

Half Blood Blues Study Guide

Half Blood Blues by Esi Edugyan

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Plot Summary

Half-Blood Blues is a novel by author Esi Edugyan. The story follows the main character, Sidney Griffiths, as he recounts his experiences while touring through Europe as a jazz musician prior to the Great War. During Sid's time in Berlin and Paris, he meets one of the greatest trumpet players in history, Hiero Falk.

Sid portrays himself as Hiero's friend and protector. When something comes between the two young musician, Sid ends up betraying Hiero Falk. Sid hides Hiero's visas, which can allow Hiero to escape the Nazis and so Hiero ends up being captured by the Nazis.

As the novel unfolds, Sid finds out that his oldest friend, Chip Jones, has been receiving letters from Hiero Falk, whom Sid and Chip thought was dead. Hiero goes by Thomas now and requests that Chip come to visit him where he lives in Poland. While Chip and Sid are returning to Europe, Sid is narrating the story of what happened between him and Hiero.

Ultimately, it is a woman, Delilah Brown, that comes between the two young men. While Hiero makes some moves that spurs a competition between the two men, Sid invokes the ultimate betrayal by essentially turning Hiero over to the Nazis, where Hiero ends up in a concentration camp.

In this coming of age story, Sid has to deal with the guilt of felling responsible for the betrayal and murder of his friend. When Sid is able to admit his wrongdoing, he also is able to come to terms with his mistakes when he is forgiven.



Pages 1-20

Pages 1-20 Summary

Chip, Sid, Hiero, Coleman, and Delilah are living in a flat in Paris. Chip, Sid, Hiero, and Coleman are in a band. They left Berlin, escaping to Paris in an attempt to escape the war. All of them, except Coleman, who is staying with his girlfriend, are hung over from drinking too much the night before.

When Hiero wakes up, he wants a glass of milk to help his stomach. Since they don't have any milk in the house Hiero gets his shoes and coat on to go out to get some milk. Sid follows Hiero because Hiero is young and because Hiero doesn't have any identity papers to be wandering the streets. They go to Bug's, which is the nearby tobacconist, but the shop is closed. They wander instead in the Coup, which is a bar and café.

The bartender serves Hiero a glass of milk, but says that no matter how much he drinks that it isn't going to turn him white. Sid stumbles downstairs to the bathroom to be sick. When he returns, he finds two officers checking identity papers. The two officers end up taking Hiero and a Jewish boy away.

Pages 1-20 Analysis

It appears as if the band members are all black, but some of them can pass as being white because of the lightness of their skin. This makes it easier for Sid to get around in Paris and even in Berlin because he has light skin and light eyes. There is some foreshadowing that the band came to Paris to escape the monstrosities in Berlin, which also suggests that they are going to tell the story of the events in Berlin as the novel unfolds.

Additionally, it is unusual for blacks to be traveling around in Europe, touring as a band, during the start of or during World War II. Sid references making a record a few times, which indicates that they are trying to make a break into the music business.



II Berlin 1992 Pages 21-41

II Berlin 1992 Pages 21-41 Summary

It's 1992 and Sid is packing for a trip he's leaving on the following day when Chip comes by to visit. Sid has lived in the flat for forty years, the first five with his wife Lola before she died. Sid and Chip are returning to Berlin for the first time after leaving it behind decades earlier. They are going to do interviews for a documentary about Hieronymous Falk, their old friend Hiero, who died after leaving a concentration camp.

When Chip arrives, he tells Sid he has something Sid isn't going to believe, just as it was hard for Sid to believe that the Berlin Wall fell. Chip tells Sid that Hiero isn't dead, but alive and well living in Poland, and that Hiero has been sending Chip letters. Sid questions Chip's sanity and how he knows the letters are really from Hiero.

Chip leaves and Sid starts to think about Hiero. Hiero became famous after a musicologist comes across a copy of a recording of Half-Blood Blues, a three-minute and thirty-three second song written by Hiero and performed by Hiero and the others in the band. At this point, Hiero was already dead. While the rumors vary as to what Hiero died from, Sid starts to ponder which, if any, of the presumed ailments took his friend's life.

The next morning, Sid wakes up early and takes a cab to the airport. Sid watches as Baltimore passes by outside of his taxi window. He thinks this will be the last time he goes away on a trip from his hometown. When Sid gets to the airport, he doesn't see Chip until they board the plane. The two men discover their seats are not together, even though they booked their tickets together.

When they arrive in Berlin, Sid's luggage is in Poland so the airline is going to deliver it to their hotel. Sid senses that Chip is being extra friendly and wonders why his friend is acting this way. Riding through the city to their hotel, Chip and Sid notice how much the city has changed since they lived there.

Later, Sid arrives at the theater wearing one of Chip's suits with Chip by his side. The minder, which the man taking care of them from the hotel, tells Chip and Sid that they are going to show the documentary film and then the two men will go on stage to answer questions. The documentary explains how Hiero was put into a concentration camp because he was an African-German, along with how Hiero became famous and all of the great musicians he worked with before going into the camp.

II Berlin 1992 Pages 21-41 Analysis

The inference is that when the guards took Hiero away he was placed in a concentration camp by the Nazis. While Hiero was able to survive the concentration camp, something or someone killed him after his departure from the camp. It seems as



if Chip or Sid did something that could be bad if Hiero is alive. It might be that Chip claimed that he write Half-Blood Blues instead of Hiero, who is the one responsible for writing it. This is what might have propelled Chip to fame. It doesn't seem as if Sid stole the credit for recording the song because he is the only band member that didn't become famous. Sid worked as a medical transcriptionist instead.

Sid is facing his mortality. He knows that he is getting older and that this is likely to be his last trip to of the country, and just leaving town in general. Chip can be acting extra friendly because he is going to tell Sid some bad news or he is going to ask Sid to do something that Chip knows Sid isn't going to want to do.

Sid thinks about how much Berlin has changed even if it hasn't changed at all. What he means by this is that his viewpoint of the city is different now. When he was there originally, he was young and naïve. He looks at Berlin, changed by the war, but also changed by Sid's experiences in life.



II Berlin 1992 Pages 42-52

II Berlin 1992 Pages 42-52 Summary

Sid watches as his own interview shows on the screen. Then Sid watches as Chip reveals that Sid committed a crime he's never paid for by allowing the Nazis to haul Hiero away as if Sid didn't even know Hiero. Sid rushes out of the theater, angry that one of his oldest friends has betrayed him. Sid feels as if everyone is staring at him as he leaves, even though the documentary film is still playing.

Sid thinks back when he first met Chip, when they were ten. Chip was a liar from that first day. Chip took Sid to his Tante Cecile's house, tricking the senile woman into thinking they were her son so she would give them candy.

Sid walks for a long time until he winds up ordering some food in a café. Chip shows up at the café swearing to Sid that he said a bunch of good things about Sid but that Caspar, the documentary filmmaker, just took what he wanted from the interviews to make the film. Sid pays for their food and tells Chip he's leaving on the first flight he can get.

The next day, as Sid is leaving for the airport, he sees Chip trying to drive a rental car. Sid goes over to Chip, telling him to get out of the car.

II Berlin 1992 Pages 42-52 Analysis

Chip has been so friendly to Sid because he betrayed him in the documentary. Chip throws Sid under the bus, suggesting that it's Sid's fault that jazz lost Hiero because Sid allowed the Nazis to take Hiero away without a fight. Sid thinks about the first time he met Chip because it goes to show that Chip has always been a liar and fraud artist, so he shouldn't be too surprised at what Chip said about Sid on film. Sid suggests that the last time he sees Chip is in the German café. Even though Sid blew off the rest of the festival, Sid telling Chip to slide over into the passenger seat suggests that Sid plans to continue on their journey to Poland.



III Berlin 1939 I

III Berlin 1939 I Summary

Sid and Paul are riding the trolley when they think they see Ernst sitting at a café with a woman. At the next stop, a man gets on the trolley. He strikes up a conversation with Paul about Paul not being in uniform. Paul says he's not in uniform yet. The two men say, Hail Hitler, as Paul and Sid get off the train. Sid sees Paul is angry and somewhat shaken because the two men have forged papers from Ernst, but they aren't that great.

Paul and Sid arrive at the Hound, Ernst's club. This is where the band practices on stage, even though the club is defunct now. Hiero is already on stage practicing. As the boys practice, Ernst shows up with the woman they saw him with at the café, Delilah Brown. She's a singer who represents Louis Armstrong and she invites the band to go to Paris to make a record.

Hiero, Ernst and Paul meet Fritz and Chip at the bathhouse. at first, they talk about Paul choosing between the two women he's dating, Inge and Marta. Then, they tell the others about the record deal with Louis Armstrong. They decide they should go but wonder how to get the papers and visas they need to go from Germany to France. Fritz seems hesitant about going. Ernst leaves to go back to the Hound to work.

When the others leave, three Boots, which are the Nazi officers, attack Paul and Hiero. The others join in the fight to free their friends. Chip ends up using a broken bottle to stab one of the Boots in the chest. Then, Sid and the rest of the band members run from the scene.

III Berlin 1939 I Analysis

Previously, Chip eludes to the fact that Sid and Hiero allowed a woman to come between them. Now that the story line introduces Delilah Brown, showing how she met the boys, it suggests that it is Delilah that ends up coming between Sid and Hiero. Delilah represents an angel to the jazz band because she is providing them with a way to leave Berlin, possibly saving their lives, and providing them with an opportunity to make the record they dream of making.



III Berlin 1939 II Pages 72-88

III Berlin 1939 II Pages 72-88 Summary

The band members are at the Hound. Fritz is pulling the shards of glass out of Chip. They're talking about having to stay inside to see how bad the backlash is going to be from them attacking the three Boots. Fritz says he has a bad feeling and he thinks Delilah showing up and them being attacked in the same night is not a coincidence.

Delilah wakes the boys up in the next morning, looking for Ernst at the Hound. She says she ran into Fritz and he told her what happened. Delilah and Paul banter back and forth with each other, while Paul scours the newspaper for a story about the incident the previous night. Ernst comes out of his office when someone starts knocking on the front door and calling out for them to open the door in German. The musicians start to run to hide.

They end up hiding in a space under the floor together. They can hear the Boots tossing items around and searching for them above their heads. After the Boots leave, they stay inside the floor for some time to make sure the Boots don't return. When the musicians climb out, Ernst tells them he called his father to help them get out of Berlin and go to Paris. They all say Fritz isn't going to be happy, but Ernst says Fritz will live.

Delilah and Sid climb up in the flies on the stage to talk. Delilah points out that Hiero looks up to Sid. Sid tells Delilah that Paul discovered Hiero when Hiero was practicing on day and that both men lived on the same street. Delilah tells Sid the story of how Louis Armstrong discovered her after she went to Chicago from Canada to try to make it as a singer when she was sixteen. Chip and Hiero join in the conversation when they start joking around with Chip about what his middle initial, C, stands for.

III Berlin 1939 II Pages 72-88 Analysis

It seems as if the Boots have tracked the musicians in the fight to the Hound. It seems as if Delilah is falling in love with Hiero. She seems fascinated by his talent and his innocence. On the other hand, Sid seems to be falling in love with Delilah. This is going to create a love triangle, which is the love triangle that Chip later suggests made Sid jealous enough to allow the Nazis to drag Hiero off to the camp.



III Berlin 1939 II Pages 89-107

III Berlin 1939 II Pages 89-107 Summary

Chip and Paul are playing cards while they talk to Sid about how he can land Delilah. Chip tells Sid that he hasn't to get rid of Hiero first. This is when Hiero walks from backstage with Delilah following him. As Sid watches how Hiero and Delilah are interacting, Sid realizes that he does have to do something to win Delilah over.

After being in the Hound for a few days, Sid realizes Hiero gave Delilah a stray cat as a present. In an attempt to win her over, Sid tries to give Delilah his coat to keep her warm. Because Sid is drunk, he ends up struggling to get his arms out of the coat and making a fool of himself. Later, Sid finds out Delilah is upstairs in Ernst's office alone.

Sid goes there to apologize to her for accidentally calling her frigid, when he was trying to offer her his coat to keep her warm. Delilah removes her headscarf to show Sid that she's bald. He kisses her and tells her he thinks he's falling in love with her. Delilah leads Sid to Ernst's couch, pulling Sid on top of her.

The next morning, when Sid wakes up on the couch, Delilah isn't there. When he talks to Chip and Hiero, Sid finds out that Paul is missing too. Sid tells them about Paul saying he needed something from the flat and Sid suggesting Paul enlists Delilah's help.

Fritz shows up. He admits he's been staying at a condominium owned by Chip's adversary. Fritz says he heard Paul was arrested and sent to a camp. He also tells the band that he's leaving to go play with the Golden Seven, which is a competitor.

III Berlin 1939 II Pages 89-107 Analysis

Sid says he like a loaded rifle. He's using this as a metaphor to suggest that he's getting angry about the relationship Hiero and Delilah are forming. Sid intends to prepare himself so he can steal Delilah away from Hiero to keep her for himself. The amount of alcohol Chip starts to drink when they are holed up in the Hound reveals the beginning of Chip's alcoholism.

Delilah and Paul missing half the day suggests they've been picked up by the Boots. This also suggests that the Boots will be there soon to pick up the rest of them. They assume Delilah too has been arrested since they believe she was with Paul.



III Berlin 1939 III

III Berlin 1939 III Summary

Sid wakes up in the car, which is bouncing over the roads to Hamburg before they leave for Paris. Hiero bangs his fists on the back of Ernst's seat, yelling that he left his horn at the Hound. They are pulled over by two Boots, but Ernst talks to them and then they continue on their journey.

Ernst drives them to the mansion where he grew up. The butler and then Ernst's mother and sister, who is in a wheelchair after contracting polio at the age of four, greet them. The next morning, everyone wakes up to a new suit and even the car has been washed and shined up in preparation for their journey. Chip and Liesel, Ernst's sister, seem to have taken an interest in one another. Even Sid and Hiero have experienced a change in their relationship since they left Berlin.

Sid and Hiero go off on a drive alone together. Hiero takes Sid to a zoo where the animals are not in cages but contained by moats. There is a village there of Africans living in huts. They leave the zoo and go sit by the water. Sid recalls the first time he saw Hiero and the first time he heard the kid play. This is when Sid realizes that what Delilah saw in Hiero is how vulnerable Hiero is. Sid reassures Hiero that they are going to be okay.

A few days later, Ernst runs into Sid in the driveway. Ernst tells Sid that his father is back and that he wants to introduce him. They go to his father's office, where Ernst's father gives them an envelope with papers for all of them. They extract Paul and Fritz's documents. When they leave, Sid asks where Ernst's papers are and Ernst says he's not going.

Chip, Hiero and Sid leave Ernst behind. They reach the border between Germany and France. The German soldiers check their papers and eventually allow them through. At first, the French soldiers try to make them turn around and go back. When they say they're Americans, the French soldiers allow them to pass through into France.

III Berlin 1939 III Analysis

Ernst intends on asking his father for help to get him and the others out of Germany and into Paris. Ernst is using his family's money and power to help get them safely to Paris. Hiero implies that he comes from the tribe of Africans that are living near the zoo in Germany, where Hiero takes Sid. Hiero is trying to show Sid where he came from and what Hiero had to overcome in order to be able to play music. Crossing the border, crossing over between the east and the west, represents crossing over into freedom and the birth of a new life.



IV Berlin 1992

IV Berlin 1992 Summary

Chip tries apologizing to Sid as they pull up to the area that formerly was the Berlin Wall. Sid tells Chip that he has to make it right. Chip agrees. Sid continues to the airport where they board a plane to Poland. Sid asks Chip if Hiero knows they're coming to visit him but Chip admits that Hiero doesn't know that they're coming right now.

When they land, they board an ancient looking bus to take them the rest of the way. Chip mentions the first jazz club they went into as thirteen year olds. Chip played the drums on stage with the band. After, whores took the boys to separate bedrooms and Sid receives his first experience with oral sex. The boys run out separately, but meet up again in the street.

The journey continues. Passengers get off the bus at each stop. Sid and Chip talk about why Hiero chose to come live in Poland. Sid thinks about the documentary film and how it exposed many of the lies Hiero Falk had told them. One is that a French soldier supposedly raped his mother and his father stepped up to marry her—to do the right thing. When Hiero was born black, they realize his biological father is not a French soldier, but a tall black man from Senegal that Marieanne, Hiero's mother loved.

They stop at a rest area for food. Chip and Sid end up being the last two passengers. When Sid finds Hiero's letter in Chip's bag, Sid realizes Hiero has changed his name to Thomas and that Hiero never asks about Sid. Hiero only asks for Chip to come visit him.

IV Berlin 1992 Analysis

As Chip and Sid continue on their journey together, the journey represents both their pasts and their futures. The men have been friends for close to seven decades, so they have experienced numerous situations together. It is ironic that Hiero chooses to live out his life in Poland rather than move somewhere away from the Nazis and that situation after being freed from the internment camp. Additionally, it is ironic that Hiero writes to and requests that Chip come to visit him when it was Sid and Hiero that were close. This suggests that something happened between Hiero and Sid that has not yet been revealed in the novel.



V Paris 1939 I

V Paris 1939 I Summary

Hiero, Sid and Chip spend their first night in Paris sleeping in the car. They go to a café for breakfast and Chip goes to call Louis Armstrong. When Chip returns, he says they have to stay in Montmartre, where they are, for the next couple of hours. As they're waiting, Sid spots Delilah walking toward the café.

The three reunite with Delilah. She leads them toward where Louis is, whom she says still isn't well. As they enter the hotel lobby, they fill Delilah in on what happened to Fritz and Ernst. She also tells them that France declared war on Germany the previous afternoon. Delilah leads them into Louis's room and introduces everyone.

Sid drives to Lila's apartment to start unloading their stuff. He finds out that Lilah told Hiero she was leaving Berlin and Hiero just let Sid suffer thinking Lilah was dead. The three men sleep in the living room—one on the couch and the other two on the floor. Lilah has a bedroom, but she stays out all night and doesn't come home.

Over the next few days, the musicians watch as the people hunch over their wireless radios to hear news about the war. They wait to play music with Louis. The consul calls for all Americans without business in France to leave. That night at dinner, Sid and Lilah talk about how men came to take Paul away. She says they weren't Boots and were calling him Jude. Bill Coleman, a trumpet player, comes up to their table to talk to Lilah and introduce himself to Sid.

On the walk home, Lilah says she can't be with Sid like before. That night, they make love for the second time.

V Paris 1939 I Analysis

It seems as if Lilah has some sort of a secret. She has a secret life. This life is holding her back from being in a normal relationship with Sid. On the other hand, however, Lilah wants to be with Sid. Lilah is struggling with her feelings for Sid just as much as he is struggling with his feelings for her.



V Paris 1939 II

V Paris 1939 II Summary

The day comes when Chip, Hiero and Sid get to Play with Louis. Sid starts to play bad and everyone looks at him, but then he seems to get it back together. Louis names Hiero, Little Maestro and Little Louis. Louis asks about Hitler and what's going on in Germany. They tell him about Paul, their piano player. When Louis and Hiero start playing together again, for the first time, Sid hears the talent Hiero has.

As they leave, Chip asks Sid what happened. Sid says he choked. When Sid gets back to Lilah's flat, he tells her that he was awful and then she seduces him. Louis does decide to use another player on the record in place of Sid. When he goes to tell Lilah, they get into a little argument over the love Lilah shows to Hiero, which she says is brotherly-sisterly love because Hiero doesn't have anyone.

As the winter wears on, Sid continues to pout. He runs into Louis one day, who convinces Sid that Sid knows the talent Sid possesses. Louis also tells Sid that the others need him. This is when Sid's attitude starts to change. By spring, the war hits France.

V Paris 1939 II Analysis

Sid is blinded by his selfishness. The only thing he sees is his desire to be a great musician. He isn't aware of how he affects other people's lives with his actions. He also isn't paying attention to how other people affect his life and his emotions. Now that the war is in France, all of their lives are going to change drastically.



V Paris 1939 III

V Paris 1939 III Summary

As the war rages on, Delilah comes in one day saying that they are rounding up Germans in France. This is when she plans to get them fake papers so they can get Hiero into the United States. The weeks go by and they get word from Louis, who is touring in the south, urging them to leave Europe. The record falls by the wayside. Hiero stops eating.

Delilah pays to get them papers, but when the girl provides them the papers, Hiero's are not included. She says his papers are more difficult. When they return with the papers, Chip tells them that Ernst's car has been stolen. They go to report the theft the following morning. When Chip and Sid return, they find a note from Delilah saying she's gone to get them train tickets to leave Paris because the government pulled out the night before.

Chip and Sid head to the train station to look for Delilah and Hiero. They are swept up in the crowd of people trying to leave Paris. They end up finding Delilah and Hiero near a tree outside of the station. Hiero is beat because he was mistaken for a Senegalese soldier trying to flee. They decide to return to Paris. On the walk home, he stops once in a while to spit up blood.

The next day, the city is deserted. The group realizes that the French have evacuated rather than to stay and fight. They decide they want to record their own record and intend to enlist Billy Coleman's help to do it. A few days later, they go to Coleman's studio, to record Half-Blood Blues, but the electricity is out. The group plays for the first time since Sid messed up when playing for Louis.

The next morning, they wake to hearing Boots marching through the city. The next morning, someone knocks on the door of the flat. When Sid opens the door, he finds an envelope with Hiero's papers tucked under the mat. The papers are for Hiero to go to Switzerland, however, instead of America with the rest of the band.

When Delilah comes into the flat, she asks for the visa because she ran into the delivery guy in the street. Sid denies that he received them. In the meantime, Hiero's illness continues to worsen and he has a high fever.

V Paris 1939 III Analysis

In the face of war, Sid and his friends are looking for a bright spot. For them, the light at the end of the tunnel is recording their own record. Now that the war is officially coming to Paris, they know that the time is now or never. Ironically, the war doesn't come to Paris at all. While the French didn't remain in the city to fight off the Germans, the Germans don't intend to try to take Paris.



Sid lying about receiving Hiero's papers is his final attempt to get rid of Hiero so that he isn't a wedge between Sid and Delilah. As Sid secretly keeps the papers from Delilah and Hiero, at the same time he keeps assuring Hiero that he's going to take care of him. This reveals the evil and sinister side of Sid, where he is selfish enough to sacrifice Hiero's life for Sid's own happiness.



VI Poland 1992

VI Poland 1992 Summary

As Chip and Sid make their way to Hiero's home, Sid thinks about his old friends. He recalls how Ernst was shot and killed in the eye during the war. He also thinks about how one of Paul's old rivals was responsible for Paul's death in the streets of Berlin. Fritz ended up hiding out from the Gestapo in a brothel, but died of starvation when wandering in the woods. Delilah said goodbye to Sid in New York Harbor and returned to Canada. She married and then died two years later of blood cancer.

When they finally reach Hiero's house, they find Hiero, ravaged by age, sitting in a chair in his living room. The white milky film on his eyes reveal Hiero is blind. Chip and Hiero greet one another and then Chip admits he has Sid with him. Hiero feels Sid's face and sees Sid is crying. The two men embrace.

They talk about how Hiero, who now goes by Thomas, came to live there. He offers the men what he has of food and drink, saying the woman who comes in once a week is due to bring him some supplies. They talk about how Hiero didn't tell them he was a live because he was afraid Chip would come drag him out, and Hiero says he's let the music go now. When Sid goes to bed that night, he knows he has to tell Hiero the truth about the visas. He also knows this will cause him to lose his friend forever.

After dreaming about Hiero being in the concentration camp, Sid decides the next morning that he cannot admit the truth to Hiero. When Hiero comes into the kitchen, however, Sid starts to tell him the truth. Sid admits to Hiero and Chip that he hid the visas so they could finish recording. Hiero leaves the house. Thomas returns to the house and tells Sid he "sees" him just like he was fifty years ago.

VI Poland 1992 Analysis

Guilt is starting to eat away at Sid. This feeling propels Sid to finally confess to Hiero about what happened with Hiero's visas decades earlier. Sid feels as if it could have change Hiero's entire life if Hiero had been able to get out of Paris and go to Switzerland, as the visas would have permitted him to do. Thomas forgives Sid for hiding his visas and prohibiting Hiero from escaping Paris and getting to Switzerland.



Characters

Sidney Griffiths

Sidney Griffiths is the main character and narrator of the novel. He is African American. Sidney is originally from Baltimore, Maryland. Sid, however, is in Paris and Berlin during his younger years.

While traveling through Berlin and Paris, Sid is trying to make it as a jazz musician. Even though he is a black man, he has light skin. For this reason, Sid often passes as a white person. Sid also speaks fluent German.

After Sid returns to the United States after the war, he stops chasing his dream of being a musician. He works for almost thirty years as a medical transcriptionist. Sid also marries but his wife dies prior to Sid recounting his story.

Sid ends up betraying one of his fellow band members, Hiero, back in Paris. Sid does this out of spite for the attention Hiero receives from the woman Sid loves, Delilah. Sid lives with the regret his entire life, but when he finds out Hiero is alive, well, and living in Poland, Sid travels to see his old friend and confess his betrayal.

Hiero Falk

Hiero Falk is a young musician. He plays the trumpet in Sid's jazz band. Hiero has darker skin than Sid, even though Hiero has a white mother and a black father. It is one of the fellow band members that discovers how talented Hiero is and recruits him to play with the band.

Hiero is German, so he too speaks fluent German. Hiero is younger than the other members of the jazz band. Hiero is also very sweet innocent and naïve. It seems as if Hiero is competing with Sid for Delilah's affections, but he seems to do it in a way that appears as if he is not competing with Sid.

His fellow band members believe Hiero died while in a concentration camp, after being imprisoned by the German. Hiero survives the concentration camp, however, and moves to Poland. While living in Poland, Hiero goes blind. While Hiero stops pursuing his dream of playing music, he becomes famous after he is thought to be dead, when someone finds the recording the band made of Half-Blood Blues.

Bill Coleman

Bill Coleman is also a black man living in Paris. He is a trumpet player. Sid meets Bill Coleman while Sid is in Paris. Bill is one of Lilah's friends. When the band decides to record Half-Blood Blues, they go to Bill Coleman's studio to record it.



Delilah Brown

Delilah Brown is a light-skinned black woman. She is originally from Canada. She is a singer who works with Louis Armstrong. She wears a turban on her head because she is partially bald. Delilah has small crooked teeth, boyish hips, and a tawny skin color. Delilah travels from Paris to Berlin to get the band to go to Berlin so they can record with Louis Armstrong.

Chip Jones

Chips Jones stands five foot four inches tall. He is Sid's oldest friend and former band mate. Chips is also a former drug addict that's been clean for fifteen years. Chip's face is wrinkled and pock-marked. In the modern portions of the novel, Chip is eighty-three years old but still maintains a hectic touring schedule with a band. Chip is a drummer and once played the drums for the jazz band he was in with Sid. Chip is the one responsible for reuniting Hiero and Sid in the early '90s.

Lola

Lola is Sid's wife. He marries her after returning to the United States when he fled Paris. Lola dies prior to Sid retelling the story that is the plot of the novel.

Tante Cecile

Tante Cecile is Chip's senile old aunt when Chip and Sid are kids. Tante Cecile thinks Sid and Chip are her sons when the boys are around ten years old. Tante Cecile gives Chip and Sid candy.

Paul Butterstein

Paul Butterstein has blonde hair and blue eyes. He also has very pale skin and is Jewish. He plays the piano in the jazz band. Many of the Aryans in Berlin believe Paul is one of them. Prior to the band escaping Berlin, Paul is taken into a concentration camp, where he later dies.

Fritz

Fritz is tall and wide man. He's Bavarian. His nose is strong and resembles the beak of a hawk. His hair is blonde and looks like straw. Fritz ends up going to play with a different band prior to the rest of his band mates leaving Berlin for Paris. Fritz later dies from starvation while hiding out in the woods during the war.

Marienne Falk

Marienne Falk is Hiero's mother. She was in love with a French soldier. She lies and says she was in love with a French soldier, but when Hiero is born, it is obvious that his father is black.



Objects/Places

Berlin

Berlin is a city in Germany. It is also where Sid and the others are touring to try to make it as band musicians when the war breaks out. The band members try to leave Berlin to escape the war and to go to Paris to record with Louis Armstrong.

Paris

Sid and the others are in Paris when the war officially breaks out. They remain in Paris, waiting for Hiero's visas to leave the country. While they are in Paris, the Nazis imprison Hiero in one of the internment camps.

Baltimore

Baltimore is a city in Maryland. It is where Sid is from originally. Sid returns to Baltimore to live after he leaves Paris during the war. Sid leaves Baltimore to make the return trip to Europe for the Falk Festival.

Mathausen

Mathausen is a concentration camp. It is the concentration camp where the Nazis take Hiero when they capture him in Paris. Hiero survives his stay at Mathausen and is released by the end of the war.

Cafe

The band members frequent a café in Paris. The cafe is where Hiero and Sid are trying to buy a glass of milk when the Nazis pick up Hiero. They call the woman who runs the café Bug.

Hound

The House is the club that Ernst runs. The club is officially shut down because he allows blacks in it. Now, the Hound, is a rundown building that Ernst sold so they can have fuel to cook and keep warm during the winter months. The Hound is where the band members hide after Chip stabs one of the Boots and prior to them leaving for Paris.



Half-Blood Blues Recording

Half-Blood Blues is the name of the recording Sid, Hiero and Chip make with Bill Coleman. It is this recording that someone discovers after Hiero's supposed death. Half-Blood Blues is what makes Hiero famous, spurring the documentary about him.

Falk Festival

Sid and Chip travel back to Europe for the Falk Festival. The festival is in honor of Hiero Falk as a great musician. One of the festivities includes the unveiling of the documentary about the musician and his life.

Poland

Poland is where Hiero moves after leaving the concentration camp. Sid and Chip travel to Poland to reunite with Hiero. They are in Hiero's home in Poland when Sid admits to what he did.

Letters

Hiero writes letters to Chip. The letters reveal that Hiero is alive and not dead. In his letters, Hiero requests that Chip come to visit him in Poland.



Themes

Relationships

One of the primary themes running through the novel is relationships. The two primary relationships that the novel tackles are romantic relationships and relationships between friends.

Both Sid and Hiero put more stock in their relationships with their friends than they do with their own family members. Additionally, music is more important to Sid than anyone in his life., although, many of Sid's friends are also his bandmates.

The novel also delves into romantic relationships. While Sid and Delilah are not officially in a romantic relationship, Sid is in love with Delilah. The novel focuses on how Sid's love for Delilah and his desire for her to be in a relationship with him drives Sid to withhold important paperwork from Hiero that could have changed the outcome of Hiero's life, including not landing him in a camp.

Finally, the novel touches on the line between friendship and romance when it comes to guys and girls having relationships. Delilah is the only woman among a group of young men that pay in a band together. Delilah seems to waver in how she feels about Sid and how she feels about Hiero. Sid, on the other hand, has romantic feelings for Delilah. He even goes so far as to admit that he loves Delilah. While Delilah often requests Sid tell her he loves her, Delilah never says that she loves Sid.

Competition

Sid is an aspiring musician and the idea of someone who is seeking fame suggests to the reader that he is highly competitive. Even Hiero, one of Sid's band members, thinks that Sid is competitive. In this situation, the two young men are competing over Delilah's affections. In fact, each of the men engage in behaviors that are an attempt to demean the other to try to win Delilah over for their own.

Chip and Paul both see Sid as competitive and this causes them to give Sid advice on how he should undermine Hiero and win Delilah over. When Sid sees the opportunity to get rid of Hiero once and for all, Sid hides Hiero's visas so that Hiero is not permitted to leave Paris. If not for the idea of competition, Sid might not have acted as he did, making competition a theme of the novel.

War

The novel is set during the Great War. Although the war is in another country, hundreds of miles from where the young men live, they soon find themselves living with the war

hanging over their heads. As Paris is cut off from the rest of the world, food diminishes and life as they know it is changed forever.

The novel begins in what appears to be a carefree lifestyle, where a group of young jazz musicians are touring Europe and trying to make it in the music business. However, the narrator tells the reader almost immediately that some twists and turns are ahead of them that can make the difference between life and death. This is because Sid ends up allowing his jealousy take over his emotions. It does not appear that the war is that big of a deal to the band members, but the war continues to intrude into their little world.

In the end, the war changes the course of all of their lives. The war is what ends up landing Hiero in a camp and then pretending as if he is dead so he can live out the rest of his life in peace in Poland.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view, from the perspective of the main character, Sidney Griffiths. The point of view of this novel is intimate, allowing a reader to connect closely with the main character, Sid. Sid narrating the story allows the reader to get inside Sid's head, thoughts and inner struggles. The reader cares what happens to the narrator. The point of view also allows the author to inject opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the other characters and the occurrences taking place.

Setting

The primary setting of the novel changes throughout the novel. Berlin, Paris, and Baltimore are all settings throughout the novel. The novel takes place during the years leading up to and during the Great War. Then, the novel unfolds in the early '90s. The main characters are involved in the daily life of black musicians traveling throughout Europe when the war breaks out.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware how the main character is responsible for putting Hiero in an internment camp. However, as events unfold, Sid's actions are a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters and even the outcome of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is relatively simple and easy to read. The language is from the 20th century, which is when the novel is set. The language is descriptive enough that it helps to explain the situations and is detailed enough for the reader to truly understand. There are also some French and German phrases throughout the novel because of the setting of the novel.

Structure

The novel contains six different parts. Each part is broken down into the year and location of the novel. Each section ranges from 20 to 50 pages long. The story unfolds primarily in exposition and with some dialogue. The author injects his own voice and thoughts throughout the book, providing his opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel. The narrator, Sid, switches back and forth between the past and the present.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is that of human relationships - romantic ones and friendships. One subplot is competition. Another subplot is war.



Quotes

"But I warn you, you drink all the milk in France, you still not turn white" (II Berlin 1992, p. 13).

"These people are lost in the dark maw of history" (II Berlin 1992, p. 41).

"I mean, there he stood, denying his friend, pretending he didn't even know him, while they dragged the poor boy away" (II Berlin 1992, p. 43).

"I'm offering you a way out" (III Berlin 1939 I, p. 61).

"We in trouble, buck" (III Berlin 1939 II, p. 81).

"He was deported to Sachsenhausen" (III Berlin 1939 II, p. 105).

"We Americans" (III Berlin 1939 III, p. 129).

"In his letters, the kid didn't ask me to visit him at all. Everything was addressed to you" (IV Berlin 1992, p. 146).

"Aw girl. You goin break my heart" (V Paris 1939 I, p. 171).

"A man ain't just got his one talent" (V Paris 1939 II, p. 186).

"I ain't goin let nothing happen to you" (V Paris 1939 III, p. 214).

"I see you, Sid. I see you like it was fifty years ago. Exactly like that" (VI Poland 1992, p. 228).

Topics for Discussion

Who is the true Sidney Griffiths? Why do you think he decides to lie about Hiero's visas when they are trying to escape Paris? Why do you think Sid returns to see Hiero? What do you think happens to Sid after he admits the truth to Chip and Hiero?

Discuss the relationship between Sid and Delilah. Do you think they are really in love or do you think it is one sided? Why do you think Delilah leads Sid on, but then pushes him away again? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Sid feel about Delilah? How does Delilah feel about Sid? How do Delilah's feelings change after Sid lies about Hiero's visas?

Discuss the relationship between Sid and Chip. Are they best friends or something else? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Sid feel about Chip? How does Chip feel about Sid? How do Sid's feelings change? What does he do about it? What happens to Chip?

Discuss the relationship between Sid and Hiero. Are they friends, acquaintances or something else? Is there true competition in their relationship? Why do you think Sid makes Hiero think that he's taking care of Hiero? Do you think Hiero's life would have been different if Sid gave Hiero the visas when they were in Paris?

Who is the true Chip? Why do you think he acts like he is so tough? Do you think he knew what Sid did to Hiero? Why do you think Chip invites Sid to go visit Hiero with him? Why do Chip and Sid remain friends over the years?

Who is Delilah? Do you think she is in love with Hiero, or do you think she cares about what happens to Hiero? Why do you think she returns to Canada and never speaks to Sid again? What role does Delilah play in Sid and Hiero's relationship?

Discuss Hiero's decision to write the letter to Chip. What impact does it have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them and how does it derail their lives?