

# **Ham on Rye Study Guide**

**Ham on Rye by Charles Bukowski**

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## Plot Summary

Henry says his first memory is of being under something. He thinks it was a table. It was 1922 in Germany, and he was between one and two years old. His memories are spotty and among them is food. He says people were "always eating". Then the entire family is in America. He has limited contact with his grandmother and almost none with his grandfather. Henry's life consists of both a series of beatings at the hands of his father, Big Henry, and the disinterest of a timid mother.

Henry is forbidden to interact with other children in the neighborhood. His parents feel that the other children are poor and beneath Henry, though they barely struggle through the Depression themselves. Henry breaks away from that to some degree, and does eventually manage to make some friends although he himself always drives them away. When Henry is still very young, he's put to work mowing the lawn each Saturday. He has just begun to make friends with some other boys in the neighborhood and now misses out on their Saturday play time. When he finishes mowing, his father gets on his hands and knees to check for "hairs"—any stray weeds that are sticking up above the accepted level of the grass. For any hairs, Henry is beaten with a razor strop. He says that it's simply accepted that he's to be beaten each week.

Henry still manages to have some friends in the neighborhood, and has just begun to fit in when his father forces him to transfer to Chelsea High—a school traditionally attended by children of wealthy families. There, Henry is again an outcast, though he's joined by several other outcasts. Henry graduates and begins working as a stock clerk at a department store. He says that the "caste system" is alive and well and that the stock clerks are lower than the store clerks and unworthy of their notice. After just a week at the job, Henry is taunted by former classmates and beats one of them up, prompting his boss to fire him.

Henry's father then sends Henry to college because tuition is free, used books are cheap, and having a son in college is more acceptable than having a son without a job. At the advice of a friend, Henry takes journalism because he believes it will be easy. He sells his books, buys booze, and falls into a routine of drinking. His father finds some short stories Henry has written and throws him out of the house for the content.

Henry moves out, makes money by writing term papers for other students and by gambling, and prepares himself for a life on skid row once he quits college. He meets up with a former college classmate, Becker, who is now in the Marines. The two are having a drink when news comes that Pearl Harbor has been bombed. Henry and Becker part and Henry goes to a penny arcade where he loses two games of robotic boxing against a young Mexican boy.



# Chapters 1 through 5

## Chapters 1 through 5 Summary

Henry says his first memory is of being under something. He thinks it was a table. It was 1922 in Germany, and he was between one and two years old. His memories are spotty and among them is food. He says people were "always eating". Then the entire family is in America. Henry remembers visiting his grandmother in Pasadena and playing her piano. He remembers visiting his grandfather, though his parents didn't get out of the car. Instead, Henry gets out alone and says that his grandfather is "the most beautiful man I have ever known". His grandfather gives him "a gummy badge" from his years of service in the German military and a pocket watch.

Henry's family has a Model T and he says that on many Sundays when his grandmother didn't visit the family would go for a ride, often with a picnic basket. One day, the picnic basket was empty and his father drives to an orange grove where he begins picking oranges. The grove owner appears with a gun and chases them away.

Henry describes his family and that his father talks badly of his own brothers who are alcoholics and "ne'er do wells", and of Katherine's brother in Germany. One day, they go visit Big Henry's brother, Ben, who is dying in a sanitarium.

Another day, the family goes in search of Henry's Uncle John. When they arrive at his house, Henry's Aunt Anna answers the door and says John has left them. Her daughters, Katherine and Betsy, are making peanut butter sandwiches and are scraping the jar to get enough for two. As Henry and his family leave, Henry's mother gives them some food. She says Big Henry wouldn't allow her to give cash so that John can't spend it for gin or gas. Anna says it's "lovely" and that she can't wait to show her daughters.

It's about this time that Henry says he has begun to hate his father. He cites his father's tendency to create scenes wherever they are. For example, they are in a diner and he complains of "fly shit" in the whipped cream and then threatens to "burn this place down". When Henry begins kindergarten, he's exposed to his first encounter with other children. He becomes obsessed with bathroom practices and says that he felt the other children had "something dirty" in the bathroom so he himself holds it all day. In grammar school, he says that he doesn't think his teacher ever went to the bathroom and that he hated her. Henry also talks of the fights among the boys at school, and that by the time he got through the afternoon fights he'd have lost the need to relieve himself.

## Chapters 1 through 5 Analysis

Henry doesn't explain any of his family situation, including why the family came to America from Germany and why his grandfather is estranged. It's interesting to note that Henry's father tells him to stop playing the piano but his grandmother intervenes and Henry continues to play. Big Henry—as his father is sometimes called—doesn't object,



but in future years he will be very strict with Henry, often beating him for minor offenses. Henry's mother never stands up for Henry and his grandmother won't be around when those beatings occur.

Henry notes that his father would show him "magic tricks" with a package of Camel cigarettes. It's interesting that Henry and his father seem to have a good relationship when Henry is so young, as it will deteriorate badly in later years. Henry will say that his father "doesn't like me". Henry doesn't explain the incident in the orange grove, but his father will much later say that he's tired of driving a milk truck and wants to sue a drunk who runs over Henry so that he'll never have to work again. It seems that he's ranting against the wealthy who have plenty.

Henry's father is rude to Ben, asking where all his girlfriends are now and threatening to tell the nurses that he has cigarettes. Ben says, "You're not going to do shit". Big Henry shows no signs of compassion for his brother, who is dying at age twenty-four. Big Henry does give a clue here about his own childhood by saying that his father, Leonard, was never good to his children unless he was drunk.

Big Henry says he's heard that John is wanted by the police for rape, and Anna stands up for her husband. She says she's certain the girl enticed John, but Big Henry asks how she would like to be raped. It's interesting that on this trip Henry's mother stands up for Jack. She says that Jack "never had a chance" because he left home early. She says that at least Big Henry finished high school. He corrects her, saying he went to college. Katherine hadn't known this, which seems strange considering that they are husband and wife and have apparently been married for some years.

Henry is having a lonely childhood. He is not allowed to play with neighborhood children because his father says those children are poor. Though Henry's father drives a milk wagon and the family is not wealthy, they imagine themselves to be. It's likely that Henry's parents also lead a lonely lifestyle but there's no indication why they make this choice unless it's their sense that they are better than other people.



# Chapters 6 through 10

## Chapters 6 through 10 Summary

A boy named David begins sitting next to Henry at school. Henry says that he doesn't like the boy, but he allows it and David shares his potato chips. David catches up with Henry that afternoon and they walk home together. Some boys circle the two and bloody David's nose and tear his shirt. They don't beat on Henry, though there's no real explanation. At David's house, Henry waits outside for a few minutes and hears David's mother berate him for his torn shirt and then beat him. A short time later, David begins playing the violin but Henry says the music is sad and he hates it.

As a first grader, Henry gets his chance at bat and hits a home run. One of the other players says that they should put Henry on the "regular team" that plays teams from other schools, but Stanley Greenberg says no. Henry says that Stanley is right and that he never hits another home run but that the other students always remember that one. Another day, Henry is hit in the back of the head with a football. He says he's certain they hit him on purpose and he goes for Billy Sherril, who had thrown the ball. A teacher, Mr. Hall, breaks up the fight. Henry goes to the principal, Mr. Knox, who sends a note home to Henry's parents.

Henry's father beats him with a razor strop. When Henry comes out of the bathroom, he tells his mother that the beating "wasn't right", and asks why she didn't help him. She says that "the father is always right". Henry says that he feels he's something that belongs to his father, just like his father's roses. By dinnertime, Henry is able to go downstairs for dinner, though he is in pain. He asks to be excused, but they make him stay at his place until he finishes eating. His father makes the remark that Henry is to "eat every carrot, and 'pee' on his plate". He laughs at the joke and Henry's mother pretends to be shocked.

A little girl next door, Lila Jane, asks if he wants to see her panties. One day they walk to a vacant lot where Henry kisses Lila Jane and "grabs her behind". He asks her to "do it", but says he doesn't know exactly what else there is to do. When a boy from a neighboring school tries to beat up Henry, Lila Jane interferes and the boy runs away crying. Henry says that the boys from his school, Delsey, take their beatings without a word. He says the boy from the other school, Marmount, "weren't much".

## Chapters 6 through 10 Analysis

Henry's dislike of David is based solely on his appearance. He says David wears knickers, is pigeon-toed, and cross-eyed. However, he notes that David has potato chips at lunch time and that he even has jelly on his peanut butter sandwich. It's an inconsistency that's never explained, since David's mother apparently isn't a loving parent who provides her son with jelly and chips because she cares for him.



As Mr. Knox is talking to Henry, he asks Henry if he's tough. Henry doesn't answer but Mr. Knox then rises and shakes Henry's hand. He squeezes Henry's hand and Henry says that it was like a vise. Mr. Knox squeezes harder and harder and continues to ask Henry if he's tough. Henry finally looks at the principal and says, "I'll kill you". There's no explanation offered for the comment and no indication of what Henry meant by the words, including whether he was serious or not. Henry indicates that Mr. Knox seals a note in an envelope and hands it to Henry. He says it was sealed "and I had no desire to open it".

When Henry gives the note to his mother, her reaction is that he's disgraced the family. She cries about what the neighbors will think, though his parents never associate with the neighbors.

Henry spends most of his free time alone. He imagines that he's a great football player. When Lila Jane asks him why he doesn't play with the boys in the neighborhood, Henry says that he sees enough of them at school. He doesn't let on that he's forbidden from playing with them. Henry will eventually be accepted into a small circle of friends.



# Chapters 11 through 16

## Chapters 11 through 16 Summary

One day when Henry is standing around watching the boys playing during physical education, a teacher tells him that he is supposed to be playing something also. The teacher puts Henry in a kickball game as shortstop. Henry knows that the guys will be sending vicious kicks his way, but he stops every one of them. Then Stanley Greenberg gets up to kick. Henry says that ball comes toward him like a shot but he catches the ball and holds it. A team from a school called Miranda Bell challenges the team from Henry's school to a baseball game. The game is stalled with no score for several innings until one of Henry's classmates hits a home run. Henry says it was over after that and the game ended in a fight.

Henry's father takes Henry along on his milk route. On the way, his father asks which direction they're traveling. Henry says "west" and his father corrects him, saying that it's south. He then asks Henry what he would do if he left him. Henry says that he'd go back and drink the milk and orange juice his father left on doorsteps behind them. Then he'd tell a policeman that his father told him west was south just to be certain he'd be lost. At daylight, Big Henry begins making his rounds in attempts to collect money. At one house, he begs the woman to make a payment and she invites him in to "talk about it". He's inside a long time and when he returns, he's tucking his pants in. Henry would see the woman again, in his own living room. His mother says that his father loves the woman. Her name is Edna and she insist that Big Henry choose. When he doesn't, she takes his car and leaves.

Henry says that his mother actually hid in the trunk of the car and caught his father with the woman named Edna. After Big Henry is confronted with the two women in his house, he argues with his wife. Then Henry hears his father beating his mother. He says that he slips out the window and that he hears the beating going on for a long time.

Henry learns from one of his friends what "fucking" is. He says that he's repulsed by the idea that he began as his father's "dong juice". The next day, he thinks about it a lot at school and his teacher keeps him after class because of it. He imagines that she's held him after school because she wants to have sex. He asks her if she wants to fuck. She tells him that she's not going to tell his parents or the principal but that he must never say such a thing again.

As he walks home that afternoon, he's hit by a car. He wakes in the hospital and tells the nurse how to reach his parents. When his father arrives, he berates Henry for getting hit by a car, though the doctor says the driver was drunk. Outside, Big Henry says that he'll sue the drunk who hit Henry and that he'll move to the South Seas where he'll never work again. In reality, the man is penniless with a wife and three kids.





Henry meets the boy next door, Chuck, who calls himself "Red". Red has a fake arm and tells Henry that he was born without an arm past his elbow, though he has little fingers where his arm ends. Henry discovers that Red can catch and throw a football and the two boys begin playing together. One day, some bigger boys come along and try to take the football. Red refuses to give it up and a fight ensues. Henry expects that they're going to get beat up but then Red begins beating the boys with his fake arm, using it as a club. Henry says that boys' howls of pain gives him courage and he fights harder. The two of them chase the boys away, retrieve their football, and go back to their play.

On another occasion, Henry and Red go to the pool together. Henry admits to a curiosity about Red's arm but tries to look at the shortened limb only when he believes Red won't realize he's looking. Henry decides to swim under Red and grab him but swims into a large woman instead. She begins yelling that he's a pervert then tells him to grab her cunt. He refuses, but when they are in the shower room preparing to leave, he tells Red that "a guy's got to get started sometime". Red moves without a word of goodbye.

At some point, the boys in the neighborhood being playing with Henry. He's getting better at sports and enjoys Saturdays because they play football in the street. One Saturday, his father yells his name and puts him to work mowing the grass, edging the lawn, snipping stray grass, and watering. Henry knows it will take all day and that he'll miss out on the remainder of the game. When he's almost finished, his father gets on his hands and knees, places his head level with the ground and finds two weeds sticking up. He shows Henry's mother, who says nothing, then he takes Henry inside and beats him with the razor strop.

## Chapters 11 through 16 Analysis

Henry notes that the players from his school are children of the depression and are poor, but they are tougher, bigger, and stronger than other children their age. Henry says that the boys from his school were feared.

At home on the day he has the conversation with the boy from school, Henry listens at the door of his parents' room. He hears the bed squeaking and then hears his mother go to the bathroom. Henry decides that sex is repulsive. The he thinks about doing it with Lila Jane and thinks that it's not so repugnant after all.

When Big Henry is in the elevator leaving the hospital, he encounters an old man in a wheelchair who says that he doesn't want to die. Big Henry mutters that the old man has lived long enough, prompting the elevator operator to call him repugnant.

There's little doubt that Henry is lonely. His father forbids that he have anything to do with any of the other children in the neighborhood and his parents never associate with any of the neighbors either. Henry's final words about Red are that he was "a good guy".



It seems that Big Henry has set an impossible task just so that Henry will fail. He's looking for ways to punish Henry. It also seems likely that Big Henry has chosen this particular time for Henry's chore so that he can't join the neighborhood kids at football. While Henry is mowing, his father yells for him to hurry. When he hurries, some of the grass clippings aren't caught in the bag. When that happens, Big Henry gets a two-by-four and throws it, hitting Henry in the leg. Henry says that he could have dodged but didn't. He also says that he doesn't hate his father, he's too confused for that.



# Chapters 17 through 20

## Chapters 17 through 20 Summary

Henry becomes accepted among the neighborhood boys and begins going to church with a boy named Frank. He says he studied the Catechism and that his parents are happy he's going to church. One day he goes to confession with Frank. On the way, they see a stray dog and Frank remarks that it's too bad the dog can't go to Heaven. Hoping to help the dog get into Heaven, the boys carry him into the church and baptize him with holy water. Then they go into confession, but Henry can't think of anything he's done wrong. He makes up an array of sins, that he kicked his father and mother, stole money for candy bars, looked up a girl's dress, ate snot, and baptized a dog. He says he knew he had committed a mortal sin and never goes to confession again.

Henry's friend, Frank, likes airplanes, and Frank's father gives the boys money to make the trip to an air show. They have money for transportation but decide to save that money for something else and hitchhike instead. They're picked up by a man who tells them that he saw a guy get arrested under the pier for "sucking off" another guy. He says he believes a guy has the right to that without being arrested. He offers to take the boys somewhere else but they insist on going to the air show. When they arrive, Henry and Frank make a break and run away. When they run under the grandstand in an effort to hide, they find some boys looking up. When they join them, they discover that a woman has on a skirt and no panties, meaning the boys can see "her cunt".

When Henry is in fifth grade, David has moved away. Henry says that a new teacher, Mrs. Fretag, asks all the students what their fathers do for a living. Henry says most of the fathers are out of work and Henry says that his father is a dentist. Another of the children says his father is out of work and Henry says he wishes he had thought of that. Mrs. Fretag tells the students that they are to go see a personal appearance by President Herbert Hoover on a Saturday. Henry knows he has to work on the lawn so he doesn't ask to go. He writes an essay on the appearance solely from his imagination. Mrs. Fretag reads his essay aloud to the class and Henry says it was over much too soon.

Frank and Henry spend time together and often hitch-hike to a movie set where they explore until they are chased away by a guard. They also hitch-hike to the beach where they explore the fun house and house of mirrors. Sometimes they catch fish and sell them to the Jewish ladies who sit on the benches. One day, Chuck, Eddie, Frank and Gene are watching a spider wrap a web around a fly and they call Henry over to watch. He looks for a few minutes and then kicks the web, earning the anger of his friends. Henry runs from them but says they were over it within a few weeks.

Frank's father commits suicide and Frank moves away with his mother. Frank and Henry send drawings to each other for awhile. The drawings follow a story line about



some cannibals. Henry's mother finds them one day and his father puts a stop to the exchange of mail.

Everyone is having financial difficulty and Henry notes that the children—seeming to take their clues from the adults—get mean. Henry's mother has a low-paying job "somewhere" and his father, like most, is out of work. Henry says that someone learns that some weeds can be eaten and there are fistfights over the weeds in vacant lots. Henry's father comes home one day with a broken arm and black eye. Henry says he considers running away but doesn't imagine that he can find a job when grown men are unable to find work.

## Chapters 17 through 20 Analysis

It's interesting that Henry's parents are happy that he's going to church. He doesn't elaborate on that fact at all and there's no indication why they have that reaction. Henry seems to have finally found a friend in Frank.

Henry tells about the planes in the show and says that there were several accidents. The man who wins one contest actually wins because all the other planes crash. Henry says that pilot was "fat", like his plane, and is disappointed. Parachutists are the final act and one of them comes down with an unopened chute. He falls to the ground, bounces, then is still. The remainder of the show is canceled.

Henry doesn't give any explanation for his decision to write his essay from his imagination. He doesn't seem interested in telling his teacher that he can't attend. When his teacher finishes reading the essay, she dismisses the class but tells Henry to stay. He expects to be in trouble. Mrs. Fretag asks Henry if he was there and he admits that he wasn't. She says that makes the essay all the more remarkable.

Henry notes that his father beats him for making those trips with Frank, but he says that he would get beatings for something anyway and that the trips are worth it. Henry says that he's part of a group of boys that include Frank, Chuck, Eddie, and Gene, but that the group would often have a falling out and that he was usually the cause. He notes that he and Frank never fight and that Frank is ostracized whenever he is simply because they're friends. Henry doesn't explain why he does the things that prompt his friends' anger. When he kicks the spider web, it almost seems that he's lashing out against his own entrapment.

One day, Henry joins a group of boys to watch a bulldog that has a kitten cornered. Henry accuses some of the boys of putting the kitten in the situation and tries to make them call the dog off. He realizes that they're aching for the kill. Henry looks around for an adult and sees Mr. Gibson, the mailman, watching from his bedroom window. Henry says that Mr. Gibson is one of the few men in the neighborhood with a job but that even he wants to see the cat killed. Henry says that he wants to rush in and save the kitten but doesn't have the nerve and that makes him sick. He goes home and his father tells him to stop looking so unhappy or he'll give him a reason to look that way.



# Chapters 21 through 25

## Chapters 21 through 25 Summary

When Henry goes to Mt. Justin Jr. High, he is among a class of large boys. He says that the boys are ill-fed and poor, but seem to be bored with childhood. He says they look like "tigers with the mange". One boy has "a cock, 10 inches long, soft", and Henry discovers that he has the biggest balls. He says that his seventh grade team played football against the eighth and ninth graders and used the opportunity for violence. It's during this time that Eddie tells Henry about masturbation and Henry says it feels better if you imagine "you were doing it with a girl while you whacked off".

A boy called "Baldy", who was really named Eli LaCrosse, attaches himself to Henry. One day, Baldy invites Henry into his cellar where there are barrels of wine. He says that his father doesn't care because he is a surgeon who lost his license because he's a drunk. Baldy says his father no longer drinks. The boys drink quite a lot and Henry says he's discovered something that's going to help him out for a long time to come.

There's a girl in Henry's biology class named Lilly Fischman. She entices the teacher, Mr. Stanhope, to allow her to sing and dance during class every day until the principal steps into the room during one of the performances and puts a stop to it. Henry says no one in the class pays any attention to the teacher in the subsequent class times. Then comes the day for a biology exam and Henry knows that he's in trouble, as do others in the class. Lilly opens her textbook and the class follows suit. Stanhope tells them to close the books but Lilly stands up, raises her skirt, adjusts a garter, and takes her seat. Stanhope stops objecting and the class finishes the exam with the textbooks open.

Pop Farnsworth teaches shop and he begins the semester by telling the boys that they are all to dismantle an engine and put it back together again. A boy named Arnie Whitechapel tells Pop a dirty joke, followed by many more and Pop gives in, allowing the boys to watch movies about rebuilding engines. They don't work on the real engines at all that semester.

Miss Gredis is Henry's English teacher. The boys all have a crush on her. She sits on an empty desk, facing the students, legs crossed with her skirts pulled high. The boys typically have a hard-on when they leave the class. There's some discussion about the possibility that she's asking for it, but most think she just wants to drive the boys crazy. There's a boy in the class named Richard Waite who is not quite fully mentally developed and he begins "jerking off" daily during that class. The other students can hear his closed hand as it hits the bottom of his desk. There's another boy in the class named Harry Walden who is rumored to be spending time with Miss Gredis. He is rumored to be a genius, wears neat clothes, and has the admiration of all the girls. He's sometimes absent from school and the boys believe that Miss Gredis is "fucking him to death". Then comes the day Harry is again absent and the news arrives that he's



committed suicide. Miss Gredis doesn't yet know and begins her lecture as Richard begins the monotonous "thump, thump, thump".

Henry doesn't understand why the girls are fascinated with Harry Walden. One day he stops Harry and threatens him in the hallway. Harry points over Henry's shoulder, Henry turns to look and when he turns back around, Harry is simply gone. When Miss Gredis begins her lecture after Harry's suicide, she says that she believes the English language will undergo some changes. She says "this new voice will be uncluttered by old histories, old more, old dead and useless dreams". It's left to the reader to decide if any of that applies to Harry's life or even to Henry's.

Coach Wagoner challenges a boy named Morris Moscovitz to a fight. He says Henry will be next. He gets in a few blows against Morrie but then Morrie pummels him and Wagoner gives up. The boys then stand around smoking and Wagoner walks by, telling them to put out the cigarettes. They refuse. Henry says that someone as nasty as Wagoner should be able to back it up.

## Chapters 21 through 25 Analysis

Henry says that his group of classmates comes largely from homes like his. They didn't get love from their families and didn't ask for it from anywhere else. The gym coach, Curley Wagner, singles Henry out and tells him that "I'm going to get all you guys, especially you". Henry says he likes being singled out as the bad guy and cites his admiration for people like Dillinger and Ma Barker. He says his father plays at being bad but isn't. He says it seems that there's always someone pushing at him.

Henry says he doesn't like Baldy but somehow finds himself walking the smaller boy home each day. He says that Baldy cusses to make it look like he's not afraid but that he really is. Henry says he's not afraid but is confused, so the two could be a good pair. After the wine, Henry tells Baldy he's going to "fuck your mother". When Baldy admits that Henry can whip him, Henry says he'll leave Baldy's mother alone. Later, they chew gum so that Baldy won't get in trouble. Henry says he's not afraid of getting in trouble.

One of the boys says that his father pulls out a fingernail each time the boy brings home an "F". Henry himself knows he'll get a beating. It's interesting to note that these seem to be the rules rather than the exceptions. It's Henry who is sitting at his desk wondering how he's expected to be able to pass this exam and decides that Lilly is an "evil woman" who will "send us all to hell".

It's interesting that Henry and his classmates are not the slightest bit interested in the engines they are to work on in shop class. In fact, Henry says that their entire lives are dismal already and that the project was "dumb and it was hard".

Henry himself has said that the boys have no respect for their elders and it seems Wagoner wants to counter that trend. He says that he'll earn their respect one way or another. Morrie, at thirteen, is a large boy, as are all of Henry's friends. Wagoner tells them as he walks away that he'll still get them.



# Chapters 26 through 33

## Chapters 26 through 33 Summary

Henry is at home alone one day when he discovers that Mrs. Anderson at the house across the street is sitting on the steps and Henry can see up her dress. He gets his father's binoculars and jerks off to the sight. He does that often. On Wednesdays, his parents go to the movies and Henry discovers that another neighbor, Mrs. Pirozzi, is in her living room teasing her husband. Henry watches until Mr. Pirozzi goes to the door. Afraid that he's caught, Henry runs. One night, Henry and Baldy are walking toward Baldy's house when they discover a couple in bed together. They stop and watch through the window but the girl refuses to have sex. They continue to return to that window but nothing ever happens.

Henry gets one hundred demerits from Wagoner for "loitering" when he was supposed to be playing at games. This means Henry has to pick up garbage to work off the demerits. He joins a guy named Pete, who says that Lilly Fischman's father "got her" and that she's no longer a virgin. He says he plans to make it with her that afternoon in an old car behind the shop and asks Henry to stand as a lookout. Henry agrees and takes Baldy along. Once there, Pete can't make his penis hard and Lilly performs oral sex. As Pete is groaning that he loves her, Henry sees Wagoner and an entire group of boys that were playing football, along with all the fans, rushing their way. Baldy and Henry get a thousand demerits and Pete and Lilly never return to school.

Henry's father sends him to a high school called Chelsey High rather than the nearby school, Woodhaven. He has horrible acne and is covered in boils. He says he doesn't at all fit in at Chelsey and knows that other people find it difficult to look at him because of he boils that cover his face. He joins ROTC. Placing the rifle on his shoulder sometimes breaks a boil, causing it to leak blood through his shirt. He is asked not to return the next semester. His father slathers him with a salve and tells him to leave it on much longer than recommended, resulting once in a burn. Henry is finally sent to a hospital where he waits for an entire day but doesn't get to see a doctor. When Henry sees a doctor the next day, he calls in other doctors to look at Henry's case of "acne vulgaris". They talk about him as if he can't hear, ask if he's asleep, to which he says "yes". He returns for treatment the next day, and a doctor uses a needle to drill into the boils to drain them. He's then exposed to ultra violet light.

After the treatments fail to work, Henry's grandmother, Emily, arrives with a crucifix. She and Henry's mother pray for God to release the devil that's dwelling in Henry's body. They are wailing and praying and his grandmother digs into his back with the crucifix, prompting Henry to yell at them and order them from his room. Henry then prays himself, saying that he's withstood every test handed to him and that if God were to put in an appearance now, he would spit in God's face. Henry sleeps then and wakes suddenly to find that he's on his back with his legs pulled up in front of him, making a mountain of the blankets. He says there are two dark eyes peering at him for a long



time. Henry questions whether it's God, but says it must be an illusion. He retrieves a small box given to him by his grandmother. Henry is to ask a question and to choose a small scroll from among those in the box, which is to provide the answer to his question. He asks what the illusion meant and the scroll reads, "God has forsaken you". Henry later looks back through the scrolls and can't find one with those words.

## Chapters 26 through 33 Analysis

Henry's mother goes to work every morning and his father leaves the house at the same time each day even though he doesn't have a job. It's another case of trying to impress the neighbors, though Henry's parents believe they are too good to interact with any of them. They lock the house but Henry discovers a way to get inside and often spends time alone.

Anyone with demerits must pick up garbage to work off the demerits and anyone with demerits can't graduate. Henry says he doesn't care and seems happy that people know he's bad. Interestingly enough, he's also not planning to quit high school. He says simply that getting the thousand demerits is like getting a life sentence to junior high. He won't, however, remain that long, and says later that it seemed they wanted to get rid of him.

Henry's graduation is a let-down. His parents aren't in attendance and Henry says it's just as well because a tough guy doesn't need something like that. It's up to the reader to decide if that's true or if he's covering the hurt of not having had his parents there.

Henry says that he believes the doctors simply don't know what to do about his condition. He says that they eventually decide to use a needle to drain the boils because they didn't know what to do and felt they had to do something. He says they experiment on the poor. If it works, they use that treatment on the rich. If it doesn't, there are more poor for the next experiment. He also notes that Miss Ackerman, the nurse who finishes draining the boils, is the kindest person he's met in eight years.

Henry's treatments continue and he is becoming attached to Miss Ackerman. One day, she puts new cream on his face and bandages him completely so that only his eyes, ears and mouth show. Henry says that it's a mysterious look as opposed to simply frightening as he is without the bandages. He imagines that people might be wondering what happened to him and may guess that it was a fire or a car crash. He stares at a woman's ass and says that he would never have had the nerve to do that without the anonymity of the bandages. One day, while the boils are very bad, Baldy knocks at the door. He has a friend with him and Henry doesn't answer because he doesn't want them to see him. Baldy comes inside and Henry yells at them to leave. He says that he befriended Baldy when no one else would and that he feels betrayed that his friend would not understand that he didn't want to see anyone.

Henry's father still goes to his imaginary job each day. His mother has lost her job but goes out looking for another each day. They are "on the dole", meaning they get canned





goods and other food each week. Big Henry insists that they not use the car because he needs the gas for his traveling to his imaginary job each day. He also insists that they walk more than two miles to a different part of the city for their relief food so that they won't happen to meet any of the neighbors. Henry says that the other fathers in the neighborhood simply sit around on their porches all day.



# Chapters 34 through 40

## Chapters 34 through 40 Summary

Henry's father gets a job as a security guard in a museum. With the job, Henry is no longer entitled to the free healthcare and he says a fond goodbye to Miss Ackerman. Big Henry doesn't believe in paying doctors, so Henry sees only one doctor as a follow-up for the treatment he'd been getting for his boils. The man tells him to avoid fried foods and to drink carrot juice. Henry is told that he'll be going back to school. He discovers the library and goes there each day. He says that he didn't find anything he liked at first but kept reading. He finally discovers authors that he does like, including Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, Huxley and Sherwood Anderson. Henry's father insists on lights out at eight o'clock, so he reads under the covers with the reading lamp overheating under there as well.

Henry has been out of school only one semester and he's forced to return to Chelsey High. He notes that things haven't changed much and that he's still surrounded by the less desirable crowd. One day he's at Gene's house when Harry Gibson appears with two sets of boxing gloves. Harry had one professional boxing match and is cocky. He lands a solid punch on Gene's brother, Dan, who immediately gives up. Gene takes the gloves and Gibson promises to go easy on him, but Henry believes the boxer is too serious. He yells at Gene to take him and Gibson turns on Henry. When Henry takes the gloves, the two of them are fighting hard. Gene and Dan break it up and point out to Henry that he has blood all over the front of his shirt.

One of those who has attached himself to Henry is Jimmy Hatcher, who is popular but poor. Henry says they are not friends, but Jimmy continues to hang around him. One day, Jimmy, Baldy, and Henry are walking home when Jimmy suggests they stop at his girlfriend's house. He has a key and they are met by Bones, the family dog. Jimmy tells them to watch, spits in his hand and rubs Bones' penis until "sperm spurted out". Jimmy also pees in the milk jug and tells them that he's "finger fucked" Ann, his girlfriend. Ann arrives home and she and Jimmy are locked in a passionate embrace when Baldy and Henry say they have to go and leave.

Jimmy asks Henry to go to the beach and they bike the fifteen miles there. Henry can outride him and does, pretending to be asleep at a bus stop bench when Jimmy catches up. Henry is self-conscious of his boils and scars and says he feels exposed without his shirt. Five girls approach and Jimmy joins them, but Henry declines. When the girls leave, Jimmy returns to Henry and says he got the phone numbers of the two "best ones". Henry asks "best for what" and Jimmy says for sex.

Henry takes ROTC because he doesn't want to have to take off his shirt for gym. He says most of the guys are there because they are misfits or their parents make them out of patriotism. He says rich people are more patriotic because they have more to lose. He admits that the maneuvers get into his blood despite that fact that they are basically



pointless. He says they have mock war and both sides claim victory. During one maneuver, Henry realizes he is lost, sits against a tree, and waits. Someone arrives from the opposite team, then someone from Henry's team. There's a real fight until the ROTC leader, Col. Sussex, arrives, slaps them around without saying a word, and sends them to the trucks for their return.

## Chapters 34 through 40 Analysis

"The job" consumes Big Henry because he wants to "rise in the ranks". He talks incessantly about "the job" and insists on "lights out" at eight p.m. so that he can be fresh for work the following morning. Henry talks about his discovery of specific authors who seemed to talk directly to him. He says the "good lines" are "magic". For his father, finding a job was magic.

Henry is told he'll be going back to school, but Big Henry says that it's only because he shouldn't be laying around the house all the time. Big Henry wants Henry to be an engineer. It seems that it was Big Henry's dream. When Big Henry didn't have a job, he told the neighbors that's what he did for a living.

Henry knows that he's going to be in trouble for ruining the shirt, but he says that it was a good day—and that he hasn't had many good days. Henry approves of his appearance in the mirror when he looks at himself, bleeding and cut. It's interesting that Henry was so anxious to stand up for Gene. Henry worries that his shirt will be missed because he has only a few; however, he's no longer so afraid of his father because he has accepted a severe beating from his father some time ago without crying and said that he would welcome some additional lashes. He said then that he was certain he'd taken the last beating his father would administer, but he wears the signs of his battle against Gibson proudly.

As Baldy and Henry are leaving, they discuss the fact that Jimmy has it made. It's not evident why Jimmy wants to be friends with Henry when Henry obviously isn't interested. Henry says that Jimmy writes an essay for English class about friendship and continues to look his way as he reads it. He counters with an essay about the advantages of having no friends, but the teacher gives him a D and doesn't allow him to read it in class.

Henry feels cheated when he doesn't want to go with the girls. When Jimmy returns he is angry and Jimmy reminds him that they're friends. Henry says that knocking Jimmy around wouldn't fix the problem and they ride home. Henry says he doesn't feel the desire to show off as he did earlier because he needed something more than that.

Henry notes that the two battle teams ride to the site of their mock battle in different trucks but that they are all mixed together on the return. He says that it's a childish game, though he himself admits to being caught up in it. It seems that all the young men are hurt by the fact that no one wins these "wars".



# Chapters 41 through 48

## Chapters 41 through 48 Summary

There's an ROTC competition and Henry makes the finals. They perform in front of an audience of parents and girlfriends. Henry says he has no idea how he came to be there and that he'll soon be out, but that he can't make an obvious mistake because it would hurt Corporal Monty. The two finalists are Henry and Andrew Post, and Henry says that Andrew needs the win. Then Andrew makes a mistake and Henry wins. Col. Sussex says, "congratulations" and smiles as he pins the winning medal on Henry's shirt, which makes Henry think he's not so bad after all. Henry goes home, dropping the medal into a drainage hole along the way.

Another of the boys who attaches himself to Henry is Abe Mortenson, who makes all As because his mother makes him study all the time. Henry's parents want Henry to be like Abe. One Sunday, Henry convinces Abe to leave his civics book to play baseball. Henry is suckered by a new player called "Kitten", who weighs at least 190 pounds. Henry tries to figure out the pitching so that he can get a hit, but continues to strike out. At one point, he's racing toward a ball in the outfield that is in Abe's area. Henry realizes it should be Abe's but he continues to run, smashing into Abe and breaking his arm. The game breaks up immediately.

Henry goes to have dinner at Jimmy's house one night. Jimmy says that there will be beer and the two of them drink and talk. Jimmy says that his father killed himself because his mother refused to return home. He says that his mother dated a man who paid her money to piss in his mouth. Soon, Jimmy throws up and goes to bed. Henry says that he plans to wait for Jimmy's mother, Clare. He propositions her. She calls him a child, which makes him mad, and he pushes the issue. She pulls up her skirt, revealing that she has on no panties. He sees that the hair is dark with gray in it, wonders that someone would kill himself for that, and leaves.

Henry says that all he sees ahead for himself is work. He wishes that he could be somewhere alone with no one to bother him. He imagines that the life of a dishwasher who goes home alone and drinks himself to sleep would be a good life. Henry goes to his senior prom but only looks through the window. He watches the couples dancing and says that they look "unscathed" and happy. He wants that happiness for himself but says that even that comes with a price. He says that he'll be happy someday and that when that happens, he'll have something no one else has. He doesn't elaborate.

It's graduation day and Henry is among the class of the "summer of '39". As he's walking back to his seat after getting his diploma, Abe gives him the finger. Henry says Abe ruined his day because the gesture was "unexpected". He considers beating him up but says it would take nothing to hurt Abe and that makes it a worthless victory. Henry and Jimmy discuss their future in terms they understand, suggesting careers such as dishwasher, priest, poultry farmer, and public servant.



Henry gets a job at a department store, Mears-Starbuck. He says he put in lots of applications because there was nothing else to do and he didn't want to live at home. On the way, he stops to feed a starving mongrel and is five minutes late. His boss, Mr. Ferris says that Henry should have come up with a better story than stopping to feed a starving dog. He gets an indoctrination talk about the job, including the fact that there is no union and that employees get a ten percent discount. Henry works as a storage clerk and he takes items to the sales floors for restocking. On his first trip, the elevator operator makes Henry wait while he goes to the bathroom. Henry gets bawled out when he arrives, and the sales clerk threatens to tell Mr. Ferris.

Before the week is over, Henry is taunted by some former classmates. He agrees to meet one in the parking lot and wins the fight, though both are battered badly. When the fight concludes, Henry returns to work, but Ferris fires him. Over the coming weeks, Henry spends time at Pershing Square with other unemployed men. He says that there are two restaurants where a man can get a cheap meal or free food. He also spends some time at a bar where the homosexuals will buy the drinks. Henry says they soon caught on to the fact that he'd bleed them for drinks then leave.

## Chapters 41 through 48 Analysis

For the second time, Henry talks of having to choose between something horrible and something worse. The first was when he was headed to the beach and says it was that or staying at home with nothing to do. Now he says that he has to march around in ROTC or wear a football helmet to block "some mean son-of-a-bitch" while the stars make the runs.

Henry's mother gets a phone call from Abe's mother and says the arm is broken. His mother cries and she says that Abe's mother will hire a Jewish lawyer and that they'll take everything the family has. Henry's father is torn. He doesn't want to lose his possessions but he's proud to have a son who can break someone's arm. Abe's mother doesn't sue after all, having talked at length with Henry's mother. Abe's mother apparently decides that Henry is having some issues and that his mother has already suffered enough at his hands.

Jimmy stops to check his mailbox and uses his key to also open another box. He finds a letter with a check inside, tears up both, and throws away the pieces. There's no indication of his reasoning for this act. When Henry says he's going to Jimmy's house, his parents say that Jimmy is a good boy. It's noteworthy that they can see no good in their own son but have decided that this boy is good.

On graduation day, Clare will stop to "congratulate" Henry. She'll whisper that if he should ever want a real diploma, he should stop by and she'll "rip his balls off". Henry says he might see her sometime.

Henry says that a life of work, marriage, family, and even family events seems like impossible drudgery. He has only his own home life and that of families in similar



situations as an example of what a family could be. Despite the fact that he says a life as a dishwasher would be acceptable, he then makes the comment that nobody would choose to be with the dishwasher, indicating that he doesn't really want that solitude he so often describes.

As usual, Henry's father berates Henry, saying that he'll never amount to anything and comparing him to Abe as a boy who can "apply himself". Henry's parents are driving their ten-year-old car while other parents are pulling away in their new, shiny cars. Henry says his own father sent him to Chelsey High with the hope that the attitude of the wealthy would rub off, making Henry want to be wealthy himself. He says it didn't work.

Henry soon discovers that the reason he was selected for the job at Mears-Starbuck is that they want people who will stay with the job. Henry says he was selected because he's pathetic. He says that most of the people who were hired are so old that they won't be going anywhere except to their graves.

Every night, Big Henry asks Henry if he's found a job. He accuses Henry of not looking and seems to have forgotten that he himself was without a job for some time. Henry applies for work at an airplane factory where Jimmy is hired, but Henry is rejected. He says that the only difference in how they filled out their applications was the "place of birth", where Henry wrote "Germany".



# Chapters 49 through 58

## Chapters 49 through 58 Summary

Henry enrolls at L.A. City College. It's not that his father wants him to get an education, but that tuition is free and Big Henry believes there is a measure of respectability in being in college as opposed to being unemployed. On the advice of Baldy, who is already enrolled, Henry skips orientation day and plans to take journalism. When it's time to enroll, he has no idea what to do until he finds Baldy, threatens him until he outlines how to go about signing up for classes, and makes his selections. On the first day of class, Henry is hung over, has sold his books, and is thirty minutes late for English. Henry will continue to arrive late until the day the teacher says that he's assigning Henry a D for the class. Henry asks why not an F and the teacher says that is sometimes equated with fuck, and that Henry is "not worth a fuck".

Henry vows to get even with Baldy for telling him to skip orientation and he does so during gym. Henry says that they both wear wool pants and both have trouble with the itchy material, so both wear their pajamas under their pants. During gym, Henry walks over to Baldy, grabs his pants, and pulls them down, exposing the pajamas and shouting for the others to hear. He then pulls down Baldy's pajamas, exposing his penis, and yelling about the size of it. Baldy is humiliated and cries.

Henry meets a student named Richard Becker, who wants to be a writer. When Henry reads a short story by Becker, he's jealous, saying it's much better than his own. He joins Becker and some friends for a night of drinking and wins the game by staying to drink more than anyone else. He wins eighteen dollars, tosses down one extra shot of whiskey to prove that he can, and leaves, stopping to sit down in an unlocked car on his way home where he throws up until he feels better.

As the teachers and most of the students begin to protest the Germans and to tout pro-American sentiments, Henry does the opposite. He says he's convincing because he doesn't care or believe in what he's saying. He says that selective reproduction is the only choice and says that he hates the prejudice shown against the people from Germany, where he was born. He is approached one day by the president of the student council, who says that he doesn't believe in what Henry is suggesting, but that if the Germans win, he's willing to transfer to their cause. One day, Henry is approached by Baldy who has a student named Igor with him. They attend a meeting at which they discuss the need to make America safe for white girls and that communism is suggesting that the wealth be divided to everyone, including the blacks, homos, rapists, and child molesters.

Henry is arriving home one day when his mother intercepts him. She says that he can't go home because his father is waiting for him and has said he'll kill him. She says that Big Henry found his manuscripts, read them all, and says that Henry won't be allowed to live under his roof. Henry goes home to find all his clothing, his manuscripts, and his



typewriter on the lawn. He packs, takes the ten dollars his mother gives him, and leaves.

Henry gets a room for \$3.50 a week directly upstairs from a bar. He is making ends meet by writing term papers for fellow students. When Jimmy comes to Henry's room, he has two others from the airplane factory. They've all gotten paid and Henry soon wins most of their pay at games of poker and coin toss. The man called "Fastshoes" breaks an ashtray, refuses to pick it up, and Henry demands that they leave. Jimmy picks it up but Henry continues to demand that they leave. As Fastshoes reaches the top of the stairs, he turns to make another comment to Henry who hits him, knocking him down the stairs. Henry tells them that he's in room five if they ever decide to return to even the score. After they're gone, the landlady, called "Mrs. Kansas", tells him that she'll call the police if there are any more disturbances.

Becker comes to visit Henry. He's joined the Marines and suggests Henry do the same. Becker says there's little time for writing, though he still wants to. Henry says Becker is a fool for joining the military and that he's an asshole for talking about writing. He hits Becker, who doesn't hit back at first, but then hits Henry in the gut and then knees him in the face. Henry wonders why someone doesn't hear the sounds of the fight and call the police. When he regains consciousness, he's alone and it's late. Mrs. Kansas asks to come in and Henry puts her off. He packs his clothes, knowing that he doesn't have enough money to pay for the damages to the room, then rushes out, hitting one of Mrs. Kansas's friends with a typewriter on his way out. Henry finds another room at Bunker Hill and settles in after stepping out to get wine.

Henry is preparing to leave college. He says that books make a person soft and that college doesn't prepare anyone for the hard pavement. He happens upon a touch football game that's become rough and steps in to play, roughing up the player they're calling "King Kong" because of his size. When Henry finishes Kong off, Baldy wonders aloud which of the two is the sadist.

Henry says that he makes some trips to skid row to prepare for his future. One Sunday, he walks into a penny arcade and sees Becker at a game. He asks for a rematch and Becker declines, but offers to buy Henry a beer. They go to a bar where Becker pays thirty-two dollars for a few drinks with a girl who rubs his dick under the table the entire time. Then he and Henry go to another bar where they hear the news that Pearl Harbor has been bombed and that all military personnel are to return to base. Becker asks Henry to go with him to the bus stop. Henry only agrees after Becker says that he's an orphan. As they wait, Becker asks Henry if he has any advice, and Henry says no. He then says that he might get killed.

Henry returns to the penny arcade but it's deserted. He finds a Mexican kid and challenges him to a game of boxing. The kid chooses his robotic boxer and wins two games. Henry says he feels that winning the second game is very important though he can't say why. When he loses, he simply walks away.





## Chapters 49 through 58 Analysis

The other students aren't laughing at Baldy and are actually angry at Henry for his stunt. He's challenged to a fight but skips the rest of his classes. He goes to Pershing Square where he watches a debate between a believer and an atheist. Henry says he himself is an agnostic, meaning he doesn't have much to argue about when it comes to religion.

As they are playing the drinking game, a man runs in and claims to have robbed a gas station. He's told to hide in one of the cars outside and does. Henry discovers that they have plenty of liquor, all the same brand of whiskey, and imagines that he's fallen in with a ring of thieves and hijackers.

Henry notes that the cause he's speaking out for seems to attract the social and mental idiots and misfits. He says that Igor makes buttered rum and that Baldy cries as he tries to drink to prove he's a man. Igor insists that they play Russian roulette and when they go for a ride in a boat, he shoots holes in the bottom, forcing them to swim to shore despite the fact that they're all drunk.

Henry is most angry over his manuscripts. He says that those were the one thing his father shouldn't have had a right to touch. There are no details of the content, though Henry has written stories about a German pilot and his exploits. Henry's father is inside the house and despite the time Henry spends in the yard picking up his clothing and papers, Big Henry doesn't come outside to confront his son.

One day, Jimmy appears at Henry's room with two guys named "Delmore" and "Fastshoes". Henry asks how Jimmy found him and he says that Henry's parents had a private detective trace him. He says Henry's parents would send money but they believe he'll drink it up. Henry says that they can go on worrying. As Jimmy is leaving after the fight with Henry, he tells Henry that he's ugly inside.

Becker asks Henry if his stories have been rejected and Henry indicates that he hasn't actually sent anything in. He says he knew he would be rejected and so saved the cost of postage. Becker says that Henry's writing is too angry. It's Becker who says that Henry is hiding from life by drinking all the time. Henry considers the vast number of poor in Los Angeles and says that he could get lost among them.

Henry continues to be consumed with the idea that life has nothing to offer him. He seems to envy Becker, who wants to taste everything life has, including marriage, children, and having a book published. It seems that Beckman has rushed into the military without considering that he might very well be called into war. When a bartender offers Becker a drink, Henry urges him to take it, saying that the bartender knows Becker may get shot protecting his bar. The bartender says that Henry has a nasty temperament, but Henry doesn't seem to mind.



# Characters

## Henry Chinaski

The main character of the book, who tells his story in first person. Henry is brought up by his parents who think they are better than the neighbors. They long for a wealthy lifestyle but are poor themselves. Henry spends most of his time with only his parents for company because his father doesn't want him to associate with other children. Henry's desire for friendship overcomes that and he does begin to be accepted by the boys of the neighborhood, sometimes joining in the various street games or ball games held in vacant lots. As he grows up, he becomes obsessed with sex as is typical of many young boys. He learns what he can from the other boys and his relationship with his father is rocky at best. From an early age, Henry is berated by his father. When Henry brings home a note from school over a fight, his father beats him brutally. It's a trend that continues and that seems to color Henry's opinion of everything else. He says once that he's tougher than God, that he's withstood every test that's been handed to him—including surviving his parents. In his teens, Henry turns to alcohol to numb the pain of his life. He drinks as often as possible and soon becomes a habitual drinker. He says to a classmate that if he didn't drink he'd have long ago committed suicide. The friend puts that down to a cop out and tells Henry that he's hiding from life.

Henry also fights habitually. He can't seem to hold friends because he is willing to fight even those he's close to. The exception seems to have been Frank, though Frank moved away when the two were still children. Henry takes on any challenge and if one isn't available, he issues his own. Asked why he doesn't join the military, Henry says he doesn't want to get up early and doesn't want to obey orders. He is angry with his life and has no ambition to improve on it. He says that his ideal would be to live in a cave with enough food and booze for two years, and that during that time he'd have to see no one.

## Big Henry Chinaski

Henry's father. Big Henry spends much of his time berating others, including Henry. He seems to have no social grace and will often rant about a bug in his food at a restaurant. While he doesn't seem to want the food for free, he threatens to return and burn the place down. He is brutal with Henry physically as well as mentally and often turns to a razor strop to issue his punishment on his son. However, there comes a day when Henry stands up to his father and invites him to inflict a few more lashes—the last time Big Henry beats his son physically. When Big Henry throws all of Henry's belongings onto the lawn, he does so with a threat that he'll kill Henry. However, Henry is outside, yelling at his father, but Big Henry doesn't come out to face the challenge. It seems likely that he actually sent his wife to tell Henry not to come home. It's noteworthy that Big Henry was willing to throw Henry's things in the yard after the years of worrying what the neighbors would think. It's also interesting to note that Big Henry



apparently hired a private investigator to locate Henry after he moved out of the family home.

## **Katherine Chinaski**

Henry's mother. Katherine seems to be the one person who isn't particularly afraid of Big Henry and the one person who doesn't get beat on or constantly berated by him. When Big Henry swallows coffee too quickly and spits it out, yelling that it was hot, Katherine calmly says that he shouldn't drink it so fast. There's no real indication whether Katherine has any serious sway with Big Henry or if the lack of abuse is merely seen through the eyes of a child who feels betrayed. When Big Henry administered the first beating with a razor strop, Henry tells his mother that she should have stepped in and stopped it. She says that the father is always right.

## **Richard Becker**

Becker meets Henry in college and is an aspiring writer. Henry reads one of Becker's short stories and admits that it's better than his own writing. It's Becker who tries to get Henry to see some truths about himself, including that he's hiding from life by drinking so much. Henry and Becker have a fight after Becker has gone through basic training for the Marines. Becker knocks Henry out and when they meet again, Henry's first words are that he wants a rematch. Becker declines but buys Henry a drink. They are together when the news comes across that Pearl Harbor has been bombed.

## **Janice Ackerman**

The nurse who tends Henry while he's undergoing treatment for his severe acne. She drains the boils and talks to him about his life, offering kindness and encouragement. Henry says he loves her but not in a sexual way. He says she is the kindest person he's met in eight years.

## **Emily**

Henry's grandmother. Henry says his earliest memory of his grandmother is her constantly saying, "I'll bury all of you". When Henry has acute acne, Emily comes to his room and prays over him with a crucifix, but Henry orders her out when she gouges into his back with the crucifix so far that he bleeds.

## **Leonard**

Henry's grandfather. Henry talks of him only once but says that he was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen. Leonard tells Henry that "you know me", suggesting that



they'd spent time together in earlier years. There's no indication what caused the falling out with Leonard nor what becomes of him.

## Red

The boy who lives next door to Henry who has only one arm. He and Henry become friends and spend time throwing a football and at other sports. It's during this time that Henry gets in his practice and takes a step toward becoming accepted. He says that all a guy really needs is practice. One day, Red is simply gone without any indication that the family is planning to move. Henry says Red was "a good guy".

## Eli LaCrosse

The boy most call "Baldy" because he has little hair on his head. He attaches himself to Henry and Henry finds himself tolerating the boy. Henry doesn't like Baldy but they continue to be together over the coming years. It's Baldy who tells Henry that he can skip orientation at college. When Henry discovers that he's in trouble because he doesn't know what to do, he catches Baldy, makes him tell him everything that he should do, then tells him that he'll get even. He does so one day during gym class when he pulls Baldy's pants down, showing all the boys that he wears pajamas under his pants, then pulling down the pajamas to expose his penis.

## Frank

A boy in Henry's neighborhood who becomes a friend. Henry notes that he and Frank never argue. It's Frank's father who pays for the boys to attend the air show. It's Frank who spends afternoons with Henry at the beach exploring the fun house, and wandering around the movie set. Frank moves after his father commits suicide. They write for a while but Henry's parents put a stop to it when they discover that the boys are actually drawing cartoons of cannibals in an ongoing story they are creating.

## Lilly Fischman

The girl who dances for the boys during biology class. Lilly agrees to meet a boy named Pete at an old car one day for sex. Henry is to be a lookout but they are caught by the gym teacher and a group of boys. Henry gets a thousand demerits and Lilly and Pete never return to school.

## Jimmy

The boy who continues to try to be Henry's friend despite the fact that Henry is rude to him. It's Jimmy who comes to Henry's room with two friends where they gamble and

drink until Henry has won most of their money. They have a fight and Jimmy tells Henry that he's "ugly" on the inside.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Los Angeles**

Where Henry and his family live after coming to America.

### **Pasadena**

Where Henry's grandmother, Emily, lives.

### **Mt. Justin Jr. High**

Where Henry attends junior high school.

### **L.A. County General Hospital**

Where Henry gets treatment for his boils.

### **Woodhaven High**

Where Henry was scheduled to go to high school. He doesn't because his father wants him to attend the more influential Chelsey.

### **Chelsey High**

Where Henry attends and where most of the students are wealthy. Henry's father wants him to go there so that the attitudes of the rich will rub off on him, making him yearn for a successful life of his own.

### **Mears-Starbuck**

The company that hires Henry right after graduation. Henry notes that he has no idea how he got the job because there were many applicants.

### **L.A. City College**

Where Henry enrolls after losing his job at Mears-Starbuck.



## **Prushing Square**

Where Henry and others who are unemployed often sit during the day. Henry says that there are sometimes debates about God there, though he is an agnostic and has nothing to add.

## **Penny Arcade**

Where Henry is when he encounters Becker just before Pearl Harbor is bombed and military personnel—including Becker—are ordered to report to duty.

## **Bunker Hill**

Where Henry gets a room after running away from Mrs. Kansas's rooming house.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Many critics call this novel a coming of age story. In many ways it is though the main character, Henry, doesn't really resolve any of the issues that are weighing him down. He does, however, move through his childhood and into an adult role, though he doesn't seem overly successful with any of it. Henry recounts that he can remember pieces of his life in Germany before his family moved to America. He then tells of his life as a child growing up with an abusive father and an indifferent mother who allowed her son to be beaten regularly. Henry pushes to find his way in the world and zeros in on alcohol and fighting as ways to handle life. He spends as much time as possible drinking and says that he almost never has enough to drink often enough. He never seems to examine his need to fight but does often put himself in situations that will result in a fight. There even comes a day when he's confident enough to face down his father, and he wins. His maturity is marked by the inability to get along in society and his lack of ambition. His idea of planning for the next phase of his life is to visit "skid row".

On several occasions, Henry stands up for the person being picked on but sometimes can't bring himself to do that. He is critical of himself and considers that a weakness that he abhors.

## The Need to Escape

Henry is living a nightmare existence in many ways and, like most children, he is seeking a way to deal with it. He finds solace in several ways. One of the earliest is his encounter with alcohol. After he has the first taste, he's hooked. He notes that even the flowers are trying harder to be pretty after drinking wine from a friend's cellar and that he has discovered a way to escape the daily horrors of his life.

He also discovers the public library. He says that there he finds books that are milky and false but continues to read until he discovers the authors he likes. Those authors are not noted for their cheerful, upbeat writing; Henry says that their truthfulness is what touches him. He reads a book each night and risks his father's wrath by reading under the covers after the time lights were to be turned off. Henry also discovers that he can escape by writing. He details the adventures of a German pilot who encounters the enemy in droves and manages to walk away from even fiery crashes. This hero always returns to alcohol, never pays any attention to the girls who want him, and is willing to fight at the slightest inclination—all similar parallels to Henry's own life.

Henry also finds escape in fighting. He notes several times that he doesn't feel the pain of the blows he's taking during a fight, but simply continues to look for the opportunity to inflict pain of his own.





## The Tendency to Learn by Example

Henry's only examples of how a home and family work are the disjointed families of his own and those of his friends. There are suicides among his friends, single mothers who work in bars, fathers who are out of work, and plenty of fighting. It can be argued that Henry himself as a victim of abuse tends to be more than ready to fight himself, though he tends to be uninterested in those fights that would be skewed in his favor. For example, he knows a boy named Abe who makes straight As and is thrown up to Henry as a perfect student. Henry runs into Abe on the baseball field and breaks his arm. On graduation day, Abe gives Henry the finger. Henry considers beating on Abe but knows that he could win easily. He says that means he wouldn't accomplish anything from the fight and he lets the opportunity pass.

Big Henry wants nothing more than to have a job, and once he has that, it consumes his time and energy. Henry sees that and doesn't want to work. He also says that he can't imagine the drudgery of a family, including family outings on holidays. He has only his own dysfunctional family as an example of what that would be, but expects that's what his own family would be like if he dared have one.

Big Henry tends to berate everyone he comes into contact with and Henry picks up that trait. When Becker realizes that he's being called back to his military base for active duty, Henry agrees with Becker when he says he might be killed. Henry doesn't know how to offer comfort to this man who turns to him and seems to have no compassion at all for Becker's situation. It's not that Henry has no compassion—he felt sick when he realized there were boys watching a bulldog about to kill a kitten and he once tried to feed a stray dog. It's simply that Henry has never seen that kindness in action and doesn't seem to know how it works.

# Style

## Point of View

The story is written in the first person from Henry's point of view. The perspective is completely limited to Henry's sights, thoughts, and ideas. While this is not unusual, the perspective is even more limited by the fact that Henry doesn't often explain himself. There are many details left to the reader's interpretation. For example, Henry's father throws Henry's manuscripts out, saying that Henry couldn't live under his roof after writing such stories. Henry is naturally angry and says that the manuscripts were the one thing his father shouldn't have had the right to touch. He also says that his father went snooping through his personal belongings and got burned. However, the subject of the manuscripts is left to the imagination of the reader. Henry had previously written stories about a German pilot who carried on many daring adventures, but those were written in a notebook and the manuscripts Henry retrieves from the lawn were strewn about. It seems likely that they were not the same stories, but the reader isn't granted that information specifically.

## Setting

The book is set in Los Angeles, a real city. The time spans from the 1920s when Henry is born in Germany to the 1940s when Pearl Harbor is bombed. The fact that the place is real and the events are historically accurate makes the story of the fictional character more believable as well. Henry lives in a house with his parents through his childhood and then moves to two different boarding houses. The descriptions of the deplorable conditions of the boarding houses are historically accurate. The true conditions of life during the Depression are not described fully. Henry talks only briefly of the hunger and desperation. He mentions often that boys his age were undernourished but somehow grew bigger and stronger than others, but doesn't dwell on the fact that many were hungry during those years.

## Language and Meaning

There are many scenes of the book in which foul language and sexual content appear. Some readers may find these passages distracting or offensive, but they are true to the writer's story. The story is straightforward, with few words that will be difficult for any reader with an adequate vocabulary. There are, however, passages and events that are obscure and it's left to the reader to discern the meaning of those. In some cases, the author simply doesn't explain the details of particular events. For example, a boy named Juan often walks behind Henry as he is going home. Henry watches from behind the curtain of his living room and there's nothing to explain why Juan continues to follow Henry.



There are some passages in which the curse words are merely used as young boys tend to do. Henry talks of one friend who uses curse words in every sentence and the passages reflect that language accurately.

There are a few dated terms, but most will be grasped by the modern reader.

## Structure

The book is divided into fifty-eight chapters of varying lengths. Some are as short as two or three pages while others stretch to eight or more. The chapters are basically divided into events, though some events are divided into several chapters. The chapters are often so brief that the story can feel rather disjointed, which becomes somewhat distracting at times and may make it difficult for some readers to stay focused on the story. For example, a boy named Abe is introduced but does not become part of the story until several chapters later. The chapters are not named but are merely numbered.

The book ends rather abruptly and the person who is hoping for resolutions to the many problems facing Henry is going to be disappointed. Instead, Henry plays a boxing game with a kid he doesn't know after having seen a former classmate off to his military post. Henry feels that it's vital to win the game, but loses and walks away from the arcade.



## Quotes

"They talked of many things as we drove along. They were always talking, and they talked all the way back to my grandmother's house. They spoke of many things but never, once, my grandfather." Chap. 1, p. 12

"I didn't have any friends at school, didn't want any. I felt better being alone. I sat on a bench and watched the other play and they looked foolish to me." Chap. 6, p. 29

"He reached and took down the razor strop which hung from a hook. It was going to be the first of many such beatings, which would recur more and more often. Always, I felt, without real reason." Chap. 8, p. 39

"Practice, that's all it took. All a guy needed was a chance. Somebody was always controlling who got a chance and who didn't." Chap. 15, p. 62

"I let the air out of Chuck's football. I looked up a little girl's dress. I kicked my mother. I ate some of my snot. That's about all. Except today I baptized a dog." Chap. 17, p. 73

"I couldn't watch the kill. I felt great shame at leaving the cat like that. There was always the chance that the cat might try to escape, but I knew that they would prevent it. The cat wasn't only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity." Chap. 20, p. 90

"Gathered around me were the weak instead of the strong, the ugly instead of the beautiful, the losers instead of the winners. It looked like it was my destiny to travel in their company through life. That didn't bother me so much as the fact that I seemed irresistible to these dull idiot fellows. I was like a turd that drew flies instead of like a flower that butterflies and bees desired." Chap. 36, p. 155

"Once in the mold you had to push forward. Sussex was as helpless as the next man. Either you managed to do something or you starved in the streets." Chap. 41, p. 176

"And yet I knew that what I saw wasn't as simple and good as it appeared. There was a price to be paid for it all, a general falsity, that could be easily believed and could be the first step down a dead-end street." Chap. 45, p. 194

"There were too many demeaning jobs. Why the hell wasn't I a superior court judge or a



concert pianist? Because it took training and training cost money. But I didn't want to be anything anyhow. And I was certainly succeeding." Chap. 47, p. 210

"It was so wearisome being in the world. Every time you looked around there was some guy ready to take you one without even inhaling." Chap. 51, p. 231

"What you must do, with money and the poor, is never let them get too close to one another." Chap. 54, p. 251

"I made practice runs down skid row. I didn't like what I saw there." Chap. 58, p. 274



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Henry's relationship with his father. What is it that causes the first of the beatings? What stops them?

Describe Henry's relationship with his mother. What does he say to her when the first beating is over? What is her reply?

When Henry breaks out with the "acne vulgaris", he's sent to a public hospital. Describe the treatment. What was Henry's attitude about the diagnosis and the treatment? What part of the treatment does Henry like? Why?

When Henry meets the girls at the beach, he declines to go off to play with them. Why? What is Henry's reaction to his decision? Do you believe he had another option?

Becker says Henry is hiding from reality by drinking so much. Why does Henry seek solace in the drinking? How does he have his first taste of wine? What is his reaction then?

Describe three instances in which Henry resorts to violence. Why does he take this tact?

What is Henry's outlook on his own future? What does he expect of himself? What does he dream of? What steps does he take to control his destiny? What does he say about Becker's outlook on life? How does that compare to Henry's?

Two of Henry's friends committed suicide. Who were they?

What are some of the steps Henry's father takes to ensure that the neighbors don't know that the family is poor? Why does he go to these lengths?