

# **How Late It Was, How Late Study Guide**

**How Late It Was, How Late by James Kelman**

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## Plot Summary

Sammy, a 38-year old unemployed Scotsman and petty criminal, wakes up in the gutter on a Sunday morning in Glasgow after a weekend of heavy drinking. He has a run-in with the police and finds himself in a police cell having lost his eyesight, apparently in the brawl. He remembers little about the weekend, except that he went out drinking with some friends following an argument with his girlfriend Helen, who he lives with.

The novel tells of Sammy's experiences over the following week, as he struggles to cope with his blindness, the attentions of the police and the bureaucracy of lodging a claim for dysfunctional benefit. To add to this, Helen has disappeared without a trace.

The police are interested in Sammy due to his association with Charlie Barr, a political activist and terrorist who it is believed Sammy met up with over the weekend. Sammy claims to remember little about the meeting, but the police persist, releasing Sammy only to re-arrest him for further interrogation later in the week. Sammy has been in prison in the past for his involvement in crime, and he is frightened of being imprisoned again. Finally, with the help of his son, Sammy escapes from Glasgow with the intention of starting a new life in England.



# Pages 1 - 57

## Pages 1 - 57 Summary

Sammy awakes on a Sunday morning propped up against some railings in a Glasgow street, with his head pounding. He is wearing someone else's old trainers and wonders where his shoes are. He struggles to remember how he got there, but can't recall anything clearly. He approaches a group of men who he initially thinks are tourists but then recognizes as policemen, and asks them for money to get home. The police are irritated by Sammy and tell him go away. He punches one of them before running off, so they pursue him and beat him up.

Later Sammy wakes up on a bunk in a police cell, with bruised ribs from the beating. He falls asleep again and when he next awakes he discovers that his eyesight has been lost, apparently as a result of the beating from the police. While waiting to be interrogated, Sammy recalls a story he once heard about Samurai warriors, who plot revenge on the people who killed their master. They lulled their rivals into a false sense of security by living like vagabonds for a year, then regrouped and killed their rivals, before committing suicide as their duty was done.

When the police later tell Sammy he is free to leave, he demands to speak to a doctor regarding his blindness. In response, the police become annoyed and return him to the cell. As Sammy ponders his situation, we learn he went on a drinking spree over the weekend after an argument with his girlfriend Helen about his activities dealing in stolen goods. On the Saturday he met up with an old friend, Charlie Barr, but has no clear recollection of what happened at their meeting.

On his prison bunk, Sammy can't sleep and his mind wanders, thinking about gruesome deaths he has experienced. One of these was that of a fellow drinker who Sammy had been with when he took himself off and wedged himself in some park railings to die; the second was a fellow prison inmate who was, accordingly to Sammy, suffocated by the prison officers.

When the police discharge him on Wednesday, he makes his way home, feeling mentally unstable and very self-conscious. He listens to the sounds around him to get his bearings, and asks a passerby for help in crossing the road. He feels exhausted and desperate, but presses on towards Helen's flat where he lives.

## Pages 1 - 57 Analysis

The reader learns a lot about the central character of the novel 'Sammy' Samuels from the events that take place in this first section of the book and from his own recollections of significant things that have happened in his life. It is clear from the outset, when he wakes up in the gutter and then provokes and attacks the policemen, that Sammy is a rough character with aggressive tendencies, who is inclined to drink too much. We also

learn that he is a convict who has been in prison in the past, and is now still involved in petty crime.

As the novel progresses however, it becomes clear that there is more to Sammy's character than was at first apparent. He is a very anxious person, prone to panic attacks and very fearful of being returned to prison. He has a mind which constantly wanders, he thinks quite deeply at times, and can be very philosophical about life.

This section introduces us to the fact that Sammy has a girlfriend, Helen, who he is not presently on good terms with. He appears to love Helen, but seems a little frightened of her and worries about what she thinks of him. We are also introduced to the character of Charlie Barr who is central to the story although never actually appears in person. We learn at this stage that Sammy has known Charlie since they were young boys, and it is implied that Charlie is involved in crime, although he has changed somewhat from being a politically vociferous heavy drinker to a teetotaler who is 'keeping the head down'. Sammy recalls meeting Charlie over the weekend, which later turns out to be significant as we discover that the police are trying to track down Charlie who has been involved in a political or terrorist act.

It is never made clear whether the police beating did actually cause Sammy's blindness or whether it was brought on by his own anxiety. What we do know from the early part of the novel however, is that he was not blind immediately after the beating, as he could see when he first awoke in the police cell.

The story of the samurai warriors could be regarded as representing Sammy's own situation as it is uncovered as the novel progresses. He appears to idolize Charlie Barr and risks sacrificing his own freedom to protect Charlie, for the sake of duty and honor between friends.

Sammy's recollection of the deaths he has seen raises questions about his possible involvement in them. It emerges later in the novel that the fellow prisoner was found in Sammy's cell, and Sammy alleges that this was because the prison guards put him there to cast suspicion on Sammy. The reader is never really convinced that Sammy is capable of murder, but due to his aggressive tendencies the suspicions linger regarding the circumstances of both men's deaths, as well as Helen's uncharacteristic disappearance, and these are left as questions which are never answered.

Sammy's blindness might be seen as representing the adverse circumstances generally with which he has to deal in his life. Like his blindness, it is never really clear to what extent the difficulties he has faced in his life have been imposed on him or whether they are self-induced.

Music is also introduced early on as a theme that is interspersed throughout the novel. Sammy loves country and classic rock music and often identifies with particular tracks, from which selected lyrics are included at various points throughout the book.



## Pages 58 - 77

### Pages 58 - 77 Summary

Sammy eventually arrives at Helen's flat, but she is not at home, and he initially assumes she must be at work. He falls asleep on the sofa for a while and when he wakes up he feels his way around the flat and realizes that Helen has been away since he left, as the bed has not been slept in. Sammy becomes very depressed and wonders how he will cope. He has no money and will have to manage for two days with little food until his unemployment benefit check arrives on Friday. In bed, he ponders his situation and wonders whether Helen will return. He remembers their conversation the previous week, in which she found out that he was involved in selling stolen goods.

On Thursday Sammy addresses the practicalities of dealing with his predicament, despite the pain he is still experiencing from the beating. It occurs to him that he will no longer be required to take work on building sites, and wonders whether he will be eligible for a 'dysfunctional payment' to compensate for his inability to work. He makes plans to go to the welfare department to make a claim for benefits and to the doctor in order for his disability to be medically documented. He wonders how to go about applying for a guide dog and a white stick. Realizing that he will need a stick initially to help him around, he calls on a neighbor, who he has not actually met before but who introduces himself as Boab, and asks to borrow a saw in order to cut the head of a mop. As he still has no money and the welfare office is some distance away, he decides to wait until his unemployment benefit arrives the next day before making the trip.

For a while, panic overcomes Sammy, and he feels defeated by his situation. By now he is dirty and unkempt, having not washed since before the previous weekend, but although he notes his condition, he postpones doing anything about it. He ventures out of the block of flats using the stick, but once outside he loses confidence and goes back into the flat. After a while, he regains some confidence and starts to feel quite positive again, telling himself that despite everything that has happened over the last few days, he is still not defeated.

### Pages 58 - 77 Analysis

The setting for this chapter is Helen's flat, where Sammy lives and where he seems quite at home. Sammy's state of mind swings back and forward between deep depression and anxiety on the one hand, to acceptance of his circumstances and a practical focus on how to deal with them on the other. Despite having to face extremely challenging and unexpected circumstances - his unexpected blindness and the disappearance of Helen - along with a lack of money and very little food, he is surprisingly resilient and resourceful when he is able to keep his anxiety under control. We are introduced to Boab, Sammy's neighbor who is not a central character in the novel but who plays a key role in helping Sammy to overcome his circumstances, at this

stage by lending him a saw to make a stick, and later in the novel by helping to facilitate his escape, albeit unknowingly.

We learn that Sammy's only current income, apart from his earnings from dealing in stolen goods, is his unemployment benefit and that he relies heavily on Helen for support. Although unemployed now, in the past he has lived in England and worked on building sites there. Another side of Sammy's character emerges as it is revealed that as well as enjoying music, he likes reading and watching the news and documentaries on television, so it appears he is a little more complex than might initially be assumed.



# Pages 78 - 120

## Pages 78 - 120 Summary

On Friday morning Sammy's unemployment benefit check arrives in the post. Having mapped out the journey in his mind, Sammy succeeds in making his way to the post office and cashes his check, then he buys some food and tobacco and some sunglasses in the shops nearby. He waits at the bus stop for a bus to the DSS Central Medical Department (Department of Social Security), asking the other people waiting for help in identifying the right bus. They help him on, the bus is very crowded and he has to go upstairs. Having lit a cigarette, he feels very pleased with himself for what he has achieved so far.

When the bus arrives at the Central Medical Department, Sammy starts to panic and almost falls down the stairs. He is very anxious and worries about being knocked down by a car. A security guard, who apprehends him when he tries to enter the grounds the wrong way, directs him to the Emergency Department, where he must go as he has no pre-arranged appointment. Sammy finds the way in and joins the awaiting crowd. While waiting, his mind wanders and he thinks about his parents, his son Peter and his ex-wife, who he hasn't seen for years. When a young lad nearby starts bragging about a fight he was involved in, Sammy reflects on the boy's stupidity in being so brash.

When it is time for his appointment, Sammy is helped into the lift and finds his way to the Sightless section. He is initially interviewed by a young male official, who enters details of his condition and other information about him on a computer. The boy asks whether Sammy's loss of sight occurred when he was in police custody and whether he has raised a claim for compensation. In casual conversation, Sammy mentions that it was his own stupidity in provoking the police that had caused this to happen, and when the boy asks 'they gave ye a doing?', Sammy agrees. He is very irritated, however, to realize the boy has recorded this on the computer and asks for it to be removed, but is told that is impossible. He feels angry with himself for what he has said.

Sammy is next interviewed by a woman, who interrogates him about the allegation that he endured a physical beating by members of the police. She asks him to clarify what he meant and he said they were using physical restraints. The woman queries why he is not seeking compensation and warns that it might be seen as an inconsistency in his claim for dysfunctional benefit. Sammy explains he is not seeking compensation as the police didn't intend to make him lose his sight. The woman says that someone might query why the restraints were being used, and might argue that he himself caused the dysfunction and is therefore ineligible for benefit. Sammy struggles to control his temper, especially when he realizes she is entering everything he says on the computer. He asks for the claim to be withdrawn and says that he will complete a new form himself. The claim is withdrawn but not deleted from the computer. The woman advises Sammy that he will be asked to visit the Police Department's Medical Benefits Office, as





a formality, and notifies him of the time limits within which he has to lodge his application.

When Sammy arrives home he succumbs to depression and another panic attack. He reflects on how difficult life can be, and his experiences of prison. He worries about what will happen to him if Helen doesn't return, as it is not his house and he will have to leave. After a while his mind turns to practicalities again as he thinks about painting his stick white so that his blindness is more obvious. After eating, he falls asleep for a while on the living room rug and then goes to bed.

## **Pages 78 - 120 Analysis**

In this section, the author recounts Sammy's experiences as he faces the external environment to deal with his predicament. There are two challenges to be faced: coping with his blindness, and dealing with bureaucracy in staking his claim for dysfunctional benefit. He is more effective in dealing with the first of these, as he cashes his unemployment benefit check, buys some food and successfully negotiates a bus journey to the welfare office. He feels triumphant in doing so, although his confidence falls as he almost misses his bus stop and is apprehended by the guard when he enters the wrong way.

When Sammy tries to assert his rights in making his claim, he comes up against numerous barriers and difficulties. He raises the suspicion of the officials since he does not want to make a claim against the police, and becomes nervous and aggressive when being questioned. It is never quite clear why Sammy is so reluctant to sue the police if his blindness was genuinely caused by the beating, but it seems likely that due to his own criminal involvement and fear of being imprisoned again, he does not want to make an issue of this, particularly as he perceives that the police would win the case anyway due to their power.

Sammy's aggressiveness when he feels threatened by the situation again leads us to question the extent to which his apparently disadvantageous situation in life is actually the product of his own actions.



# Pages 120 - 158

## Pages 120 - 158 Summary

On Saturday morning Sammy goes out early to make an appointment with a doctor for Monday. He waits self-consciously with the other patients for the clinic to open. Inside, he is questioned quite aggressively by the receptionist about why he needs an appointment on such short notice. When he mentions that the police are involved in his case, however, he is offered an appointment on Monday morning.

Sammy leaves the clinic quite elated with this small victory. He craves a drink of beer having not had any alcohol for a week, and resolves to go to a pub at lunchtime. Feeling positive, he sets out for home, planning to buy food at the grocery store on the way back. The sun is shining. On the way however, he starts to feel very self-conscious and panicky again. He loses track of where he is, and changes his mind about going for a drink, deciding just to find his way home. He asks a passerby to point him in the right direction for the grocery store, and having bought some food he feels relieved to get home again. He feels very depressed and panicky, but tries to calm himself down and accept his circumstances.

Sammy's reflects on the argument with Helen, which occurred because he had told her too much about his criminal past. He loves Helen very much and wants to make a future with her, but to do that he felt he had to come clean about the past and announce his intentions to make a clean start.

Sammy therefore told Helen about the crimes for which he had been imprisoned. The first had occurred when he was living in London and had been recruited in a pub to take part in a 'job'. The police almost missed him when they apprehended the other criminals as he was hiding in the car, but he made the mistake of trying to start the engine, and as he couldn't actually drive he was unable to move off but alerted the police to his presence. The second incident was due to his involvement with Jackie Milligan, a criminal from Liverpool who made contact with Sammy when he needed to disappear as the police were looking for him. Sammy was only 19 at the time and he knew Sammy from the betting shops they both frequented. Sammy went off with Jackie and it is not revealed exactly what they did then, but they were both captured and given prison sentences for Jackie's previous criminal activities, four years in Sammy's case.

Sammy tells himself that he really had wanted to change, but his intentions had backfired as Helen had taken offence at what he had told her. Helen had been very quiet after their conversation, but they had argued on Friday morning when she had tried to stop Sammy from going out to sell stolen goods.

Having thought about Helen, Sammy now turns his attention to painting his stick white. He goes to Boab's flat to ask him to come and help Sammy find the white paint. Boab insists on painting the stick for him, and Sammy reluctantly lets him, although he is



concerned that Boab will ask questions about Helen and find out that she has disappeared.

Later Sammy soaks in the bath and thinks about going back to England where he has worked on building sites in the past. He suddenly starts to feel vulnerable, as he realizes that he hasn't locked the front door securely, and panicking, he quickly gets out of the bath and dresses. When there is a loud knock at the door, Sammy grabs the kitchen knife, locks the front door and goes into the living room, but soon realizes someone is in the room with him.

## Pages 120 - 158 Analysis

Again, Sammy's state of mind swings between despair and positive thinking, and we see how vulnerable he is to the onset of severe panic attacks. Conversely, minor accomplishments significantly boost his confidence, albeit on a short-term basis.

The main development in this section of the novel is the unraveling of information about the row with Helen and the circumstances that led up to it. According to Sammy, he genuinely wanted to be totally open with Helen about his criminal past and his intentions to reform in order to make a future together. At the same time, his actions prove otherwise, that he is unable to resist the temptation of dealing in stolen goods. This almost schizophrenic state in which conflicting emotions and actions are displayed, are paralleled in Sammy's mood swings and the presence of both insecurity and aggression in his character.

We learn a little more about Helen and Sammy's relationship with her. Sammy's apparent fear and respect for Helen may be a result of the comfort and security she provides him, which is in contrast with the relationship he had with his ex-wife, who was very demanding and spoiled.

It is also revealed that Sammy was involved in petty crime even as a teenager, and has had two long spells in prison, although he claims that he had only peripheral involvement in the crimes for which he was convicted and had been an unlucky victim in being caught. There are indeed indications of Sammy's naivete in getting involved with seasoned criminals and indications that he has been taken advantage of by such characters in the past. Despite his lifelong involvement in petty crime, he doesn't appear to have a very sophisticated criminal mind.



# Pages 158 - 211

## Pages 158 - 211 Summary

The police, who had entered the flat while Sammy was in the bath, handcuff him and take him back to the police station, where he is questioned by three men about what he did over the weekend. They are trying to get information relating to the terrorist activities of Sammy's friend Charlie and it appears that they are not local policemen. Sammy tells them about the row with Helen, and says that he can't remember much about what happened over the weekend until he woke up on Sunday morning. He tells them that he was drinking more than usual because of the row and because he was depressed about being unemployed. He thought that he had spent Friday night and Saturday with the Leg (Donaghue), and that they met two other drinking buddies - Billy and Tam - while on a pub-crawl, but that he can't remember anyone else being there.

The police try to trap Sammy into divulging information about his meeting with Charlie, by detailed questioning of his actions over the weekend. They suggest that Sammy was just setting up an alibi by going to a betting shop where there would be a record of his wagers, and questioned why he would have then visited a pub which was some distance away from the betting shop, rather than close by. The police tell Sammy that Mr Donaghue when interviewed said that they didn't see Billy or Tam, but that they had met up with someone else that Sammy knew well, who the reader assumes is Charlie.

After this interrogation, Sammy is put back into a cell with another prisoner. At this stage he feels very depressed, and thinks that things couldn't get much worse. He reflects that life has been against him and that the only good thing he had was Helen, but he has even lost her now. He wonders if anything bad has happened to her and realizes the police must suspect him. He wonders what Charlie has done and why the police want him to confirm he met him. He feels extremely tired but can't sleep, and gets irritated with his cellmate who is pacing up and down. After a while Sammy is marched out for more questioning. They ask him about the dress shirts that they found in the cupboard of the flat and accuse him of stealing them; Sammy says he bought them from someone in a pub. The police accuse Sammy of covering up for someone involved in violence and terrorism, and accuse him of lying when he says they just talked about football in the pub over the weekend. They accuse him of faking his blindness, and read out a letter from the manager of the pub where Helen works, asking her why she has not turned up for the past week. The policeman alleges that Sammy met Charles Barr in a pub on the Friday evening and threatens him for withholding evidence. He bribes him by saying that although they do not suspect Sammy of harming Helen, others will, and he will get him off the hook for that if he divulges what he knows about Charlie. When Sammy still doesn't tell them anything they return him to the cell. At this stage he is terrified of being sent back to prison and of what it would do to him. He aggressively lectures his cellmate, Davie, on what the police are like and how to deal with them. After a while he has a bad panic attack.



The police question Sammy yet again. Sammy decides to tell them about the meeting over the weekend, as he knew that Charlie would be able to take care of himself anyway. He tells them that until Friday he hadn't seen Charlie for ten years. He is told that the other police want to hold him in custody until Helen turns up, and it emerges now that Sammy believes he had been set up in prison before when his fellow prisoner died and his body was put in Sammy's cell to make it look suspicious. This incident along with Helen's disappearance would certainly cast suspicion on Sammy. The police also suggest that any case against them for causing his blindness would not be successful as Sammy already has medical records confirming that he is an anxious type of person, who experiences panic attacks. Sammy argues that these medical reports were filed after the prisoner was found dead in his cell and reflect his state of mind at that time. When the police ask him to pass on a message to his friend (Charlie) - to 'watch out for the dark', Sammy interprets this as a warning to himself rather than Charlie.

When he is taken back to the cell he feels dreadful. He sleeps until suppertime then starts to plan what he will do when released. He has a restless night, and is dragged out of bed the next morning when the police bundle him into the car and take him for his doctor's appointment. They send him in alone while they wait in the car.

## Pages 158 - 211 Analysis

It now emerges that the main reason for the police's interest in Sammy is his association with Charlie Barr, who they seem to be desperate to capture. It is clear that Charlie must have been involved in a serious act of violence or terrorism, as non-local police are involved in questioning Sammy, and they are prepared to overlook what they know about Sammy's own criminal activities in order to get information about Charlie. We already know that Sammy did meet up with Charlie over the weekend, and although he initially holds back this information apparently out of loyalty to Charlie, he eventually admits their meeting to the police. However, Sammy appears to genuinely have no idea what Charlie is currently involved in.

It is unclear why Sammy is so loyal to Charlie apart from the fact that they have been friends since childhood. There is no evidence that Sammy benefits from the relationship, and indeed it is more likely that Sammy is being used by Charlie as an alibi.

Sammy continues to experience panic attacks and his temper flares against the police. In this section of the novel we see the first indication that Sammy is planning to flee the situation, as he considers moving back to England to find work.



# Pages 211 - 261

## Pages 211 - 261 Summary

Sammy sits in the reception area and waits for his turn to see the doctor. His mind wanders, as he reflects on the pointlessness of just waiting and hoping things will turn out okay. He suddenly realizes someone has sat down beside him, and a voice asks whether he is looking for a 'rep' (someone to represent his case for a commission payment). The man seems to know all about Sammy and his situation. Sammy asks the man to go away, but he is persistent and when Sammy's name is called he grabs his wrist and warns him that the doctor can be awkward and that he must stick to his story.

The doctor questions him about his blindness and his eyesight before he became blind. He conducts some basic tests and confirms that Sammy does not respond. He questions him about other aspects of his health, and Sammy lifts his clothes to show the doctor the bruising on his ribs. When the doctor asks about anxiety and panic attacks Sammy denies that he experiences these, but the doctor refers to his medical notes from the time that the dead man was found in his prison cell, which describe Sammy as being prone to these types of attacks. The doctor advises him to adapt to his blindness, which he should regard as semi-permanent. However, when Sammy asks about exemption from employment and about getting assistance from a charity, the doctor is unhelpful and says it all depends on comprehensive medical reports being carried out by medical officers at the PMBO. Sammy is prescribed anti-stress medication and ointment for his bruises. He is infuriated and curses the doctor. He stumbles as he tries to leave the room, the door opens and the rep is there, who informs the doctor that he is representing Sammy. As Sammy leaves the rep catches up with him and tells him that the police have left. He asks Sammy about his consultation with the doctor. Sammy tries to shake him off, saying he is not claiming compensation and doesn't need a rep.

The rep introduces himself as Ally. He clearly knows a great deal about Sammy's case. He tells Sammy that he believes the police will ultimately admit their responsibility. Sammy grabs his wrist and tells him to mind his own business. After a while Sammy calms down and apologizes, and asks Ally to help him to catch a bus home. While they are waiting for the bus he explains a little to Ally about why he is not claiming compensation - because he is already in trouble with the police, and just doesn't want any more trouble, he wants to live an ordinary life. Ally suddenly starts talking as if Sammy has already agreed to let him represent him, saying that some of the information is irrelevant and he should just answer Ally's questions. He tells him his commission rate and gives him advice on how to act - take the prescription, register with the charity for a stick and dog etc. He asks questions about what actually happened during the run-in with the police. He also advises Sammy to tone down his language. Sammy gets annoyed with him, but Ally explains that in his job as a rep he has learned the importance of using in the right language. Again he speaks as though Sammy has already appointed him as his rep. Sammy says he needs time to think about it, and the rep warns him not to leave it until the last minute as he has to prepare the case. While



saying he isn't putting pressure on him, Ally clearly is, as he says Sammy will have to make a decision one way or another. Finally Sammy agrees and they shake hands on the deal. Ally reminds him to go to the charity as quickly as possible, and arranges to meet Sammy again at Sammy's flat on Wednesday morning. Ally leaves him at the bus stop. Sammy tells himself that he has no intention of using the rep, or going to the charity the next day. Instead, he plans to escape before the police capture and imprison him again.

He eventually catches a bus home and gets off in drizzling rain which gradually gets heavier. As he walks and his trainers start pinching again, he has a glimmer of memory in which he either put on the trainers by mistake in someone's house when he was drunk, or someone had already taken his shoes and he was left with the trainers. He thought it was probably the Leg.

Sammy suddenly makes a decision to go to England, then loses hope as he tells himself he won't get his Dysfunctional Benefit or compensation and won't be able to survive there without money or a job. He wonders whether he could sell the dress shirts to obtain some money to go to England, if the police haven't already taken them away. However, he realizes that his contacts Tam and the Leg would be wary of dealing in the stolen goods now, since they had been interviewed by the police.

Sammy continues on through the rain and winds up what he hopes is the right direction. While trudging on, he considers what it would be like to escape to England and imagines his life in London, or alternatively in a small seaside town in England where he would be the only benefits claimant and would receive lots of special attention. He also daydreams about running a pub with Helen in England, but tells himself that he will be alone, as Helen has left for good. He is quite nervous walking along, constantly thinking that there is someone walking beside him. After a while he recognizes his surroundings and reaches home.

## Pages 211 - 261 Analysis

This section of the novel tells what happens when Sammy visits the doctor with the intention of getting medical evidence to support his claim. It also introduces us to Ally, who claims to be an experienced representative of claimants for benefit. The reader never knows for sure whether Ally is who he says he is, or whether he is actually a policeman or acting on behalf of the police, but the latter scenario seems likely. It is not explained how Ally knows so much about Sammy's case and his background, nor why the police who brought Sammy to the clinic went away after saying they would wait for him. In a later section of the novel, Sammy's son Peter is suspicious of Ally's manner, saying that he reminds him of a policeman.

Ironically, Sammy believes that he can see through the rep as he has known similar types of people, but he does not suspect he is a policeman. This demonstrates Sammy's naivete, and perhaps helps to explain why he has been so easily influenced

by his criminal associates in the past. The fact that his initial resistance to Ally is quickly worn down also supports the view that Sammy is easily influenced.

The reader's impression of the doctor is that he does not take Sammy's case very seriously, despite confirming that he is sightless. Seeing that Sammy's medical records indicate that Sammy is prone to stress disorders, he seems most inclined to attribute his current situation to this, rather than the beating by the police. It is possible, of course, that the police have spoken to the doctor prior to Sammy's appointment and influenced his judgment. Overall, his manner is one of disinterest in Sammy's case.

The theme of escape is expanded at the end of this section, with Sammy daydreaming about idyllic scenarios of a new life in England. It is clear to the reader that the reality of his situation would be very different. However, the dreams serve to strengthen Sammy's resolve to run away.





# Pages 261 - 314

## Pages 261 - 314 Summary

Back at the flat, Sammy initially feels much more positive. He puts on some music while preparing food, but becomes very emotional when he hears a sad song that he identifies with, and he lies down on his bed and cries. After a while he gets up and eats, but still feels very despondent. The dirty water is still in the bath from Saturday night. He makes up his mind to ask Boab to phone for a taxi for him and to go to Glancys for a drink, and smartens himself up by putting on a shirt and tie, but decides against shaving. He decides to go to Quinns Bar, where Helen works, first, as he wants to see for himself whether she is there or not.

At Quinns, he is prevented from going in by the bouncers, who tell him it is a special promotion night for young people, but Sammy suspects it is because of his unkempt appearance. When he asks to see Helen, he is told she doesn't work there. Sammy starts to get aggressive with the bouncers, but backs off when he realizes there are several of them. He feels cross with himself for going to Quinns and for provoking the bouncers. He now tells himself that Helen isn't coming back, and resolves to escape from Glasgow without further delay before the police can capture him.

Sammy moves on to Glancys bar, where there are only a few drinkers. He feels very self-conscious. He buys a pint of beer and while drinking it is approached by a friend, Herbie, who says he had heard about Sammy's blindness. Herbie buys Sammy a drink but soon returns to his companions. Another friend also sends Sammy over a drink but doesn't come to talk to him. Sammy feels that his friends don't want to be seen with him, as he is in trouble with the police, but are still buying him drinks as they don't want to upset him. It is quiet, no one is playing dominos as usual. Sammy ponders about whether he could still play dominoes, being blind.

He is then approached by Tam, who buys him a drink and asks him about his blindness. Sammy unsuccessfully tries to find out more from Tam about the forgotten weekend. Tam is very annoyed with Sammy for not warning him in advance that the police might question him about the weekend, as they had turned up early one morning at his house. He had lots of stolen goods in the house and his wife was very frightened. Tam blames Sammy because he was the one that met up with Charlie. Sammy is furious and reminds Tam that he has been preoccupied with dealing with his blindness and had not therefore had a chance to warn Tam. Tam leaves, saying that he doesn't know Sammy as well as he thought he did, that the police know more about him.

When Sammy gets home, unable to sleep he thinks about the way in which the police use people's families to try to manipulate them, and ponders that Tam is inexperienced and doesn't realize how the police operate.



Sammy goes to bed, but is woken up very early in the morning by a knock at the door. It is Ally, who says he needs to check some details with Sammy. Sammy wonders how he got his address as he hadn't given it to him. Ally asks Sammy to sign a document, which he says is just a formality. He asks Sammy to tell him as much as possible about Helen and about what he can remember of the blanked-out Saturday, even the things which Sammy thinks are irrelevant. He also questions Sammy about his health and his drinking behavior. Sammy gets very defensive and angry when Ally starts asking about Helen, as Sammy is worried about her. Ally mentions that the police are talking about the fact that politics are involved, and accuses Sammy of not mentioning this. He also asks Sammy if it would be okay if he got in touch with Charlie. He inspects Sammy's bruises and says he will send someone later with a camera to take photos of them. He then leaves hurriedly.

## Pages 261 - 314 Analysis

The fragility of Sammy's emotional state is in evidence in this section, as he initially feels very positive, but is influenced by a sad song on the radio that he identifies with, and he lies down and cries. He continues to feel very despondent and we feel at this stage that he had reached the depths of despair about his situation. Characteristically, however, he pulls himself out of this stage and turns to action, deciding to go out for a drink.

In Sammy's experiences at Glancy's, the theme of loyalty is reintroduced, but this time it is the lack of loyalty of Sammy's friends that is portrayed, in contrast to the loyalty he has shown in withholding information about Charlie from the police. His friends make token gestures by buying him drinks, but are reluctant to be seen with Sammy due to his involvement with the police. Tam, the market trader who Sammy was drinking with over the weekend, has no concern about what has happened to Sammy, and just blames Sammy for putting himself and his family at risk.

Ally's intensive questioning of Sammy, and his request to make contact with Charlie, strengthens the reader's suspicion that he is acting for the police. Sammy, however, seems to have no inkling of this and provides Ally with lots of information in response to his queries. He seems to be putting his trust in Ally through desperation, as he badly needs to feel that someone is on his side.



# Pages 315 - 374

## Pages 315 - 374 Summary

After Ally leaves, Sammy reflects on his blindness, and the difficulties of living with a disability. He feels very tired and overwhelmed by his situation, but after a while he starts to feel more positive and in control. He regains some self-respect and resolves to escape with his head held high, clean and shaven. Before taking his leave, however, he sets out in the pouring rain to buy some food to take with him. He finds the walk to the shops very hard-going, he is getting soaked, he is shivering, he has no energy, he has pains in his joints, and he succumbs to another panic attack, but eventually gets to the shops and buys his food.

When Sammy arrives back at the flat he puts his clothes in the washing machine and goes to bed. When he is awoken by a loud knock at the door, he expects it to be the police and starts shaking with fear. He unlocks the door and steps back. But it is only Boab, who tells Sammy that his son Peter and his pal had come to see Sammy and were waiting at Boab's house as Sammy didn't hear their knock. Boab says he will send them in.

Peter and his friend Keith have come because Ally contacted Peter and asked him to bring the camera. They chat with Sammy for a while about the family and what the boys want to do when they leave school. Peter tells his father he felt suspicious of Ally, who had asked lots of questions about Sammy and gave the impression of being a policeman. When Peter asks Sammy what caused his blindness, he said he fell from a building. They take photographs of Sammy's injuries, but refuse to leave the film with Sammy for developing as Ally had said he would collect it from Peter personally. Sammy is worried about his in-laws finding out, and asks Peter to make sure he tells no one about this and to give the photos to Ally personally. Sammy gives the boys twenty pounds. While Keith uses the bathroom, Peter asks Sammy if he is on the run and offers to help him, as he knows of an old house where he could hide.

Sammy tells the boys he is considering going back to England. When Peter asks how he will manage to survive there, being blind, Sammy pretends that Helen will be joining him and will support them both. Peter makes an excuse to be alone with Sammy, and tells his dad that he wants to go with him to England. Sammy discourages him, saying that he should do a training course first and perhaps join him later on. When Peter offers to give Sammy the eighty pounds he has saved up, Sammy agrees to take it. He asks the boys to make sandwiches and goes to pack his clothes and cassettes, then asks Peter to ask Boab to order a taxi for them. Sammy writes a note for Helen saying he will be in touch and apologizing for what happened.

The three of them leave the flat, Sammy asking the boys to warn him if they see anyone suspicious lurking around. Although Peter remarks that there are six or seven men nearby Sammy tells them not to worry. Sammy concocts an elaborate ploy to confuse



anyone who is following him. They ignore the minicab that is waiting for them, separate from Keith and meet up at the bus-stop, then hail a taxi and go to the railway station. From there they take two separate taxis and arrange to meet later at the Swan Inn to get the money from Peter. At the Swan Inn Sammy asks a man to help him make a phone call to find out the time of the last train to Birmingham, but the lines are engaged and he gives up. When Peter arrives later the money is passed over and Sammy says goodbye to the boys. He hails another taxi, and disappears 'out of sight'.

## Pages 315 - 374 Analysis

Again Sammy forces himself to think more positively and to take practical actions towards his escape. However, his dreams of getting away and making a new life in England contrast cruelly with the difficulties he faces in just making a short trip to the shops.

There is a major change in Sammy's attitude when his son Peter arrives, suddenly he becomes much more resourceful, his negativity leaves him and he eventually makes an elaborate plan to shake off the police and escape to a new life. It seems that all Sammy needs to tackle his problems is a little help and support rather than constant barriers and difficulties.

Here, the loyalty of Sammy's son Peter is in stark contrast to the lack of loyalty shown by his friends. Even though Peter does not live with his father and there is no indication that they have had much regular contact, there is still clearly a father-son bond between them. Sammy's whole manner is transformed once Peter arrives, and he comes across as a slightly more mature and responsible person than in any other part of the novel.

When Sammy's plan of escape is successful and he slips away in the taxi, the reader is left feeling pleased that Sammy that he has triumphed over such adversity, but with lingering concerns about the likelihood that he will make a successful new life. Like the police we are left in the dark about where he has gone and what he will do when he gets there.



# Characters

## 'Sammy' Samuels

Sammy is the central character of the novel, and others appear only peripherally as Sammy comes into contact with them or thinks about them. He is 38 years old, Glaswegian, once married but now single. He has recently started living with his girlfriend, Helen, in her flat. His first marriage, when very young, lasted only into his mid-twenties and he has no contact with his ex-wife. He has a son Peter, who is now 15, from this marriage. Sammy speaks (and thinks) in very rough Glasgow dialect, with liberal use of very crude profanities, mainly the 'f' word. He is currently unemployed but has worked in the past in the building trade in different parts of the country.

Sammy appears to be almost a vagrant character. He has no regular job or permanent home, a criminal background and continuing involvement in petty crime, and drinks heavily. He develops an unkempt and dirty appearance as the novel progresses, but it is not clear whether this is his usual demeanor or caused by his blindness and despair. He has been involved in petty crime such as shoplifting since his youth, and has also been involved in more serious crimes for which he has spent two long spells in prison. He had been stealing leather jackets from a clothes shop just the previous week.

There is more to Sammy's character than initially meets the eye. Although he is quite introverted and doesn't talk very much, he has an active mind. He is probably of lower than average intelligence, which may have been caused by a boulder falling on his head in the past, and he is often regarded as stupid by his friends, but he actually thinks quite deeply about things at times and can be quite philosophical. He also claims to enjoy reading and watching news and documentaries on TV.

Sammy has a nervous disposition, and is prone to depression, anxiety and panic attacks, although he has learned to control these tendencies to an extent. It is unclear whether they are the result of his experiences in prison or whether he has always had them. Sammy also has an aggressive nature, and is inclined to become violent at the slightest provocation, but is usually annoyed with himself afterwards, suggesting that he has little self-control.

In contrast, Sammy displays a great sense of loyalty and duty to those he values, even though this may be misplaced and may backfire on him, as is the case with respect to his protection of Charlie Barr, and his desire to be completely honest about his past with Helen. Moreover, Sammy the father figure displays considerably more maturity and presence of mind; the appearance of his son appears to have a positive effect on him.

Sammy's one great passion is for music, particularly country music and classic rock. He frequently identifies with the lyrics of his favorite songs. His cassette tapes are among his few possessions, and when he is packing to leave he ensures that he makes room



in his limited luggage space for these, even though he has no player of his own. Sammy also makes up song lyrics in his own mind to reflect his experiences.

Although Sammy experiences deep depression and despair, he has the ability to rise above this and to find a positive attitude even in the most adverse and difficult circumstances. The reader does tend to wonder about the extent to which Sammy might be creating his own difficulties in life, due to his aggressive manner. In the end, however, despite everything that has happened to him, Sammy clings onto his dream of escape and a better life, and the reader feels empathy and support for him as he endeavors to achieve this.

One question that is left open in the novel is the possibility that Sammy is capable of killing, since the disappearance of Helen, the death of his cell-mate years before and the apparent suicide of a drinking companion are left unexplained and we know that Sammy is also capable of forgetting periods of time, at least when he is drunk. The reader is left feeling that it is unlikely that Sammy has killed Helen, as he seems so concerned and puzzled about her disappearance; furthermore the police do not seem to seriously suspect him of this, but the mystery of her disappearance remains unsolved.

## **Helen McGilvaray**

Helen is Sammy's girlfriend, who he has recently moved in with. She is an important character who never actually appears in person in the novel. She is found to have disappeared following an argument with Sammy and does not return. Helen is rather an enigmatic character; seen through Sammy's eyes she appears to be very hard-working, honest and responsible, if sometimes moody and prone to depression. However, we learn that she has children from a previous marriage whom she is no longer allowed to see, which raises questions about her past actions and behavior.

Helen works as a barmaid and according to Sammy is very good at her job and popular with the customers. At home she is apparently quiet, worries a lot about things, and is inclined to be sulky and give Sammy the silent treatment when she is annoyed with him. Although aware that Sammy has been in prison in the past, she has no interest in knowing the reasons and became upset when Sammy decided to tell her. She appears to want Sammy to have no involvement in crime as she tries to deter Sammy from his criminal activities, leading to their argument.

All we know about Helen's appearance is that she is tall and tends to stoop. Like Sammy, Helen loves music but her taste is more for soul than for country music.

## **Ally**

Ally is a mysterious character who claims to be a representative working on behalf of benefits claimants, but the reader suspects may actually be a policeman or someone working on behalf of the police. This is because he knows too much about Sammy and



his background, and also about what the police are interested in. Even his manner reminded Sammy's son Peter of a policeman, although Sammy did not perceive this.

Ally is very talkative, persuasive and persistent. He talks almost non-stop, seeking out information from Sammy, giving him advice on his case and telling him about other cases he is representing. In doing so, he cleverly succeeds in gaining Sammy's trust and getting him to disclose information. He is manipulative, demonstrated in the way in which he persuaded Sammy to sign a form, which he said was in Sammy's best interests in order to protect his family and girlfriend. He also pretends to be offended when Sammy doesn't trust him initially. Ally claims to have been wrongfully imprisoned himself in the past, in order to make Sammy believe that he understands his situation. He gives the impression that he is very busy working on other cases, and that he is doing Sammy a favor by representing him.

## **Charlie Barr**

The involvement of Charlie Barr is pivotal to the storyline although he never actually appears in person. Charlie is the focus of interest of the police investigations and Sammy is believed to have met up with him over the weekend.

Charlie is a political activist and suspected terrorist who Sammy has known since boyhood, as their fathers were friends. Sammy admires and respects Charlie although it is not clear why. He apparently used to be very loud and vocal, often butting into conversations in bars and confronting people for their political beliefs, but he has now quieted down and given up drinking alcohol.

Charlie is forty years old, married with three children, but believed to be unfaithful to his wife.

## **Jackie Milligan**

Jackie is one of Sammy's criminal associates from the past, and the person who was allegedly responsible for Sammy's second spell of imprisonment. He does not appear in person in the novel, and we learn about him from Sammy's conversation with Helen in which he comes clean about his criminal past. He is from Liverpool, a seasoned criminal and gambler. There is also some evidence that he is a womanizer. He has little self-control or patience, being unable to remain in hiding after a criminal job, which led to his and Sammy's subsequent arrest.

## **Tam Roberts**

A Glasgow market hawker and a dealer in stolen goods. He is one of Sammy's drinking buddies and petty criminal associates. He is married with children. Sammy spent time drinking with him over the weekend, and he was subsequently interrogated by the police about Charlie Barr. He appears briefly in the novel when he approaches Sammy in



Glancy's bar and accuses Sammy of failing to warn him that the police would be in touch with him.

## **The Leg**

Another of Sammy's drinking buddies who also deals in stolen goods. Sammy thinks he met up with him over the weekend, and he was apparently also interviewed by the police about Charlie. He does not appear in the novel in person.

## **Boab**

An elderly man who lives next door but one to the flat Sammy shares with Helen. Sammy approaches him on several occasions for help in making his stick and in ordering taxis for him. He is talkative and a little inquisitive but very helpful and obliging. He is a heavy smoker.

## **Police**

The policemen are not developed as individual characters in the novel. There appear to be two groups, local and non-local, possible national detectives who are investigating Charlie Barr's terrorist activities. In general, the police are aggressive and patronizing to Sammy. The group who Sammy initially provoked are believed to have beaten him up, resulting in his loss of eyesight.

## **Sammy's father**

We only know of Sammy's father through Sammy's recollections of him. His memories are not positive ones. Sammy had lots of fights with his father. He was apparently quite miserly, as well as being a socialist and outspoken in his political views, as demonstrated by his reluctance to add cold water to a hot bath as he perceived it would be giving money to the "capitalists". He never swore in front of his children. He went senile before he died.

## **Sammy's first wife**

Married Sammy when they were both very young. Through Sammy's description of her, we know she was attractive, but spoiled by her parents and of a sulky disposition.

## **Peter**

Sammy's 15-year old son who lives with his mother in a different part of Glasgow. . He is loyal and helpful. His character is not fully developed in the novel, but the impression





is that he is a quiet boy, somewhat unsure and unambitious, as he seems to have no clear idea of what he wants to do with his life. He shows perceptiveness, however, in suspecting Ally of being a policeman and seeing through Sammy's story that he sustained his injuries when he fell off a building. Despite not living with his father, Peter displays considerable loyalty to him, and is very keen to help him to escape; he also displays a desire to accompany Sammy and help him settle into his new life.

## **Keith**

Peter's friend, who uses his mum's camera to photograph Sammy's bruises and, along with Peter, who helps Sammy to escape.

## **Preliminary Officer (DSS Central Medical)**

A young friendly boy of about 18 or 19. He records basic facts about Sammy's case onto the computer, while at the same chatting generally about football. He influences the way in which the case is documented on the computer by putting words into Sammy's mouth about the police beating him up, which Sammy is irritated about.

## **IMO (DSS Central Medical)**

A female investigating officer who Sammy perceives to be stylish and classy. Official and formal in approach.

## **Doctor Logan**

The GP that Sammy visited to have his loss of sight medically documented. Sammy is warned by Ally that the doctor can be 'tricky'. The doctor exhibits some suspicion about Sammy's case, as there is ambiguity in the DSS report about the timing of its onset. Despite confirming that Sammy does not respond to visual stimuli, he is inconclusive about the sight loss, saying that it will have to be confirmed by further medical investigations. He tries to catch Sammy out by asking about his tendency to panic attacks, before revealing that he is aware of the earlier medical report which confirmed that he had them. The doctor uses very verbose and elaborate speech in responding to Sammy's queries, e.g. 'if a claim in respect of a found dysfunction is allowed then an application in respect of a customer's wants that may be consistent with the found dysfunction becomes open to discharge by the appropriate charitable agency' (pp. 223-4).



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Flats**

Helen's flat is on the sixth floor of a block of flats. There is a lift and an open corridor running along the front of each level, off which the front doors of each flat lead. It is a run-down, rough place with drug dealers in evidence. The building is riddled with rats.

### **Glancys Bar**

The pub which Sammy frequents most often, and where he meets up with his petty criminal associates such as the Leg and Tam.

### **Police station**

Sammy is held here twice for interrogation during the course of the week, and kept in a police cell in between interviews. The cell is typical, with two bunks and a bucket for use as a toilet.

### **Welfare department**

Sammy goes here to make his claim for dysfunctional benefit.

### **Doctor's surgery's surgery**

Sammy goes here to see the doctor in order to have his sight loss and bruising medically documented. This is where he meets Ally, the rep.



# Themes

## Disempowerment

This is a major theme running throughout the novel, as we see evidence of Sammy's disempowerment on various levels and the impact that this has on his state of mind and his ability to deal with the circumstances that confront him. The sudden loss of Sammy's eyesight, his incarceration by the police, and the suspicious and patronizing attitudes of the welfare officials and the GP towards him are the most obvious manifestations of ways in which control over his own circumstances is taken away. More generally, his periods of past imprisonment, and his history of unemployment and poverty have served to wear him down, making it increasingly difficult for him to make a successful life for himself. According to Sammy himself, his intellect may also have been adversely affected by the head injury he sustained when a boulder was pushed onto him, with the result that he tends to be slow and is often perceived as stupid by others.

The impact of disempowerment is evident in Sammy's state of mind, and its effects have clearly built up over time, rather than being attributable just to current circumstances. He is prone to depression, anxiety and panic attacks, and frequently feels completely overwhelmed by his situation.

Sammy's response to his disempowerment takes two main forms. First, he retreats into himself, his mind finding means of escape and imagined control as he dreams of a better life. On the surface, particularly when feeling threatened by others, he resorts to violence and aggression, apparently as the only means by which he can reassert some immediate control over a situation, even though this usually backfires.

## Hope

Despite Sammy's disempowerment and the very adverse circumstances that he faces, there is an underlying theme of hope which surfaces at a number of points, and builds up towards the end of the novel, as Sammy focuses on his plans to escape and eventually achieves this.

While in the doctor's waiting room, Sammy reflects on the pointlessness of hope without action, and makes an interesting observation about pubs being like official 'hoping rooms':

"Nay point hoping for the best. Ye could spend yer life doing that; hoping. If ye were gony sit about hoping then okay, go ahead, but that's all ye'll do, know what I mean, it's like waiting, ye're aye waiting. Waiting rooms. Ye go into this room where ye wait. Hoping's the same. One of these days the cunts'll build entire fucking buildings just for that. Official hoping rooms, where ye just go in and hope for whatever the fuck ye feel like hoping for. One on every corner. Course they had them already: boozers. Ye go in to hope and they sell ye a drink to help ye pass the time. Ye see these cunts sitting



there. What're they there for? They're hoping. The telly's rotten. So they go out hoping for something better." pg. 213.

Despite his thoughts about the futility of hope, it is clear that his efforts to rise above his depression and difficult circumstances rely very much on being able to sustain hope for the future, since there is little else going for him. His hope gives him the ability to see a possible positive outcome of his disability, as he realizes he might be eligible for benefits and may not have to work. Ultimately, his hope that there might be a bright future awaiting him if he can make a new start gives him the psychological means to plan and carry out his escape from the police. Unfortunately, the reader suspects that, as in the past, his dreams will be thwarted by circumstances and by his own lack of self-control. An example of this happening before was when he came clean with Helen about his history and promised to change, hoping that if he was completely honest with her they could have a happy future together. However, Helen did not believe him and instead she disappeared from this life, while Sammy was unable to keep his good intentions and immediately reverted to his involvement in petty crime.

## Relationships

Sammy's relationship with a number of key people in his life is a theme that is explored through Sammy's own thoughts and reflections, and through the circumstances surrounding and following his arrest.

The person he is closest to is his girlfriend Helen, and he clearly relies very heavily on her for both emotional and practical support. Rather than being a traditional girlfriend-boyfriend type of relationship, the reader gains the impression that Helen mothers Sammy and that he is somewhat frightened of her but protective of her at the same time, as one might feel towards a mother. From limited references to his own mother you gain the impression that this type of relationship may have been lacking in Sammy's childhood and that Helen compensates for this. Conversely, for Helen, Sammy takes the place of her own children who she is not allowed to see, and this may help to explain why she cannot face up to the fact that he is really a long-time criminal.

Sammy's relationship with his own parents is not fully explored, but the impression is one of an unhappy childhood, with frequent fights between himself and his father and a lack of any close relationship with his mother. This might potentially have contributed to his early marriage, as he sought comfort and security outside his own family, but also to the early breakdown of this marriage since he had no successful role model to follow.

Sammy does not have a full father-son relationship with Peter as it seems they have very little regular contact. Despite this, Peter displays considerable loyalty to Sammy, and there is almost a role reversal here as Peter is the one looking after Sammy's interests, by helping him to escape, giving him money and suggesting a hiding place. He does seem to have a positive effect on Sammy, who is able to overcome his depressive state of mind and at least give some semblance of a fatherly attitude as he



asks Peter about his ambitions and gives him and Keith some advice on life drawn from his own experiences.

Sammy's relationships with friends and acquaintances are another important sub-theme of the novel. Despite his wayward lifestyle, honor and loyalty towards friends are very important to Sammy, but have frequently been his downfall as the sentiments are not reciprocated. He has a very high level of respect and loyalty towards Charlie Barr, to the extent that he is prepared to sacrifice his own liberty, to an extent, rather than tell the police what he knows about Charlie so that they can capture him. Similarly, in the past, one of his prison spells came about because of his willingness to help a mere acquaintance, Jackie Milligan. Sammy is very disillusioned by the attitude of his friends towards him when he eventually goes for a drink at Glancy's following the onset of his blindness. Tam, Herbie and other friends no longer wish to associate with him due to their own fear of involvement with the police, and appear to have little genuine sympathy for his predicament.

# Style

## Points of View

The novel is written in the third person but follows Sammy's own experiences, encounters and thoughts throughout, so that the impression is almost that it is written in the first person. There is no independent description by the author of either settings or characters, and the only direct impressions we gain are when other characters are actually speaking.

This style is effective in providing the reader with a very close understanding of the central character and his lifestyle, and particularly his state of mind. Sammy's thoughts are conveyed to the reader exactly as they are formed in his mind, and in the language that he speaks. The effect is to promote a sense of empathy with Sammy, despite his faults and his bad ways.

The focus on Sammy's own perceptions and experiences has an additional function for the author. It enables him to leave a number of mysteries unsolved, such as Helen's whereabouts and what actually happened over the missing weekend.

## Setting

The novel is set in modern day urban Glasgow. The initial setting, as Sammy awakes propped up against a rusty railing in the street, has immediate negative connotations which help to set the tone of the novel.

There are relatively few specific locations; these are confined to the prison cell and interrogation room, Helen's flat, the DSS office and doctor's surgery, and Glancy's bar. Additionally, Sammy has several experiences of moving around in the external environment. From Sammy's description of the flats, we know that he lives in a very run-down area.

Because the novel focuses on Sammy's perspective of his situation, and since he is blind, there are few descriptions of locations. There is a strong emphasis, however, on the ways in which Sammy experiences his environment using his non-visual senses, including the feel of the adverse weather conditions and how they affect Sammy's state of mind, and his perceptions of people he meets from the tone of their voices.

Most of the settings are closed in and are either explicit or symbolic examples of the ways in which Sammy is himself constrained by circumstances. At the police station, the DSS office and GP's surgery he battles to assert some control, but to no avail. Even his home is no refuge, as the real source of security that it offers - Helen - has disappeared, and any privacy he might have had there soon disappears as the police and Ally seek him out. Even at Glancy's his friends have turned against him and he finds no comfort.



Sammy's perceived ideal environments contrast starkly with the reality of the actual settings, as he reminisces about his experiences of living and working in London, and dreams of life in a small English seaside town. The alternative escape offered to him by Peter is a boarded-up doss-house where drug users live. Sammy's actual destination when he does ultimately make his escape is left unknown.

## Language and Meaning

The whole novel is written in very thick Glaswegian working-class dialect, with very liberal use of profanities. This style is used in order to best portray Sammy's character, since the novel is focused throughout on his own perceptions, thoughts and experiences, and this is an accurate representation of the way that someone with Sammy's background would be likely to speak. The curses that litter his speech and thoughts all the time are just everyday language to Sammy, not consciously intended to be offensive. The only exceptions in the novel to this use of Glasgow working-class dialect are the dialogue of other characters, such as the DSS officials and the GP in particular, who uses very educated, elaborate speech.

Some of the language and expressions are likely to be quite difficult to follow for those unused to Scottish dialect, but to counterbalance this, the overall tone is straightforward and highly readable.

## Structure

The book is written in continuous prose with no separate chapters or sections and for the purpose of this review arbitrary decisions were made about how to divide up the novel for summary and analysis.

Punctuation is fairly basic, and there are no speech marks, conversations being marked instead by starting a new line for each line of dialogue.

The continuous style of writing seems symbolic of the relentless nature of Sammy's circumstances as his blindness, his battles with bureaucracy and the continuing threat of further arrest persist. Both the continuous prose style and the lack of speech marks also contribute to the sense of realism, as the book reads less as a work of fiction and more as a personal account, despite being in the third person.



## Quotes

"Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man." pg. 1

"he had seen it, the sorts man he had fucking seen it, cunts fucking dying, getting fucking kicked to death, the fucking lot man he had seen it .... All he wanted was his due, that was all man his fucking due. He had copped for it; copped for this and copped for that." pg. 57.

"If the wind was up then it made things creak and sometimes at night if ye were coming home ye thought ye heard things, it could even get a bit scary, there was a lot of shadows; and even just now, even though ye couldnay see shadows and stuff like that, it was still a bit funny, like there was somebody hanging about watching him, just dodging about out his footsteps, something like that man stupid, ye just ignored it, yer imaginings, that was what it was." pg. 58.

"He quite liked having a book to read and he quite liked the radio, discussion programmes and things to do with the news. But it was the music he needed, it was music made him jump about, it was music made him excited." pg. 60.

"he felt fucking awful man. It wasnay things closing in on him, cause it had already happened, it had happened; they had fucking closed in. He was beat. They had beat him. It wasnay his body. His fucking body man it wasnay his fucking body. It wasnay his body .." pg. 75.

"Does things slowly it just took a while to get started; it's no he was lazy, he wasnay lazy, he just needed time to sort things out; once he had that right he could move as fast as any cunt; in fact sometimes he moved too fast for his own fucking good; that was how come he was in this situation." pg. 115.

"Stuff heavy on top of ye. Ye felt like pushing up the way, getting it to fuck off yer shoulders. Like that feeling ye get when ye stand at the edge of a cliff and ye look out to sea and the wind's blowing and a tander's way out on the horizon and ye feel as if ye're really fucking out in the open and so Christ almighty the opposite of hemmed in, the opposite. So what Sammy was feeling was the opposite of the opposite, in other words he fucking was hemmed in man know what I'm saying, hemmed in; and it was gony get worse, afore it got better; that was a certainty, it was gony get worse." pg. 133.

"It was just to get to the future, he had to bring a bit of the past in, so he could get there, so it was out there and part of it and then he could really start - the two of them could, the gether. Cause he knew it was possible. But she didnay. She didnay think there was a future .... She thought they were doomed. No his fault, hers." pg. 135.





"People telling ye stuff. They always want to tell ye stuff. Ye're a dumpling. Ye're a fucking dumpling. That's how they tell ye. Even a guy like Charlie, when he tells ye stuff, his heart's in the right place but he wouldnay be doing it except cause he thinks ye don't know, ye're an ignorant bastard, a fucking dumpling; ye spend all these year inside but ye know fuck all about the system." pg. 136.

"It was just how the auld man hated giving cunts anything, especially the fucking capitalists. Ye pay for hot water, he said, so ye've got hot water, so ye don't fucking turn it into cold. Don't give them the satisfaction, fucking fat bastards." pg. 152.

"it couldnay get worse than this. He was really fuckt now. This was the dregs; he was at it. He had fucking reached it now man the fucking dregs man the pits ..." pg. 172.

"What had that cunt Charlie been up to? Fucking hell. Ye wonder about him man at his age still fucking throwing bombs ye have to wonder. Forty years auld for Christ sake." pg. 173.

"The one thing he had going for him was her. Her. That was the one thing. She was it man. See when ye come to think about it, she was it, she was fucking it. There was nothing else man. Sammy had fuck all! Jesus christ." pg. 173.

"happening to him it was happening to him, oh Christ man it was happening to him and he started breathing deep and his shoulders rocking, he couldnay stop them, now scratching at his chin and neck, clawing, like there was wee creepy-crawlies under the surface, clawing at his face round the cheekbones pulling the flesh down below the eye sockets, okay, okay, the breathing, just the breathing just the breathing, unscrew yer eyes and get rid of it, rid of it ..." pg. 197.

"That's what happens but ye get angry for nay reason; yer heart starts pounding away and ye're wanting to bang the bastard .." pg. 209.

"A bus was coming; he put out his hand; too late. There ye are: fucking time; fucking late again. If ye didnay know better it was fate, a wee warning. That was it telling him, that was the bus away and if ye didnay watch out it was yer life, what was fucking left of it man that was that; end of story. So move, move." pg 246.

"Every single last one of them took him for a mug. They did! The stupid bastard sodjers thought Sammy knew something and he knew fuck all cause Charlie didnay trust him enough to fucking tell him fuck all." pg. 245.

"Being honest he wasn't a great brain, he wasnay what ye would call a thinker. No really." pg. 250.

"He had to screw the nut. He was acting mad; he had to watch it, get to fuck man head for cover, know what I'm saying, life was too claustrophobic, ye couldnay cope with it." pg. 258.



"It's how they suffocate ye; all their fucking protocols and procedures, all designed to stop ye breathing, to grind ye to a halt; ye've no to wander and ye've no to breathe, ye've no to open yer mouth; ye're to keep in line and don't move a muscle: just fucking stand there till ye're telt different." pg. 321.

"It's funny, what ye have to own up to, ye've got to admit it to yerself, that they all thought he was stupid. They did. It didnay matter it was him had all the experience; in their eyes he was a halfwit" pg. 321.

"Most of the time ye get fuckt. Most of the time. Most of the time. Then the wee times ye don't, and it's the wee times ye look for. This was one of them. It made ye feel good; ye cannay describe it, having that card in the hole, when ye fucking know it man when ye know it. Never underestimate the opposition. The sodjers thought they had him figured but they didnay." pg 323.

"When he walked out of here the head was gony be held high, he was gony be cleanshaven man, fresh and fucking brand new, clean socks and fucking Christ almighty he was gony stick on one of these new bastard shirts. He was proud. He was fucking proud." pg. 324.



## Topics for Discussion

Why do you think the author chose the distinctive style of language in which this book is written. In your view, what are the pros and cons of writing a novel in a particular dialect?

The author leaves many questions unanswered, including what happens to Sammy after his escape. Discuss the various open endings and your views on the effectiveness of this writing technique.

Describe the various types of relationships that are portrayed in the novel. What are the similarities and differences between them?

Discuss the character of Ally and the role that he plays in the story.

Discuss the way in which blindness is portrayed in the novel. Why do you think the author chose to make Sammy blind?

Discuss the similarities and differences between the police treatment of Sammy and the treatment that he receives from the DSS officials.

Do you think there is hope for Sammy's future? Explain and justify your answer.

Why did Sammy feel he had to escape from Glasgow? Do you think he did the right thing by running away?

Discuss the significance of the theme of crime in the novel.

Do you think that "disempowered" is an appropriate term for describing Sammy's situation? Explain and justify your answer.

How is the theme of escape developed by the author as the novel progresses? What effect does this have on the reader's perception of Sammy.