Palm Springs "to try to read the letter inside [him]".

"December 31, 1999"

This chapter begins with Andy's commentary on how Dag and Claire never fell in love either, and how the three of them share a wonderful platonic friendship. Dag then begins the latest in what Andy describes as a series of end-of-the-world stories, this one beginning with Dag's suggestion that "you" imagine "you've" had a fight with "your" best friend, and that while you're in a grocery store buying supplies for a party that night, some kind of nuclear attack takes place. However, in the moment before you're incinerated, he adds, your best friend comes in, kisses you on the mouth, and says "I've always wanted to do that." And then the heat of the nuclear explosion comes, incinerating you - "kind of scary, kind of sexy, and tainted by regret. A lot like life, wouldn't you say?"

## Part 1, Chapters 8, 9,10 and 11 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this closing section to Part 1. The first is the different ways in which the three central characters tell their stories, and what is revealed about those characters as a result.

Throughout the narrative, the characters' stories are often thinly disguised revelations of personal truth and/or experience. This section contains the end points of what might be described as the full continuum of disguise. On one end are Claire's story about Texlahoma and Andy's story about Edward, both of which can be, and are perhaps meant to be, interpreted as explanations / explorations of personal truths the characters are unable / unwilling to reveal (consider here the possible importance of Edward's being an alcoholic - see Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary/Analysis). On the other end of the continuum is Andy's story about his encounter with his boss, which isn't disguised at all. It's important to note here that Andy functions at both ends of the spectrum, simultaneously hiding and revealing himself. It's possible to see this as a foreshadowing of where he (and Claire) gets to at the end of the book - prepared, at least to some degree, to live a more open, self-truthful life without stories. Meanwhile, the next section (specifically Chapter 12) contains an example of a story in the middle of the continuum, Dag's "Otis" story in Chapter 12, which is obviously a very personal narrative but which Dag nevertheless disguises (albeit transparently) because, it seems, he is completely unable to face not only his own truth but revealing that truth to others.

Another important element here is the first, and very telling, reference to the X-Generation (see "Topics for Discussion - When Andy describes ..."). Also, the reference to Rainer Maria Rilke can be seen as quite significant. Rilke compiled a very famous book ("Letters to a Young Poet") in which he advises an aspiring artist to dig deep into his personal truth for that which will make his art special. The implication of the reference is that Andy and his friends need to do the same - dig into their personal truths in order to make their LIVES special. Finally, both the heading of Chapter 11



("December 31, 1999") and its core content (Dag's story about the nuclear war-triggered kiss) are important pieces of foreshadowing for events that take place later in the book - New Year's Eve, December 31, 1999 (Chapter 29). These events include a kiss which takes place in metaphorically similar circumstances to the kiss here, and the nuclear explosion Andy believes he sees shortly afterwards. For further consideration of the importance of this particular date, see "Style - Setting."



## Part 2, Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15

### Part 2, Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15 Summary

#### "New Zealand Gets Nuked, Too"

This section, written in a more diary-like format, begins with Andy's brief commentary on Dag's sudden and unexpected disappearance, and a phone call Andy receives from Dag, made on a pay phone in Nevada. In explanation of his absence, Dag tells Andy about Otis from Palm Springs (which he likens to New Zealand - both communities, according to Dag, are isolated enough to be safe from the fallout of a nuclear war). He describes how Otis suddenly had the urge to investigate just how serious the threat of poisoning from nuclear fallout actually is, and how Otis traveled trip through New Mexico and Nevada (the site of several nuclear tests), where he discovered that the threat isn't as present or as dangerous as he feared. Dag then, however, describes the development of Otis' theory that society could come to the belief that atomic bombs were merely extensions and/or expansions of regular bombs, therefore making them less of a threat. Andy then describes how he and Claire discuss Dag's story and dismiss him as simply being over-caffeinated.

#### "Monsters Exist"

Andy describes Dag's return - his high level of energy, his unkempt appearance, and his enthusiastic promise of presents for his friends, a beaded belt buckle for Andy and a glass jar of mysterious green beads for Claire. During conversation, the jar slips to the floor and shatters, scattering beads everywhere. Dag reveals they're the product of the searing heat of a nuclear explosion, grains of sand fused into a new and different material. Claire freaks out, shouting that he's brought radioactivity into her home and runs out, shouting that until the beads are gone and the place is completely decontaminated, she's staying at Andy's.

#### "Don't Eat Yourself"

This chapter begins with Andy describing Claire's comment that everyone has "a gripping stranger" in their lives, someone who awakens powerful passions and desires. For Claire, Andy comments, that someone is Tobias. He describes the history of Claire's and Tobias' relationship and Tobias's character (see "Quotes," p. 80, #1), and then narrates Tobias' immediate, territorial, and aggressive sexualizing of his relationship with Claire.

#### "Eat Your Parents"

Andy and Dag clean the beads out of Claire's apartment, fully aware that Claire and Tobias are having wild sex a few doors away. To distract themselves and each other, they discuss plans for Christmas - Andy's, to go home to his family in Portland, and Dag's to stay in Palm Springs. This leads to mutual complaints about their respective



families, with Andy eventually pointing out that Dag is "just afraid of the future" as Andy's parents. For his part, Dag suggests that Andy "eat" his parents, accept them as part of what brought him to the world and get on with life. He concludes by commenting on how disgusted he is with his own parents, how he wants "to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid marked underwear.

## Part 2, Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its switch in narrative perspective - specifically, into a more diary-like narrative style. From this point on, and for the most part, events described by Andy took place in the more recent past than events in Part 1, a few minutes or hours ago as opposed to days, weeks or months. The essential purpose of this is to give the narrative more of a sense of immediacy and intimacy, not to mention a sense that Andy doesn't know the end of the story as he's telling it. In other words, the reader is on the "adventure" with him.

Other important elements here include Dag's "Otis" story (which, as previously discussed, is the most thinly disguised of the various personal stories told by the three friends - see "Important People - Edward, Otis and Linda"). Also, there is the reappearance of the nuclear war image, first seen in the previous section and a symbol of transformation throughout the novel. Examples - as a result of the nuclear explosion described by Dag at the end of Chapter 11, a friend reveals the truth of his feelings to another, and as a result of a past nuclear explosion grains of sand are transformed into pretty green beads. Perhaps most importantly, as a result of what Andy sees as a nuclear explosion (Chapter 30), Andy takes the final steps towards a personal transformation into a truth-teller rather than a truth disguiser. The next key element is the reference to eating things other than food, specifically to eating the self (which has a negative and self-destructive connotation) and "eating" one's parents (which has a positive, self-affirming connotation). This ambivalence or two-sided meaning to an image or motif is typical of the images and languages employed throughout the book, and can perhaps be seen as a manifestation of the confusion and/or misplacement and loneliness that seems to be a core experience of those born within Generation X.

Finally, there are important foreshadowings here. The reference to Tobias foreshadows the important role he plays in the narrative from this point on, while the references to Christmas and Andy's parents foreshadow Andy's trip home (Chapter 24) and the appearance of his parents (Chapter 25), when he actually does as Dag suggests here, and puts them squarely into his past.



## Part 2, Chapters 16, 17 and 18

### Part 2, Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary

#### "Purchased Experiences Don't Count"

Andy describes Claire's best friend Elvissa, and narrates what happens when Claire and Elvissa finish a conversation and join Andy, Tobias and Dag by the side of the pool. Tobias, unable to get attention from either of the guys or from Claire, talks with Elvissa, who while doing her nails in "Honolulu Choo-Choo pink nail polish," comments that Tobias might not be as yuppie-ish as she thought. As proof, she demands that he tell her what experience in his life would be his last, best memory, adding that it can't be something bought, only lived. Tobias is stumped, as are Andy and Dag. Claire, however, comes up with an answer - snow.

#### "Remember Earth Clearly"

One by one, the friends describe their most remembered experiences. Claire narrates her first experience of snow (see "Quotes," p. 94, #1). Dag recalls making a mistake while filling the family car (see "Quotes," p. 94 #2), how his father didn't get angry but instead talked of how gasoline smelt like "the future", and how he closed his eyes and saw the orange glow of the sun through his eyelids. Andy recalls a cherished moment of family peace and intimacy (see "Quotes," p. 95). Tobias surprises them all with a happy, beautifully described memory of his parents (see "Quotes," p. 96). After commenting that he'll have to reconsider his opinions of Tobias, Andy describes how the friends insist Elvissa go next.

#### "Change Color"

Elvissa's describes a childhood (and perhaps childish) friendship with a neighbor boy named Curtis that matured into a sexual relationship which, in turn, ended when Curtis moved, but which renewed itself unexpectedly when she recently encountered him poolside at a Palm Springs hotel. She describes how his head keeps darting around as though he's keeping his eye on some kind of flying object. She tells of their subsequent happy reunion, and how Curtis eventually told her his life story - how he was injured in jungle warfare, how his buddy was killed, and how his buddy's blue eyes were plucked out by hummingbirds (which, according to Curtis, are particularly attracted to blue). Elvissa describes how she realized that Curtis' strange head movements were his efforts to watch for hummingbirds, how Curtis started (but suddenly stopped) talking about what he'd do if a hummingbird came for his eyes, and how after he drunkenly passed out, she (Elvissa) tried to pass some of her strength into his "poor, battle scarred body." After she's finished, Andy goes into his apartment to answer a telephone call, and Tobias goes to check out the color of his eyes in the rear view mirror of his car. "Right then," Andy says, he knew it was over between Tobias and Claire.



## Part 2, Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

This section is an important one in the novel and in the lives of its characters. They are all essentially dared into speaking truths about themselves, truths that in the past they would have disguised (perhaps in stories of Texlahoma). At least, Dag and Claire and Andy would have disguised them - as portrayed here and throughout the book, there is the sense that Tobias probably wouldn't have even given the incident he describes a second thought, if he didn't want to get into Elvissa's pants (to put it crudely). The irony, of course, is that Elvissa, who seems at this point such an advocate of truth, turns out to be a liar (see Chapter 28). Meanwhile, the carefully detailed reference to Elvissa's nail polish is foreshadowing of its reappearance in Chapter 28, where it serves as evidence that Tobias is having sex with her behind Claire's back. Finally, Elvissa's reference to putting energy back into Curtis' scarred body can be seen as a metaphoric representation of what she's doing to the three friends - by insisting on them telling a truth, she is in effect putting energy back into them. Again, the irony is that she's a liar and a manipulator, but the irony of the irony is that Claire and Andy move further towards becoming truer, more honest people anyway.

Another noteworthy element in this section is an interesting development in the sun/light motif - specifically, its inclusion in Dag's story. Aside from the fact that this is the first, and perhaps only, time in the novel that Dag speaks directly about himself (his earlier stories of how he came to Palm Springs don't count, in that they're essentially hearsay), this is also the first and perhaps only time that for Dag, the image of the sun is a positive one. On other occasions, he connects it with destruction and suffering, but here it's connected with joy ... as it is eventually for both Claire and Andy.



## Part 2, Chapters 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23

### Part 2, Chapters 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 Summary

#### "Why Am I Poor?"

Andy reveals that the phone call (from answered at the end of Chapter 17) was from his materialistic brother Tyler, who announces his plans to come for a visit after Christmas. Andy narrates how, while he's checking whether there's room at the bungalows, he saw Elvissa leaves and gets into Tobias' car. Andy then tells Tyler the timing of the visit will be fine, and Tyler warns him that Christmas at home will be "mondo weirdo," hinting that he would like expensive presents and closing the conversation by listing his clothing sizes.

#### "Celebrities Die"

In this flashback chapter, as Andy recalls a dull evening at work (livened only by the bad jokes of Mr. MacArthur, his affable middle aged boss), he also recalls a narrated comment from Dag on how he sometimes forgets whether celebrities are alive or dead, and on how he (Dag) sometimes has the same problem with Mr. MacArthur. After leaving work, Andy and Dag stroll through downtown Palm Springs. On a side street, Dag sits on an expensive car, lights a cigarette, and burns marks into the car's roof as he tells the increasingly nervous Andy about his kitschy dream hotel (where, Dag says, "people who told good stories could stay for free"). Andy finally convinces Dag to leave before someone catches them vandalizing the car, but just as Dag is getting off the car, he accidentally drops his cigarette through its open sun roof and onto a pile of papers into its back seat. He and Andy watch in horror as the papers catch fire and eventually engulf the car, and then run desperately away, convincing themselves they will never be caught.

#### "I Am Not Jealous"

Andy reveals that according to Claire, Elvissa has left town to work as a gardener in a spiritual retreat. Dag speaks mockingly of Elvissa's apparent desire to de-materialize her life, but Claire speaks angrily to him, essentially calling him ineffective and a poser, demanding that he look at what he's done to his life and move on into the future. Andy then narrates how he and his friends once again started telling stories.

#### "Leave your Body"

Claire speaks of a very wealthy young woman named Linda, who was so desperate to find some kind of meaning in her life after being abandoned by her adoring but dead father and selfish mother that she entered into a strict, lengthy meditation program based on a far Eastern spiritual discipline. She describes how, as Linda went through the program, her garden grew into something wild and beautiful - and how, near the end of the program, a priest of the original Eastern discipline heard of her situation and





came to tell her that she had misinterpreted the rules and meditated for far too long. Claire then describes how he realized Linda had gone spiritually further than he ever did or could, how when he touched her her bones crumbled into dust, and how her soul "flitted heavenward", singing like the beautiful birds that used to sing to her and her father.

"Grow Flowers"

In this very brief chapter, Andy narrates how he used to randomly sow daffodil bulbs in his family's back garden, and how they grew into random beauty. He then describes his joy at waking up and seeing his friends crashed and sleeping nearby (see "Quotes," p. 130). "These creatures here in this room with me - these are the creatures I love and who love me. Together I feel like we are a strange and forbidden garden - I feel so happy I could die. If I could have it thus, I would like this moment to continue forever."

## Part 2, Chapters 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

There are a lot of important events in this section, all of which function on different levels. Tyler's conversation with Andy foreshadows the important visit Andy pays to his parents over Christmas, while the incident with the burning car foreshadows Dag's eventual confrontation with the possibility that he too can live a more authentic life. This confrontation (which takes place in Chapter 29) is also foreshadowed in his confrontation with Claire, who seems to be moving forward on her own journey towards authenticity.

Meanwhile, the detailed exploration of the life of Mr. MacArthur, which seems on first glance to be an unnecessary diversion from the main action, can actually be seen as a manifestation of the comfortable, unconsidered but placidly happy life that Andy and his friends are so desperate to avoid. What Andy realizes (but Dag doesn't) is that continuing to live life as stories is, in its own way, as unconsidered a life as that which he seems to condemn, or at least to ridicule, in MacArthur and his wife. There is, by the way, a certain degree of irony in the name MacArthur, in that this quietly aimless but content man happens to have the same last name as one of the most determined and ambitious but still self-deluded military figures in the history of the United States military, Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Also important is Claire's detailed story about Linda, yet another example of how the central characters disguise truths about themselves in their stories - it seems quite clear that Linda's desire for a more spiritual life is an (echo? manifestation?) of the same desire in Claire. While it's fairly certain that Claire is too self-interested to go to the lengths of self-deprivation that Linda goes to, it's also fairly certain that the narrative attention Claire pays to Linda's garden (see "Objects/Places") is evocative of a certain desire within Claire for a similar wild beauty.

Finally, the section closes with the most outright, the most passionate exhibition of human feeling in Andy in the book so far, a foreshadowing of the equally passionate

feeling he experiences at the end of the book (see Chapters 30 and 31). On its own, however, this expression of passion can be seen as a vivid manifestation of one of the book's central thematic concerns, the celebration of friendship (see "Themes - The Power of Friendship").



## Part 3, Chapters 24, 25, 26 and 27

### Part 3, Chapters 24, 25, 26 and 27 Summary

#### "Define Normal"

Andy begins the narration of his trip home for Christmas with brief, vivid sketches of his variously dysfunctional siblings, and commenting that none of them (except Tyler) will be home for Christmas. He describes how his mother picks him up at the airport, and how she reveals she's given up "caring what any of you do with your lives. I hope you don't mind, but it's made my life THAT MUCH easier." When they arrive at the house, Tyler rushes out and greets Andy with "Welcome to the house that time forgot!"

#### "MTV Not Bullets"

Andy begins his narrative of Christmas Eve with a description of his mysterious shopping trip to buy dozens of different sorts of candles (mysterious because he tells neither the reader nor Tyler, who accompanies him, what he's buying them for). Andy then describes how his father (newly healthy as the result of a recent heart attack) yells at the television - specifically, at a group of protesting young people whom he shouts should get jobs. Later, after a tense dinner, Tyler goes out, leaving Andy with his parents. As he describes his lonely father filling the family's stockings at the fireplace, Andy describes a phone call from Dag (in which Dag reveals that the car fire has made the news, and in which they both come to believe they might be in trouble). Andy also describes his beliefs about his former friends (see "Quotes," p. 143), his belief that it was a mistake to come home for Christmas (because he's "too old"), and his realization that while his hopes for new insight into and/or affection from his parents are gone, he's "left with two nice people ... more than most people get." He adds, however, that "it's time to move on."

#### "Trans Form"

On Christmas Day, Andy sets up all his candles in the living room and lights them, telling his family to wait a few minutes before coming downstairs. When they do, they're all dazzled by the beauty of the light. It made, Andy writes, "the eyes of my family burn, if only momentarily, with the possibilities of existence in our time." He then adds that things got back to normal, and Andy narrates his realization that his and all his family's feelings "are transpiring in a vacuum," a vacuum caused by their being middle class (see "Quotes," p. 147).

#### "Welcome Home from Vietnam, Son"

Andy describes how, on his way to the airport at the conclusion of his visit, he visits Portland's Vietnam War memorial (see "Objects / Places - The Vietnam War"). Before they get there, Tyler (who is driving) speaks with unexpected passion of how concerned he is for Andy's well being, and his (Tyler's) sense of aimlessness and hopelessness.



Taken by surprise, Andy then narrates his walk through the memorial, explaining to the back-to-normal Tyler why visiting the memorial is important (see "Quotes," p. 151).

## Part 3, Chapters 24, 25, 26 and 27 Analysis

This section marks the book's climax, the emotional and spiritual turning point for its central character (Andy). It's important to note that in this case, the climax is not Andy's actual transformation (that comes in Chapters 30 and 31) but the CHOICE that TRIGGERS that transformation. In other words, the choice is the turning point, the point at which both emotion and insight are at their highest and most affecting.

There are several key elements here. The first is the revelation that, while he's been struggling to let go of his parents' influence in his life, his parents (or at least his mother) has already let go of HIM. The second, and not unrelated, point is that his father is also moving into a new future, living a healthy life after the shock of a heart attack. Both these points can be seen as important steps along Andy's journey towards independence from his past, and therefore towards self-hood. Another point on that journey manifesting in this section is Andy's realization that he's "too old," the implication being that he's not only too old for Christmas at home but too old to remain self-defined by his parents life. Yet another point is the reappearance of the "light" motif or imagery, in this case the affirming blaze of illumination that erupts into the lives of Andy and his family. It's important to note that in this case, "illumination" refers to both the physical illumination of the candles and, in Andy's case, the psycho-spiritual-emotional illumination that it's coming time for him to transform into a truer, more self-affirming human being.

Still another point is the very pointed reference to being middle-class, the first time this particular circumstance of Andy's existence is specifically referenced. The middle class (in America at least) is generally defined as the steadily employed, steadily working, rather materialistic, not-rich-but-not-poor core of the population. Unable to be as ostentatiously wealthy as the very rich, unwilling to be as ostentatiously disadvantaged as the very poor, the middle class is generally perceived as wanting/having/accumulating possessions in order to demonstrate simply that they can - that they have at least some money and means, and therefore some degree of success. They are, in other words, living the so-called American Dream. However, as Andy implies, the middle class is (in socio-political terms) also taken for granted, dismissed as having no desires or interests other than being able to exhibit and maintain that success - in short, that they're superficial. It's this superficiality, which is equal parts stereotype and archetype, that Andy in this chapter realizes is the true source of his personal ambivalence about his life, and what he also realizes he must transcend if he is to become a fully self-realized human being.

Finally, there is the reference to the Vietnam War (see "Objects/Places"), which in many ways comes as a complete and utter surprise. To this point Andy has come across as entirely self-absorbed - well meaning, but self-absorbed. His visit to the memorial (which, as written, has all the earmarks of a ritual) indicates, however, that there is a

sensibility and/or an awareness in him that transcends mere narcissism. In other words, he has an awareness of himself in the bigger picture of his community, his country, the world, and history - an important component of the personal integrity and search for meaning that leads him to his climactic decision to move on into a new phase of his life.



## Part 3, Chapters 28 and 29

### Part 3, Chapters 28 and 29 Summary

"Adventure without Risk is Disneyland"

Back in Palm Springs, Andy receives a phone call from Claire, calling from New York. She tells how Tobias (whom she went specifically to see) missed several appointments to meet, how they broke up during a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and how, while they were walking back to where Tobias was staying she found a Y-shaped stick (see "Objects/Places - Claire's Stick"). She tells how they went back to Tobias' apartment, how she fell asleep on his sofa, how she realized after she woke up that the stick was going to lead her to the love of her life ... and how she discovered a bottle of Elvissa's nail polish (see Chapter 16). She storms out, followed by Tobias, who shouts at her about how foolish she is to be abandoning life while he wants to LIVE life, cursing at her while yelling about being desperate for excitement. As Claire finishes her story, she asks Andy to make sure there are flowers in her bungalow when she comes home. Andy understands her to mean that she's moving back into the place she moved out of. Claire says yes.

"Plastics Never Disintegrate"

Andy finds Dag out in the bungalow complex's pool, scooping out plastic flowers that keep sticking to him - the cheap plastic mat used to cover the pool at night disintegrated, leaving the plastic flowers stuck to it floating free. Dag reveals that he has booked Andy to work with him as a bartender at a New Year's Eve party thrown by the effete Bunny Hollander, who also happens to be the owner of the car Dag accidentally torched (see Chapter 20). On the night of the party, severe storm watches have been issued, but the party goes ahead. When the police show up wanting to speak with Dag, Andy's worries over being caught resurface, and Dag disappears into the back garden, where Andy later finds him. Attempting to ease his nervousness, Dag asks Andy to tell him a story, and Andy does - a story of his time in Japan, where he became true friends with a little girl after she had been caught doing something wrong and punished for it. At that, Dag prepares to go in and see the police. First, though, he tells Andy how he imagines his death - he will be old, worn out and thin, planting flowers in the hot desert, and an angel will appear behind him and carry him into the sun. He then kisses Andy, says "I've always wanted to do that" and goes into the house. Andy then recalls the story Dag told about best friends kissing each other (see Chapter 11).

### Part 3, Chapters 28 and 29 Analysis

There are a great deal of noteworthy elements in these two chapters, the writing of which is particularly interesting - there is a certain superficial sense that not much is going on, but upon further consideration it becomes clear that there is in fact a very



great deal going on. This is, in fact, true of the entire book. There is a certain quality of misdirection to the writing, perhaps reminiscent of the misdirection in the frequent stories of the central characters ... towards the mask (in terms of the novel, the mask of irony and self-reverence) instead of towards the heart (in terms of the novel, its intense focus on friendship and the need for transformation).

The first, and perhaps most important, element to note is Claire's story of her encounter with Tobias - specifically, the fact that she tells the story as it happened, rather than disguising it with semi-fictional details (such as Dag does with the Otis story, Andy does with the Edward story, and Claire herself does with the Texlahoma and Linda stories). In other words, Claire has come to a point (perhaps without consciously doing so) of deciding she's no longer going to hide behind such semi-fictions and live a more authentic life. Her choice to do so here foreshadows Andy's choice in the following chapters to do the same - his choice to act on the decision to change made in previous chapters. Meanwhile, Claire's poignant request for Andy to put flowers in her bungalow is, on one level, a request for support for her transformation, but on another level it is a manifestation/symbol of the novel's thematic focus on the value, beauty, and power of true friendship - for Claire, the flowers equal love. This idea is reinforced by the fact that she agrees to move back into the apartment which she once fearfully claimed was going to be radioactive forever - she, true friend that she wants to be and that Andy perceives her now to be, has forgiven him and Dag.

In that context, it's interesting to note that Claire asks for real flowers while in the opening of Chapter 29 Dag is covered with artificial flowers. The sense arises from this juxtaposition of images that Claire, and to a certain extent Andy, is further along on the journey of transformation towards authentic selfishness than Dag. This sense is reinforced by events later in the chapter, when Dag avoids the truth inherent in meeting the police, and in the following chapter, when he avoids the consequences of the truth (about the torching of the car) by lying. Ironically, though, Dag does have a brief moment of personal truth - the kiss, foreshadowed way back in Chapter 11 and which seems to suggest that all along, Dag has been at least attracted to, if not in love with, Andy. There is also the sense, however, that for Dag even this brief visit to the land of trueness (to coin a phrase) is too much - in the next chapter, and as previously discussed, he avoids the truth by lying to the police.

Another important elements in this section is the reference to bad weather which symbolizes the storm of difficulty and uncertainty encountered by the three friends to this point in their lives and in the novel, and which also symbolizes the unsettling "storms" of circumstance and feeling that both Dag and Andy are about to encounter. Also worthy of note is Andy's story of the Japanese girl, a combination of true selfishness and disguise - he is, in effect, telling Dag that the only way he (Andy) can and will be a true friend is if he (Dag), faces the fact that like the Japanese girl, he's been caught doing wrong. Finally, there is Dag's image of his death, which contains yet another reference to the transcendent, affirming power of the sun and of light.



## Part 3, Chapters 30 and 31 and Epilogue

### Part 3, Chapters 30 and 31 and Epilogue Summary

"Await Lightning"

The chapter begins with Andy's description of being caught in a traffic jam while attempting to cross into Mexico. He then explains why he's there - Claire and Dag left him notes explaining they've decided to go down to Mexico to open a hotel and inviting him to join them. Dag also explains how he managed to avoid being charged for the vandalism of Bunny Hollander's car. Andy's narration then returns to the traffic, where he sees the fence that serves as the border and realizing that he, Claire and Dag have chosen to live on the more barren side of the metaphoric fence in their lives - "Dag doomed forever to gaze longingly at his sun; Claire forever traversing her sands with her [stick]..." He then describes his own situation in two stories. The first is of a young man who left his life behind to go searching for an opportunity to be struck by lightning. He starts to tell the second story as though "it's about a young man - oh get real," he writes, "it's about me. It's about me and something else I want desperately to have happen to me, more than just about anything." He describes himself lying in the sun on the rocks, dying by bits and pieces - until a pelican gives him the gift of "a small silvery fish. I would sacrifice anything," he adds, "to be given this offering."

"Jan. 01, 2000"

On New Year's Day (for the significance of the chapter heading, see "Style - Setting"), Andy describes how, after crossing the border and being gifted with two large oranges from a friendly farmer, he sees what looks like a mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion, but which he eventually realizes is the smoke from a burned off field. He, like other travelers, pulls to a stop and discovers that the land is black, like charcoal, and that a beautiful white bird is circling the field, looking for food. He describes the arrival of a bus load of mentally disabled young people, all of whom are at first excited by what they're seeing but who fall silent when they register the beauty of the white bird against the black land. They become loud and excited again when the bird begins to circle the watching crowd, flying lower and lower until it actually grazes and cuts Andy's head before it flies off to the blackened field and starts hunting. It's a while before Andy realizes he's actually bleeding, and in the moment he does he's hugged by first one and then all of the disabled young people, "dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace ... this crush of love was unlike anything I had ever known." As the man supervising the young people leaves him alone with all this affection, going to look at the bird on the black field, Andy concludes his narration, of this incident and of the book, by saying he "can't remember whether [he]" said thank you.

"Numbers"





A brief appendix lists several statistics, comparing figures (on marriage, income, television usage, cost of living, job satisfaction) from the pre-eighties and nineties to the later eighties and nineties.

## Part 3, Chapters 30 and 31 and Epilogue Analysis

Again, there are several important components at work in this section. The life-changing move to Mexico (where the hotel may or may not become the sort of hotel referred to by Dag in his fantasy in Chapter 20) is a manifestation of the change at work in the lives of the three friends, a process accepted (to varying degrees) by Andy and Claire and still avoided (to some degree) by Dag. An interesting question to consider at this point is whether Andy's perception of Dag and Claire being on the same desolate side of the fence running through their lives is accurate. Claire is certainly a different person from when she started - there is the very strong sense that the Claire of the early chapters would never have told the story of her breakup with Tobias as honestly as she does. It may be, in fact, that Andy is still too self-absorbed to see anyone's breakthrough but his own - he recognizes (and indeed celebrates in the novel's final chapter) how he is now more than ever living an honest, self-true life, but doesn't seem able to recognize that the same thing has happened to Claire. Meanwhile, the description of the dream about the pelican and the fish can be seen as a foreshadowing of the joyous encounter (between white and black, between destruction and rebirth, between self-repression and joy) that explodes into the following, and final chapter.

As has been the case when it's been referred to on other occasions (specifically in Dag's story in Chapter 11), a nuclear explosion (or in this case what Andy perceives as a nuclear explosion) has an ambivalent meaning. Both destructive (as manifest in the black field) and triggering of new life (as manifest in the appearance of the white bird and its ability to feed), the nuclear explosion is a metaphor for the emotional/spiritual explosions in the lives of the central characters - or at least, in the transforming explosions that take place for Andy and Claire. Dag, as previously discussed, seems to have moved less far along the journey to selfishness than the other two. One last point to note here about the encounter with the bird is Andy's narrative reference to the "instant family", perhaps a manifestation of the unconditional love, support and celebration that he probably feels he never got from his own. For further consideration of the black field/white bird image, see "Objects/Places" and "Themes - The Value of Friendship."

Finally, the very brief but somehow very chilling list of numbers and figures the author includes after the final chapter somehow undermines the joy of the final image, but not to any debilitating degree. There is the very clear sense that these numbers, all of which are attributed to factual sources, are clear indications of the forces against which, and within which, Andy, his friends, his fellow Generation X-ers, and perhaps everyone else, must struggle in order to achieve personal truth, fulfillment, and integrity.



# Characters

## Andy

Andy is the novel's central character, its narrator and protagonist. He comes across as intelligent and clever (which are not always the same thing), self-analytical and self-absorbed (which are definitely not the same thing), and above all determined to understand himself as fully as possible. This is clearly different from Dag, who seems content with a superficial self-understanding, and Claire, whose self-understanding comes about almost by accident. At the same time, however, and in terms of his outer life (as opposed to his more actively searching inner life), Andy is very much a go-with-the-flow kind of guy, not much inclined to take deliberate, decisive action - he tends to not only let life happen to him but to watch it and note it down, not really participating. This makes the occasions when he does make active choices (the purchase of the candles and the decision to join his friends in Mexico - both of which, interestingly enough, at the end of the book when he's nearing the end of his process of self-evolution) even more notable and more relevant to his journey and the narrative of that journey.

On a technical level, an interesting question about Andy is whether he's a fully reliable narrator, whether what he says can entirely be trusted. The question arises as the result of what he himself admits - that he and his friends tell stories the way they do in an effort to conceal uncomfortable truths about themselves. Since he is essentially telling the reader a story, that reader might be reasonable to wonder what Andy is hiding in telling the story the way he does. It must be remembered, however, that of the three central characters Andy is the only one who, right from the beginning admits to the strains of truth in his stories. It must also be remembered that in Chapter 1, while he's revealing to the reader the story he's telling Dag, he's also revealing to the reader the truth of what he's feeling. This, then, can be interpreted as a suggestion that Andy's words, his perceptions and interpretations, can be considered to be truthful ... a thematically relevant suggestion, in fact, that no matter what attempts are made to conceal it, human and individualized truth will ultimately surface.

## Dag

Dag is short for Dagmar, a name usually given to women. Why he has this particular name is never explained, but its sexual ambiguity can perhaps be seen as a manifestation of his personal sexual ambiguity (he is attracted to Elvissa, but also seems to be in love, at least to some degree, with Andy). A self-described vandal, Dag takes pleasure in destroying, both physically and verbally, manifestations of yuppiness and materialism. This is perhaps because, as he apparently explained to Andy (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5), he knows all too well how soul killing too much materialism actually is. The particularly interesting thing about Dag is that there is no significant reference to his family or to how they've specifically defined his life. Yes, there is a



certain generic reference to how his parents have ruined his life and there is also a passing reference to a supportive brother, but unlike Claire and Andy seems almost to have emerged whole into the world, without anyone actually having given birth to him.

Of the three friends, Dag is the one who seems most resistant to facing the truth about himself, the most uncomfortable with learning to face the truth, and the one who fails to make a journey of transformation towards that truth. It's ironic, in fact, that he vandalizes what he says are symbols and/or manifestations of lies while at the same time continuing to manufacture similar symbols (e.g., his stories).

## Claire

Claire is Andy's other best friend, of the same age (mid to late twenties) and employed at the perfume counter of a large department store. She is described as preferring to dress with an eye to be noticed, in retro clothes that have a style of their own. She is also described as wanting to give whatever children she might have retro names, "names like people have in diners." These last two characteristics can be seen as indications that she, like Andy, lives her life anchored in/defined by the past, and an idealized past at that.

Of the three central characters, Claire is the most volatile, the most emotional, and the most connected to her own feelings. At the same time, however, she is easily run by her feelings, unable to assert any kind of conscious control over them - and, perhaps by implication, her life. Examples - she reacts with panicky fear to the spilling of the beads, even though she is repeatedly reassured they are not radioactive, she reacts with uninhibited, irrational lust to Tobias, and when she finds out he's involved with Elvissa, reacts with equally uninhibited anger. Impulsive and prone to eccentricity (i.e., her semi-serious determination to find the love of her life with the timely-appearing dowsing stick), she is perhaps the most colorfully defined of the three friends. Her journey of transformation as she moves away from hiding her true self behind her stories and echoes and illuminates Andy's, and also reinforces how Dag hasn't taken the same kind of journey.

## Otis, Edward and Linda

These three individuals are, on a superficial level, heroes of stories told by Dag, Andy and Claire respectively. On another level, however, they can be seen as avatars, pseudonyms, alternative identities, living the lives and revealing the truths of the people who tell their stories. In other words, in telling their stories about these three characters, Dag, Andy and Claire all reveal truths about themselves that they otherwise feel they could not reveal. Otis, Edward and Linda are masks, albeit not too effective ones - the reader can easily see the truths behind those masks, and chances are the other characters, those to whom the stories are told, can as well (although the book never explicitly says that this is the case).



## Tobias

A full blooded yuppie (see below) Tobias is the embodiment of everything Andy, Claire and Dag claim to not want to be. It's important to note, however, that at first they are as much in denial about their true natures as Tobias is, but where he masks his human vulnerabilities, needs and feelings with acquisitions, they mask theirs in stories. In any case, even in those few moments when Tobias seems to be non-yuppie-ish and living with genuine emotion (i.e., the telling of his story in Chapter 17), the narrative eventually reveals his essential selfishness. In those moments, he is still pursuing acquisitions ...the goodwill of Claire, Dag and Andy, and the sexual attention of Elvissa (which he eventually, and without conscience, acquires). His final appearance, as a ranting selfishness following his breakup with Claire, he reveals the true extent of his superficiality - but the reader might well wonder, at that point, what it is exactly that he's so afraid of that he reacts to the truth (Claire's anger) with such violent rejection?

## Elvissa

Elvissa is Claire's best friend, a pale and ethereal sort (there is something vaguely vampiric about the way she's described, which is not altogether appropriate, given that she sucks the emotional blood out of Claire's relationship with Tobias). She claims to be an advocate of unpurchased, fully lived truth, but then later in the narrative turns out to be a self-serving liar. In short, she is a manifestation of the dark side of the positive journey into the light of self-hood undertaken by the other characters and celebrated in the novel as a whole - her desire for Tobias, undeniably an expression of HER (sexual) self, ultimately turns out to be destructive (at least to a point) to Claire.

## Curtis

Curtis appears in Chapter 18 as the somewhat romantic hero in Elvissa's story of reunited love and selflessness. Physically and emotionally scared, he can be seen as representing (at least for Elvissa and perhaps for the novel as a whole) the pain of those who have suffered growing up in what Andy defines as Generation X. It's interesting to note that the novel never really makes it clear whether he was/is rejuvenated by what Elvissa claims to be her efforts at bringing some truth and energy back into his life - but then because Elvissa turns out to be something of a liar, it can probably be safely assumed that he isn't.

## Tyler

Tyler is Andy's younger brother, an intriguing combination of yuppie (see below) and Generation X-er, as lost and confused as Andy but somehow aware (and perhaps sub-consciously jealous) that Andy is striving to make something different of himself and his life. There is the sense, however, that for whatever reason Tyler will be unable and/or unwilling to do with his life what Andy is doing with his.



## Andy's Parents

Andy's parents, who continue to live in the family home in Portland, Oregon, are seen/portrayed by him as the causes of his current disappointment with his life. It's an important step along his journey of transformation (letting go of blaming his past for his present uncertainty) that when he visits them at Christmas, he comes to see them as fundamentally decent people, who can't really be blamed for the way they strove to give him a good life actually made him confused and uncertain.

## Mr. MacArthur

Mr. MacArthur is the sensitive, affable owner/manager of the bar where Dag and Andy both work. He is derided by both of them as being hopelessly middle class and having no real thought of and/or interest in his life, but in spite of Andy's politely dismissive description of his life, actually comes across as somewhat content, if shallowly so.

## Yuppies

"Yuppie" is a term that, in the twenty or so years since it came into popular usage, has taken on quite a derogatory meaning. An abbreviation of the term "young urban professional," it originally was shorthand for a group of individuals defined by their living in cities, their middle-class hunger for symbols of success, and their desire for those symbols to be interpreted as meaning they were/are in fact upper class. In other words, yuppies were (are?) materialistic, greedy, shallow, and hungry for sensation - everything Andy and his friends perceive Tobias as being, and everything Tobias eventually reveals himself to be.



# Objects/Places

## Palm Springs

Palm Springs is a city in California, renowned for its hot mineral springs, and is the setting for much of the novel's narrative action. The fact that the community is a resort city - that is, a community essentially founded on the industry of leisure and/or healing - can be seen as reinforcing certain elements of the central characters' life situations. For further consideration of this idea, see "Style - Setting" and "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do you think ..."

## The Bungalow Complex

The central characters - Andy, Dag and Claire - live in a grouping of small bungalows circled around a communal swimming pool. This sense of community within a community (the community of houses within the city of Palm Springs) reinforces the idea, developed throughout the novel, that the three friends are themselves a community within a community. That is to say, they are a community of individuals striving for an identity within the larger community of those whose middle class status (as defined by Andy - see Chapter 26) has left them without identity.

## The Sun / Light

Throughout the novel, the sun and its light (not to mention light in general - see Andy's narrative of the Christmas candles, Chapter 26) serve as symbols of transcendence, new life, and hope.

## The

This well-intentioned gift from Dag to Claire (see Chapter 15) can be seen as both foreshadowing and symbolizing the toxicity of Claire's relationship with Tobias who, at the time the beads are introduced, is about to arrogantly stroll into Claire's life. The fact that Claire moves away from her home to get away from the beads symbolizes and foreshadows her eventual moving out of the relationship. Finally, the fact that Andy and Dag devote so much time and energy to cleaning up the beads represents their loyalty, not only to Claire but to the small, self-supportive and self-protective community they've found together (see "The Bungalow Complex," above).

## Elvissa's Nail Polish

The catchily named "Honolulu Choo Choo" nail polish is first introduced in Chapter 16, where it comes across as silly and frivolous (a clear contrast to Elvissa herself, who



later in that chapter and in Chapter 17 seems to reveal herself as having a significant amount of depth). Later, however (Chapter 28), Claire discovers the same nail polish in Tobias' apartment in New York, evidence that Elvissa and Tobias are still seeing each other, which is in turn evidence that Elvissa is a liar. This, in turn, suggests that Elvissa's apparent "depth" might also have been a lie. For further consideration of this aspect of Elvissa's character, see "Themes - Storytelling."

## Linda's Garden

This wild-growing garden, referred to in Claire's story in Chapter 22, functions on two levels - as a symbol of Linda's unexpected, untamed, thriving spiritual beauty as she goes deeper into her misguided healing process, and as a metaphoric expression of what seems to be Claire's deeply held, secret longing for her own sense of spirituality and inner beauty. For further consideration of the relationship between Linda and Claire, see "Characters - Otis, Edward and Linda."

## Texlahoma

Tack the first syllable of the word "Texas" onto the last three syllables of the word "Oklahoma" and you have the name "Texlahoma," the setting for one of the novel's more outrageous flights of fancy (see Chapter 8 and "Quotes," p. 39). The name conjures up images of both south-central states - heat, dryness, the city-defined explosions of wealth found in Texas juxtaposed with the desolate expanses of empty space found in both states. There is a certain patronizing quality to the characters' description of Texlahoma, as though the individuals who live there are physically, emotionally and spiritually stuck. It's clear, however, that on some level this sense of being stuck both applies to and is evocative of the three central characters being stuck (and even lost).

## The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, which took place in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, is widely regarded as one of the most significant events in 20th Century American History. Thousands of American soldiers lost their lives in what was presented to the American public as a war to protect democracy from the spread of communism, but which the public eventually saw as a vast, politically motivated betrayal of core American ideals. Opposition to the war originated on university campuses and eventually escalated into conflict on almost every socio-political-economic-racial-intellectual level of American society, and as Andy himself suggests (see Chapter 27), was the volatile backdrop for the youth and young adulthood of an entire generation.



## The Torched Car

Dag's accidental destruction of a very expensive, pretentious car (the nervous Andy his unwitting accomplice) represents his desire to destroy, or at least live without, the devotion to materialism the car embodies. It might not be going too far to suggest that because Dag describes himself (or, more accurately, is portrayed by Andy as describing himself) as the owner of such a car (see "Chapter 4"), the destruction of the car can be seen as the ultimate, specific destruction of the materialistic side of himself he claims to despise.

## Claire's Stick

The Y-shaped stick found by Claire in New York shortly after her breakup with Tobias (see Chapter 28) is described in narration as resembling a dowsing rod, a Y-shaped twig or branch that, according to folklore, is used to find water. The searcher holds the branches of the Y in either hand, allows the stem of the Y to point towards the ground, and walks about the area to be searched. The story goes that for some reason and in some way, the stem will eventually find water (in the same way, perhaps, as the stem of a tree or other plants also can be seen as pointing the way towards water in the ground). Claire's finding of the stick at that particular point in her life can be seen as representing her readiness and/or willingness to finally let go of her obsession with Tobias and, as she herself claims, find the true relationship she's been seeking. It's interesting to note that as she ends her journey of transformation, Claire finds a true side of herself not in the company of her romantic interest but in the company of her loving, supportive friends (see "Themes - The Value of Friendship").

## The White Bird and the Black Field

In the same way as the torched car symbolizes Dag's transformation (or at least the need for it) and the Y-shaped stick symbolizes Claire's, Andy's transformation and need are symbolized by the white bird and the burnt black field he encounters at the end of the novel. The most important aspect of this encounter is his discovery of spontaneous joy in the beauty and freedom of the white bird, which is totally and utterly itself, and the bird's initiation of him into that kind of selfhood as symbolized by the almost ritualized cut on the forehead. Most importantly, the transformation is marked by the unconditional and uninhibited hugs Andy receives from the bus load of mentally disabled children - a surging celebration of the bird's self-hood, Andy's initiation into his own, and the beauty and freedom associated with both.





# Themes

## Storytelling

Throughout the novel (ironically enough, as the reader is being told a story), the characters tell stories of their own. In his narration, Andy suggests that the (hobby? game?) of telling made-up stories is a result/manifestation of the desire he shares with Claire and Dag to avoid revealing themselves to each other and perhaps even to themselves (see Chapter 3). There is significant irony in this suggestion, in that the reader can easily see the thinly disguised truth behind the various stories. That is to say, Andy's story of Edward (Chapter 7), Dag's story of Otis (Chapter 12) and Claire's story of Linda (Chapter 22) can, as discussed in the analysis of those chapters, easily be seen as revealing more about the teller of the story than the teller perhaps realizes; or maybe he or she DOES realize what they're revealing, and is fully aware that telling stories is the only way s/he feels safe revealing uncomfortable self truths. For further consideration of it, see "Topics for Discussion - How aware do you think ..."

Meanwhile, it's important to note that Claire (in the Chapter 28 story of her breakup with Tobias) and Andy (in the Chapter 30 story of his dream about the pelican and the fish) both ultimately speak of themselves AS themselves. In other words, they tell truths, not stories. It's also interesting to note that in terms of the development of his character, Dag never does - the last story he tells (about what happened the night of the torching of the car) is still a disguised truth (to be polite) or an outright lie (to be blunt). The point is not made to suggest that the stories told by the other characters throughout the book are ALSO lies (although the fact that Elvissa, who seems in her story of Curtis in Chapter 18 to be a fierce advocate of the truth, turns out to be a liar, seems to suggest that they at least might be). Rather, the point is made to suggest that while Claire and Andy seem, on some level and to some degree, to be growing into their future by speaking of themselves rather than invented characters, Dag (as Andy suggests in Chapter 15) is still afraid of his. In other words, storytelling throughout the novel is simultaneously a hiding from the truth, an unconscious revealing of that truth, and a sign of immaturity. This ultimately makes Andy's statement about storytelling at the end of Chapter 1 a complex, perhaps paradoxical, certainly somewhat contradictory, statement of self semi-awareness.

## Materialism vs. Self-Expression

Throughout the novel, Andy, Dag and Claire claim that the lives they're striving to live are representative of their desire to rebel against the socio-cultural tradition of materialism that they see as having ruined the lives of their parents and as making superficial the lives of other people their age. In other words, they seem determined to both discover and express who they are as people, as individuals, rather than as target markets (to use a phrase Dag derisively employs). In taking this position, they are simultaneously embodying and rejecting the so-called "American Dream" - embodying



the ideal (of individuality, independence and freedom), but rejecting what they believe the ideal has become (materialism, greed, and self-aggrandizement).

In this context, it's possible to see a link between this theme and the thematic exploration of the value/purpose of storytelling. In the same way as materialism (for the larger community) has become a corruption of a societal ideal, storytelling (for the smaller community of the three central characters) seems to have become a corruption of the ideal of personal truth. It's possible, therefore, to see the process of truth-telling maturation experienced by at least two of the central characters as simultaneously echoing and reinforcing their process of materialism-rejecting maturation, and vice versa. In other words, by eventually making themselves accountable to and for themselves, as truth tellers and non-materialists, Andy and Claire discover and embody the value of true, multi-leveled self-expression. Dag, as discussed in "Storytelling" above, doesn't quite get there - he's still ultimately unable to face and/or reveal truths about himself without hiding behind story (unless the reader counts his sudden, albeit vividly foreshadowed, kissing of Andy in Chapter 28).

## The Value of Friendship

It could easily be argued, and with some justification, that the three central characters take refuge in their friendships with each other, hiding within their small circle of community rather than facing the struggles, joys, potential for fulfillment and almost certain emergence of pain inherent in a romantic relationship with a lover/partner. The novel seems to suggest, in fact, that there is more reward in friendship than there is in couple-hood, more unconditional love, support and trust. This idea is reinforced by the novel's clear view of coupled relationships as ultimately toxic, obsessive, and corrupt - certainly, the Claire/Tobias and Tobias/Elvissa couplings fall into that category. It's reinforced further by the way the married couples (the MacArthurs, Andy's parents, Claire's parents,) all, to varying degrees, end up in a place of significant loss of both self and individual integrity as the direct result of their respective marriages.

The main evidence for the novel's advocacy of friendships over spousal relationships is the way friendship is portrayed as a catalyst for the eventual emergence and/or revelation of personal truth. Yes, the three central characters initially reinforce each other's resistance to connection and/or revelation of personal truth by encouraging each other to tell stories and therefore camouflage their truths. By the end of the narrative, the novel seems to be suggesting that it is their unconditional acceptance of one another, flaws and all, their mutual support and trust that enables them (at least Andy and Claire) to get past that resistance and move into an experience of freedom and joyous self definition.

The transformation from self-denial to self-acceptance is dramatized by the way Claire, through letting herself be vulnerable with Andy, doesn't hide her truth (the breakup with Tobias) behind a story. It's also dramatized by Andy's climactic decision to speak of his dream of death as his, rather than as (for example) Edward's. Finally, and most vividly, Andy's friend-aided transformation into self-hood is symbolized, in the novel's final



moments, by events which, it is important to note, take place on a physical journey to join his friends and what they all see as their true, destined, free-from-materialism, full-of-self lives. These events are centered around the appearance of the white bird soaring over the burnt field - for further consideration of this image see "Style - Structure" and "Objects/Places - The White Bird and the Black Field."



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is narrated from the first person subjective point of view - that is, from the individualized, educated, idiosyncratic perspective of its central character, Andy Palmer (see "Characters"), the point of view of an individual caught between idealized but distant visions of the future and longings for a hollow but familiar past. It is also the result of a lack of any real sense of how he's going to integrate both past and future into a present vaguely fulfilling only because lack of loneliness, said lack resulting from his intense but somehow superficial friendships.

Critics have interpreted the novel's complex, self-absorbed narrative perspective as a distillation of the "Generation X" experience of everyone born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This has happened for two main reasons, the first being Andy's careful self-identification with the group he describes as "an X generation - purposefully hiding itself" (see Chapter 10). The second reason is that the other characters of the same age seem to share his point of view and his experiences (albeit manifesting it in different ways, like Tobias' superficial self-merchandising and Elvissa's self-gratification). The question, of course, is whether such an interpretation is fair, accurate, or correct. The answer is unfortunately unknowable without delving into the perspectives of far more individuals than are on display here. Ultimately, then, it seems the book's point of view is an expression of a THEORY, about the feelings, perspectives, habits and needs of a certain community within society, and the troubled, confusing pasts from which they emerged.

## Setting

There are two key points to note about the novel's setting. The first is its place in time - the end of the millennium, the transition from the year 1999 into the year 2000. Historically, there was an almost hysterical reaction to the impending transition. Spiritualists believed it was the beginning of a new age of enlightenment, while technologists were afraid that the world's computers would be unable to accommodate the necessary changes to time-and-date keeping. Ultimately, people tended to see it as a chance to have a really big party, or as a powerful symbol of uncertainty as to where the world as a whole, and individuals struggling to survive and/or be notable in that world, were headed and how they were going to get there. This last is the context in which the action of the narrative, and the questing journeys of its central characters, plays out.

The second noteworthy point about setting is its geographical setting. Palm Springs is a city in California, renowned for its hot mineral springs, and is the setting for much of the novel's narrative action. The fact that the community is a resort city - that is, a community essentially founded on the industry of leisure and/or healing - can be seen



as reinforcing certain elements of the central characters' life situations. For further consideration of this idea, see "Style - Setting" and "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do you think ..." Meanwhile, it's interesting to consider that the picnic scene early in the novel takes place in a suburb of Palm Springs, a run-down and nearly abandoned semi-ghost town. The significance of this is the thematically relevant suggestion that the lives and self-hiding practices of Andy, Dag and Claire are themselves run down, that their ways of doing things and perceiving themselves and each other are decrepit and ought themselves to be abandoned ... which, over the course of the narrative, they are.

## Language and Meaning

At the time *Generation X* was published, its language was a revelation - not just the language of the narrative, which was undeniably clever and evocative, but the way language in the book is simultaneously self-revelatory and self-referential, defining the experience and identity of the characters at the same time as it portrays them as trapped in their own self-absorbed perspectives. These perspectives are defined by what might best be described as non-academic footnotes, pointed distillations of Generation X experiences into cleverly shaped phrases, some of which have found their way into contemporary common usage. Perhaps the most well known of these is the term "McJobs," footnoted as "a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no future job in the service sector..." and a clear reference to McDonalds, the billions and billions sold fast food empire. Such footnotes, also similar in style and content to bumper stickers and advertising campaigns, are found throughout the novel and essentially summarize, often in a manner both self-awed and self-mocking, the actions and attitudes of a particular moment in the chapter. Meanwhile, it's also important to note the significance of the chapter titles, all of which perform a similar function - illuminating, often ironically, the action and/or content of each chapter. For further consideration of the chapter titles, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the titles of ..."

One final point to consider about language is the switch at the beginning of Part Two to a more diary-like perspective. While drawing the reader more intimately and immediately into the experience of the narrator, it also serves to highlight the beginnings of the narrator's (Andy's) thematically relevant transition from a story teller to a story liver. In other words, he's no longer telling the story to hide from himself, but to explore, understand, and ultimately free himself.

## Structure

The novel's structure is essentially linear, moving from event to event in chronological order. To a certain degree Part One falls outside this structure, serving more as set up or exposition, exploring (in a self-absorbed detail quite relevant to the story) the nature of the characters and their relationships before the narrative sends them on their more plot-defined journeys of transformation. That said, however, the groundwork laid in Part One is ultimately essential for the full meaning and scope of that transformation to become apparent.



Parts Two and Three are clearly divided into stages of that transformation. Part Two takes the central characters into the apparently helpless, self-absorbed depths they need to be transformed from. The beginning of Part Three takes Andy and Claire on physical journeys (Andy to his home in Portland, Claire to Tobias in New York) that eventually prove to them the necessity of taking the emotional/spiritual journey into a stronger, more active sense of independence. In short, the beginning of Part Three marks the beginning of Claire and Andy's final, climactic process of transformation from people who hide themselves behind stories into people who reveal themselves IN stories. It's interesting to note here that Dag, the character who doesn't come to a thematically relevant transcendence of self hiding the same way that Andy and Claire do, doesn't take a physical journey but stays in Palm Springs.

The novel's final chapter is set on January 1st, New Year's Day - the end of the book, but the beginning of a new millennium in the life of the world (see "Setting" above) and the beginning of new life for the characters. In other words, structurally ending the book at a time of new beginnings makes the interesting suggestion that the life cycle and experience of Generation X is like that of every other generation that's inhabited the planet. What is new comes into being at the same time as the old is fading into eternal silence, an aspect of the universe's perpetual process of destruction and renewal that's also symbolized in the final visual image of the burnt, black, dead land and the soaring, white, almost unbearably alive white bird. For further consideration of this image, see "Objects/Places - The Black Field and the White Bird."



## Quotes

"I lay myself down on the ground ... and held my breath, there experiencing a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely - a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination - a mood that surely must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out." p. 3-4

"...most of us have only two or three genuinely interesting moments in our lives, the rest is filler, and that and the end of our lives, most of us will be lucky if any of those moments ... form a story that anyone would find remotely interesting." Dag to Andy, p.24

"...my crisis wasn't just the failure of youth but also a failure of class and of sex and the future and I STILL don't know what." Dag to Andy, p. 30

"[Texlahoma] is a sad Everyplace, where citizens are always getting fired from their jobs at 7-11 and where the kids do drugs and practice the latest dance crazes at the local lake, where they also fantasize about being adult and pulling welfare check scams as they inspect each other's skin for chemical burns from the lake water." p. 39

"Inside the sedan are two couples, roughly my age ... wearing the reserved, please-don't-murder-me smile Japanese tourists in North America started adopting a few years ago. The expressions immediately put me on the defensive, make me feel angry at THEIR presumption of MY violence." P. 54

"Our parents' generation seems neither able nor interested in understanding how marketers exploit them. They take shopping at face value." p. 68

"Tobias ... embodies to me all of the people of my own generation who used all that was good in themselves just to make money ... who ended up blissful in the bottom feeding jobs - marketing, land flipping, ambulance chasing, and money brokering. Such smugness." p. 81

"I can see in [Tobias] something that I might have become ... something bland and smug that trades on its mask, filled with such rage and such contempt for humanity, such need, that the only food left for such a creature is their own flesh." p. 81

"Give parents the tiniest of confidences and they'll use them as crowbars to jimmy you open and rearrange your life with no perspective." Dag to Andy, p. 86

"In their similar quest to find a personal truth, [Claire and Elvissa] willingly put themselves on the margins of society, and this, I think, took some guts. It's harder for women to do this than men." p. 88

"...when I turned my head to walk across [the street], my face went bang, right into my first snowflake ever. It melted in my eye. I didn't even know what it was at first, but then I



saw millions of flakes ... floating downward like the shed skin of angels ... traffic was honking at us, but time stood still ... to this day I consider my right eye charmed." Claire, p. 94

"I was one of those goofy kids who always got colds and never got the hang of things like filling up gas tanks or unraveling tangled fishing rods. I'd always screw things up somehow; break something; have it die." Dag, p. 94

"I remember very clearly standing by the stove and frying a batch of bacon. I knew even then that this was the only such morning our family would ever be given - a morning where we would all be normal and kind to each other and know that we liked each other without any strings attached ... and so I was close to tears ... feeling homesick for the event while it was happening." Andy, p. 95

"...I had my suddenly young parents all to myself - them and this faint music that sounded like heaven - faraway, clear, and impossible to contact - coming from this faceless place where it was always summer and where beautiful people were always dancing ..." Tobias, p. 96

"I see hats and gems and pies - such lovely loot, begging for attention like a child who doesn't want to go to bed yet. I want to slit open my stomach and rip out my eyes and cram these sights inside me. Earth." p. 114

"When someone tells you they've just bought a house, they might as well tell you they no longer have a personality. You can immediately assume so many things: that they're locked into jobs they hate; that they're broke; that they spend every night watching videos; that they're fifteen pounds overweight; that they no longer listen to new ideas." p. 143

"...when you're middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you ... will never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you ... all happinesses are sterile; all sadnesses go unpittied ... any small moments of intense, flaring beauty such as this morning's will be utterly forgotten, dissolved by time ..." p. 147

"Growing up, Vietnam was a background color in life, like red or blue or gold - it tinted everything. And then suddenly one day it just disappeared. Imagine that one morning you woke up and suddenly the color green had vanished. I come here to see a color that I can't see anywhere else any more." Andy to Tyler, p. 151

"Only the disenfranchised can party with abandon - the young, the genuinely rich elderly, the freakishly beautiful, the kinked, the outlawed ..." p. 164





## Topics for Discussion

Consider the various memories recalled in Chapter 17, "Remember Earth Clearly." What would your most vivid, happiest memory be? Keep in mind the rule that it can't involve anything purchased, only experienced.

In what ways do you think setting the novel in the resort city of Palm Springs reinforces and/or illuminates aspects of its meaning - specifically, the situations of its characters and/or their journeys of transformation?

How do you regard how Dag, Claire and Andy all seem to be disguising truths about themselves in stories (about Otis, Linda and Edward)? Is the reader intended to see them as liars like Elvissa, manipulators like Tobias, or as Andy himself suggests, simply afraid of themselves? Explain your answer.

How aware do you think Andy, Dag and Claire are of the truths they're revealing about themselves in the stories of Edward, Otis and Linda? Why or why not? Keep in mind that the level awareness may not be the same for each character with each story.

What truths about Andy are revealed in his story about Edward? What truths about Claire are revealed in her stories about Texlahoma and Linda? What truths about Dag are revealed in his stories about Otis and the nuclear explosion?

Do you agree with the novel's apparent valuation of friendships over romantic / coupled / intimate relationships? Why or why not? How is your experience of friendship similar and/or different from your experience of a coupled relationship?

In what ways is your generation different from your parents' generation? What are the different experiences of / perspectives on history? Economics? Politics? Relationships?

Consider the titles of the various chapters and their relationship to the content of those chapters. Which illuminate the action? Which are ironic? sarcastic? foreshadowing? Which are related more to character than to action? Explain your answers.

When Andy describes his generation as "purposefully hiding itself," what do you think he and others like him are hiding from? Why do they feel it's necessary to hide?