

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe: A Novel Study Guide

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe: A Novel by Charles Yu

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Plot Summary

Charles Yu's debut novel, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, could be described as a story about contemporary family life disguised as science fiction. It concerns a young man who has spent most of the past decade in a small time machine in his job as a time machine repairman. He makes calls on people who have rented time machines for recreational purposes but have become stuck in time and must be rescued by him. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that this man's name is the same as that of the author, Charles Yu. The protagonist is a lonely and rather sad fellow, who spends much of his non-working hours drifting along in his capsule, thinking about his past and his parents, especially his father who disappeared long ago. Accompanied only by his dog and a computer that has the pixelated face of a female and a cartoon-like voice, Charles hopes to one day locate his father in some alternate universe to which he apparently has traveled in a time machine. Charles's parents, a few clients, and several street performers are the only other humans that he encounters during the course of the story. He makes one trip to a city in Minor Universe 31, a residential and entertainment world made mostly from a science fiction "substrate," where the company for which he works is headquartered. His objective is to have maintenance work done on his time machine and when he goes to pick it up, he encounters his future self. Panicking, he draws his service revolver and shoots his future self in the stomach, just as his future self is attempting to tell him that the key is the book. He has no idea what this means as he stumbles into his time machine and races away. On the capsule's console, he finds a manual-type book that has the same title as the novel.

With the help of his computer, he realizes that he must read the book and make amendments and additions to it as he goes along. At some point in the future, he must give the completed book to his past self, who then will shoot him and begin the rewriting process again in an endless cycle. Charles realizes he has become stuck in a time loop. By the rules of time travel, if he changes anything that happens during this loop, he risks entering an alternate universe from which he might not emerge. Under the circumstances, escaping the time loop appears to be extremely difficult. He may be doomed to spend the rest of his life in the time machine, writing the book, giving it to himself, shooting himself, and starting the cycle again. The book is a manual about time travel, but it also offers advice on how such a traveler should live within or use time wisely. The main use of Charles's time is in thinking about his father and mother, but he begins visiting periods in his past in his time machine, watching his younger self interact with his parents. Eventually, he discovers that the book given to him by his future self is literally the key, because it holds a key that unlocks a box that his mother gave him, inside of which his father left clues to where he went in time. This inspires Charles to realize that he can break out of his time loop through the power of his mind and memory. He does so and rescues his father from the past time in which he is stuck. As the novel ends, it looks as if the family has a chance to regain normalcy and move forward with a better understanding of how to cope with the difficulties of life by facing the problems of the past with courage and honesty.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe, by Charles Yu, is a novel told by a young man with the author's name who travels through time for his job as a time machine repairman. The narrator is also in search of his father, who disappeared, and the concept of time travel in the novel functions as a vehicle for the character to explore his own life. The book begins with three quotes from different authors about the nature of perception and time, followed by what appears to be a theoretical diagram of time and the character's life, but which later proves to be a kind of table of contents. Next comes a statement from the protagonist that he met himself in the future and shot himself, killing his own future. The first section is called "(module α)" and Chapter 1 begins with a description of the TM-31 Recreational Time Travel Device, a cramped capsule in which the character lives in what the Present-Indefinite as he travels through time with his dog, Ed. Charles rescued Ed as the animal was about to drift into a black hole. He describes his job fixing time machines as an affiliate contractor for Time Warner Time, which owns and operates this particular universe, or "spatio-temporal structure and entertainment complex." The character introduces TAMMY, software that gives the TM-31 a personality and a digitalized face. TAMMY has an apologetic style as she thinks she is not a very good program.

The character admits that he is lonely and tells a story about The Women I Never Married, who is every woman, but whom he decides to call Marie. In the story, she went to the park, but he never arrived, met her, made her laugh, called her or ever married her. He awakens to the sound of TAMMY crying, which she explains is because everything is all right, the world is not ending, and that means nobody will ever tell each other how they really feel. The protagonist likes TAMMY, but feels that he is not good at anything, even at being himself. A short section, the first of many, is identified as an excerpt from, How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe. The excerpt, called "unfinished nature of," is about Minor Universe 31, which was slightly damaged during construction and abandoned just before it was finished. The technology is excellent, but the inhabitants seem incomplete. In Chapter 2, the narrator gets a message from a client called Skywalker, L, but rather than the famous movie character, it's Linus Skywalker, a boy of nine who complains about the pressure of having the great man as his father. The narrator explains that time travelers cannot change the past, but his clients never listen to this. He says he doesn't blame them. Each night, he sleeps in the same quiet corner of space-time, where nothing can happen to him.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The quotes and diagram concerning time and perception that start this novel set it up as science fiction, while containing observations about how thoughts and memories present themselves and are processed in the brain, which suggest that the book will



also be about how humans experience the effects of time. The first chapter is set in an indeterminate future with a character who has not yet been given a name and who has been traveling through time for an indefinite period. What's more, he's moving through what he calls a universe, which apparently is a large complex in space-time has been created by a corporation. This establishes a largely conceptual setting. Rather than being clearly visualized or imagined, this place must be considered in the abstract, almost as if it were just an idea. The author intensifies this abstraction by failing to set the story at a particular time in the future. The only "real" setting is the time capsule, inhabited by the protagonist and his dog, accompanied by the human-like presence of the TAMMY software. Everything outside it is unclear and mysterious. Within the capsule, the personalities of the character and the software program are quickly developed. The apologetic nature of TAMMY and the loneliness of the narrator, who dreams about a woman he might never meet, are both funny and sad. This combination of traits is engaging, and it also marks the book as distinct from many other science fiction novels, in that, so far, the author is focusing more on character than he is on place or an exciting plot.



Chapters 3-6

Chapters 3-6 Summary

Chapter 3 begins with the protagonist thinking about his father reading a storybook to him when he was three, and how sitting on the bed with him, next to a lampshade pattern of robots and spaceships, felt like being in a spaceship. He explains that his job is to help people who have rented time machines to get out of wherever they have gone in time, hoping to change the past. What customers want, he says, is to repeatedly experience the worst moments of their lives repeatedly. He says his father built one of the first time machine prototypes, which preoccupied him for much of his life, and then he disappeared, years ago. The narrator has been looking for his father for some time. He advises that if a person ever sees himself emerging from a time machine, he should run from himself. He says his mother is locked in a time-loop built by a company as a kind of assisted living. She cashed in her retirement funds to buy 10 years of reliving in a continuing loop a hypothetical 60 minutes of her life, a Sunday dinner. Her life is one without risk but he also believes the present and chronology are overrated, because most people who move ahead in time are always looking back. Another excerpt from *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, called "size of," describes Universe 31 as smaller than an aquarium, but its inhabitants say it has a wide psychological scale, which has to do with the concept of the place.

In Chapter 4, the protagonist says Universe 31 can be claustrophobic at night when it is aglow and everyone is awake, but on other nights, it is both dark and quiet. His own time capsule, TM-31, is about the size of a hotel shower. He tries to stay in shape by lifting Ed like a weight. He has a few tools and that is about it. Another book excerpt, "reality, in relation to," says Universe 31 is 17 percent reality at the core, with a science fiction "substrate" wrapped around it. Scientists are studying whether the two regions exchange microscopic materials at their permeable boundaries. In Chapter 5, the protagonist recalls that when he played as a boy, everyone wanted to be Han Solo. Nobody wanted to be a time machine repair guy, but at least he gets a standard-issue handgun, with which he likes to pose in front of the mirror. A book excerpt, "attachment coefficient," says Universe 31 inhabitants comprise protagonists and back office. To become a protagonist, a person must obtain a certain score that demonstrates attachment and loyalty to Universe 31. The others do menial work, such as cleaning or time machine repair. Chapter 6 defines "chronodiegetics" as a theory that best describes "the nature and function of time within a narrative space." Chronodiegetics says a character in a story has no way of knowing if he is narrating the story in past tense or is in the present, remembering the past. Its main tenet is that memory and regret are the two components needed for a time machine, which theoretically could be made with a piece of paper, narration, and the past tense. The author recalls the silence of his house and the disappointed nature of his father, a scientist whose career was languishing. He wishes he had asked his father where he could find him if he ever got lost.



Chapters 3-6 Analysis

Chapter 3 begins with a father-and-son scene that could easily appear in a traditional novel, but then switches back to the narrator's work repairing time machines, and it begins to become apparent that the science fiction in the story is a way to explore the character's past. In this sense, the fact that time travelers cannot change the past is poignant. His father's construction of a time machine prototype, given the man's melancholic and disappointed nature, is a metaphor for his tendency to live in the past, when his future was brighter. The narrator's advice that one should run from a version of oneself encountered in the future is an admonishment to get the most from the present moment rather than merely letting it go by while one focuses on a potentially brighter tomorrow. His mother's decision to live a hypothetical 60 minutes of her life repeatedly is a sad commentary, taken to a comical extreme, on people who live in a past constructed by their own faulty memories. The "size of" book excerpt expands on this theme by describing a tiny universe with large psychological diversity, which is reminiscent of human minds. The protagonist's own world in the time capsule isn't much bigger than such a universe, which suggests that he, too, is trapped or confined by limitations he is placing on his mind and memory. The excerpt "reality, in relation to," is another comment on the penchant of humans to misremember and fabricate. In Chapter 5, the anecdote about every kid wanting to be a hero and nobody wanting to be a time machine repair guy ends with the narrator getting a gun, which foreshadows a problem signaled in the novel's opening quote, when he shoots his future self. The discussion of chronodiegetics in Chapter 6 takes the novel further in the direction of metafiction, in which the author comments on his own writing within the book. In saying time travel is really about memory, regret, and narrative, the protagonist is also describing novels. Similarly, his wish that he had asked where he could find his father is the sort of question novelists ask themselves when writing about their families.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

In Chapter 7, the narrator describes his manager, a middle management software program named Phil, who is easygoing but thinks he's a real person. The protagonist holds a hologram of Phil's head in his hands as they communicate. Phil warns him that his time machine is overdue for a maintenance check. Phil starts stuttering and crashes, which reminds the narrator that he'll miss the program whenever it's replaced. In Chapter 8, the protagonist makes a call to a client in Oakland during the latter part of the twentieth century. A young woman is leaning over her grandmother, who is lying on a couch, dying. He tells the young woman she has used her time machine to make a small window into an alternate past, where she was present when her grandmother was dying, rather than absent. She can stay for a while but not too long, or she might be trapped in this alternate universe. The young woman wishes she could have been there for her grandmother, and the narrator mentions again that people who rent time machines always seem to visit the unhappiest day of their lives. He says he has seen all kinds of sadness, and describes his job as part of "the self-consciousness industry."

A book excerpt, "nostalgia, underlying cosmological explanation for," describes nostalgia as the human feeling of missing a familiar place never visited, or fruitlessly longing to be another version of oneself. In Chapter 9, the narrator returns in memory to his youth, when he watched his father make sketches of alternate universes, and he felt even then that his father would go away some day. They would choose the theorem of one physicist or another and his father would draw graphs and vectors in a notebook and make equations to create a science fiction realm. The narrator notes that he has been in his time capsule for about a decade, which makes him roughly 31. He discusses his love life, which is almost nonexistent. He had a one-night stand with a human-like creature once, but he has even given up coin-operated "sexbots," because they're not much fun. Days, months, and years mean little to him, because the way in which he lives, time runs together. He feels neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. He doesn't even miss his father anymore, except every once in a while. He says time is a machine for converting pain into memories that cannot be changed.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

The narrator's strange life is made even more odd and funny in Chapter 7 when he describes holding a hologram of his manager's head while they converse. Phil's warning that the time capsule needs a check-up foreshadows trouble with the machine that could put the narrator in a difficult position. Such potential danger is clarified in the next chapter, when the narrator explains to the young woman that she could become trapped in the alternate universe she has chosen to visit. What's more, in going straight to an unhappy day in her life, just as other time travelers do, she risks being trapped in her misery. It seems the author is observing that to dwell on unhappy events of the past,



which a person cannot change, is a familiar perversity of human nature and a morbid self-consciousness to be avoided. The book excerpt's definition of nostalgia is accurate, in that a time and place in the past for which one longs can never be recovered and probably never existed, because it has been idealized by memory. In Chapter 9, the contrasting of the narrator's childhood experiences with his father to the alienated way he survives in the time capsule is a disturbing commentary on how detached he has become from human emotion. He is close to a state of suspended animation, in which the movement of time, the experiencing of feelings, and interchange with other humans have been minimized almost to the point of nonexistence. His time machine, and time itself, have done its work on him, and although he's only 31, he's like an old man. By drifting along in the present this way, he softens even his memories. This condition is clearly a metaphor, set in a science fictional world, for anyone who fails to live life fully.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

In Chapter 10, the narrator realizes Phil was correct and he must return to corporate HQ for maintenance on his vehicle. A device called the Tense Operator is broken, because he misused it by cruising too often in Present Indefinite, which is more like idling than it is a true gear of the vehicle. It burns up fuel without going anywhere, and now TAMMY is not sure the capsule will make it back safely to headquarters. As they approach the capital city of Universe 31, the narrator that it comprises about one-third of what used to be New York City. Before landing, he sees a man who resembles himself, and he can see that the man's life is made entirely of time. An excerpt titled, "capital city" says the capital of Universe 31 contains about 87 percent of the universe's robot population. The capital's name is "New Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2," informally known as Loop City. It was formed when New York and Los Angeles surprisingly merged, swallowing the rest of America with them. Next, Tokyo split in two, and half of it merged into Loop City. The whereabouts of Tokyo's other half is unknown. In Chapter 11, after the TM-31 is put in a holding pattern because of traffic, the narrator leaves the capsule with a robot repairman. On the subway, the narrator peeks into another passenger's news cloud, a suspension in air of words and images. He describes standing at the center of Loop City as like being a character within a video game, confronted constantly by dangers and pleasures. His legs tingle and he feels as if he is about to fall off one cliff after another, which he had almost forgotten is the experience of living in time. He and Ed get hot dogs and see a street performance of the Big Bang, and then watch buskers playing eleven-dimensional music. He rents a room and gets a dish of water for Ed, who looks thankful.

An excerpt called "corporate ownership of" says Universe 31 was sold by its first owners to Time Warner Time, a division of Google, which added a theme park. The universe's incomplete conceptual structure makes it ideal for the company to try out new ideas without having to worry about displeasing its inhabitants, who are insignificant. In Chapter 12, the narrator remembers being driven home from the park at age 12 by his father. He remarks that kids at school say his father is crazy, which he immediately regrets saying. His father does not respond. The boy asks if time travel is possible, and his father says they're doing it right now. He pulls over and says he has a secret plan for an invention. As his father describes the idea, the boy's mind wanders to an advertisement he saw in a comic book for a Chrono-Adventurer Survival Kit, for use in alien universes. He asks his father if their family is poor. His father, a quiet man who had become unusually excited while describing his invention idea, looks disappointed, and the boy realizes that he has hurt him. The narrator thinks he might have said it because he knew he could not ask for the survival kit, or maybe he just wanted a reaction from his father, who was often cold to the boy's mother. The father starts driving, looking crushed, but the narrator thinks this moment also marked the start of a new honesty between them.



Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The narrator's overuse of the Present Indefinite mode is symbolic of the time he has wasted in his life while drifting along in the capsule. By now, it is apparent that, like TAMMY, the narrator has low self-esteem. He has disappointed himself as a man and as a son and his reminiscences about the past are attempts to understand how things went wrong. As the capsule enters Loop City, the sight of a man who resembles himself foreshadows trouble, considering the novel's statement at its outset that the narrator shot himself in the future. Loop City's formation from the collapse of America, which then combined with part of Tokyo, symbolizes the universality of the novel's main theme, which is that frivolous use of time is a life-denying activity. This notion is further developed in Chapter 11, when Loop City is portrayed as a giant and fully dimensional video game. The sensations of time that the narrator feels, such as the tingling in his body and the sense of falling with each step, indicate that he has emerged from the stasis of the Present Indefinite only to enter a false, alternate reality far removed from the memories of his childhood that have preoccupied him. He won't find answers here to how he got on the wrong track in life. Indeed, the excerpt about Time Warner Time buying Universe 31 and refitting it with a theme park as its central attraction concludes with the depressing news that it's a place for corporate experimentation, because the people in it are unimportant. Happily, the narrator's thoughts in Chapter 12 return to his boyhood, because that is where he must go if he is to find his way out of this disturbing funhouse. The chapter includes important parts of the back story, in which the father describes his idea for an invention, presumably a time machine. The boy's daydreaming about a toy survival kit for alien universes, followed by his thoughtless and perhaps vindictive question about the family being poor, are critical to his process of growing up and seeing the world as it is. He may have hurt his father, but he also has now bonded with him in recognizing the roles played by money and recognition in career achievements.



Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary

In Chapter 13, the narrator is hit with the realization that he has let a decade slip away, but he doesn't feel like catching up with anyone. Even so, he goes to the family's home, where he can watch his mother in her endless one-hour time loop. He enters through the fire escape and watches a hologram of himself interacting with his mother. Just as the time-loop ends, he taps on the window to snap her out of it. They have a brief conversation, in which she groggily complains that he calls too seldom. He reflects that he is a momma's boy who learned grammar from her, especially all about tenses. She gives him a wrapped box from his closet, which makes him realize she has been living partly out of the time loop. On the way home, he gives five dollars to a sexbot who looks lonely. An excerpt, "convenience, particular sadness of," describes several services available in the city, including holograms of ex-girlfriends and drinking buddy robots. Chapter 14 begins with a repeat of the warning that when "it" happens, he shoots his future self. He awakens late and rushes to Hanger 57 to get his repaired capsule. As he arrives, his future self steps out of the capsule and the narrator panics. He pulls his gun and shoots his future self in the stomach, just as the victim is telling him that everything is in the book, which is the key. This confuses him. As he jumps into the time machine, he bangs his knee hard, shattering it, and yells for TAMMY to get them going. The next page shows a diagram of CY's time loop, and the notes indicate that CY is Charles Yu, the author's name. The loop in time is defined as occurring when a time traveler stops remembering in order to keep going.

The book's next section, titled "(module β)," begins with another book excerpt, called "in the event you find yourself trapped in a time loop." It gives the time loop victim advice, such as to look for the sequence of events in the loop, to accept blame for it, and to guard against entering an alternate universe by doing everything exactly the same every time through the loop, although sheer boredom might make it necessary to attempt escape. In Chapter 15, Charles Yu is back in the time machine, his leg throbbing, and is distressed that he shot his future self. Phil calls, using simulated human speech. He tells him to return to headquarters and they will go out together for a beer. Heatedly, Charles tells Phil that he is a computer program and cannot drink beer. Phil checks on this and admits it is true. Phil does not have the capability to be angry, but Charles feels terrible. Even mild-mannered TAMMY looks slightly disapproving. Charles chastises himself for being the bad guy in this broken universe. He thinks perhaps his future self was trying to tell him life is not worthwhile. He sees an unfamiliar book on the console. Its title is *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. An excerpt from the book, called "page 101," also appears on page 101 of the reader's novel. The excerpt says Charles Yu's future self will write this book. Addressing Yu directly, the excerpt asks him to trust himself.



Chapters 13-15 Analysis

The narrator's visit to his mother in Chapter 13 dramatizes the author's science fictional scenario of a time loop, in which a finite sequence of events is experienced repeatedly. Again, this is a metaphor for people running in circles, achieving nothing of significance in life, yet lulled by familiar events into dull acceptance of this stasis. His reflection that his mother taught him the tenses of grammar symbolizes her influence on his own use of time through the activities he chooses to pursue, yet he learns that she occasionally escapes her time loop. In other words, she is not entirely without awareness of life's potentials. The book excerpt that describes such city attractions as sexbots and robot drinking buddies is about making do with false inadequacies and diversions rather than pursuing the real satisfactions of life. In Chapter 14, after the narrator finally does shoot his future self, it is revealed that his name is Charles Yu, and the novel enters a level deeper into metafiction. The section titled "(module β)," introduces the plight of Charles trapped in a time loop, similar to that of his mother, except she chose to enter hers. Even so, the book, which now has been revealed as written by the future Charles Yu, offers the advice that anyone in a time loop should accept personal responsibility for being there.

In Chapter 15, when Charles angrily reveals to Phil that he is a software program, his meanness stems from dissatisfaction with himself. His discovery of the book, and the realization that he will write it in the future, should be coupled with the earlier statement from his future self that everything is in the book. At this point, the novel written by the real Charles Yu and the book of the same title written by the character called Charles Yu become almost indistinguishable. The main difference between them is the excerpts from the book that appear in the real novel are written in a different style, as if it were a book of advice, a kind of guidebook. Nevertheless, these excerpts also appear in the real novel and therefore are a part of it. This device of metafiction, or fiction about the writing of fiction, allows the author to further explore his themes relating to time and alternate universes, or other potential sequences of events. The book written in the future by the character called Charles Yu and the novel by the real Charles Yu are now integral parts of this story.



Chapters 16-19

Chapters 16-19 Summary

In Chapter 16, Charles examines the book from the future, which is part autobiography and part field manual. He cannot understand why he would travel back to the past to hand it to himself before being shot. Although normally distrustful of being told to trust himself, he once took a course that happened to contain this exact scenario of a visit from the future, providing mathematical proof that it was possible. In his own handwriting, the book is inscribed with the admonition to read it, and then write it, which will save his life. He puts it in TAMMY's TM-31 Textual Object Analysis Device (TOAD), which allows him to read and simultaneously generate a new version of the book to be held in TAMMY's memory. Chapter 17 begins with the usual heading that indicates an excerpt from the book, but this time, it is followed only by a second Chapter 17 heading and a continuation of the novel. Reading the book from the future, Charles notices that the words adjust themselves slightly as his eyes travel the pages. He also can raise his hands and type on a virtual keyboard, or read aloud and make modifications by voice recognition, or even read silently while the TOAD scans his brain to recognize and enter textual changes. He can switch back and forth between modes or use them simultaneously. He sees text that looks like it was partially erased, and even sees missing sections, which he corrects as best he can. TAMMY analyzes the text and declares that it has been copied many times. He hopes that this story, which is partly about his father and him, will in some way help both of them.

Another excerpt, called "residual objects in closed time-like curves," describes the hypothetical "Book from Nowhere." It arrives from the future, apparently from nowhere. The excerpt expresses uncertainty over whether human memory works similarly. In Chapter 18, Charles wants to give up, but TAMMY says he must continue through the time loop. She can't tell how many times they have been through it already because her software has no way of distinguishing exact patterns repeated within a set time frame. Charles cannot see why he should not just jump forward in time, to when the book is finished. TAMMY and TOAD tell him this is a bad idea, but he keys in the instructions to turn to the last page. Chapter 19 shows Charles opening the time capsule hatch and finding (on the next page of the actual novel) only the message "[this page left intentionally blank]." The TM-31 begins to vibrate and TAMMY announces it is on a path that cannot be computed. The vibrations worsen, part of the capsule's housing shakes loose, and then Charles experiences nothingness.

Chapters 16-19 Analysis

The description of Charles transcribing the book from the future even as he reads it and making modifications along the way is also a good description of how human memory works. People look back on their earlier lives from the vantage point of the future, which has become the present. They remember a good part of it with accuracy, yet miss



details here and there, and even might forget the events of entire periods. In this way, they remake their pasts, because all that remains of the past is memory, which means that the record held in the mind, with its accuracies and faults, becomes the past. Apparently, Charles's book from the future has already been rewritten this way many times, just as people repeatedly go over their memories of the past, honing and refining them, changing them subtly each time. Such work of the memory can be a healing process, as it can lead to better understanding of important events in a person's past, and that is what Charles hopes his rewriting of the book from the future will achieve. The excerpt about the Book from Nowhere summarizes this idea, as embodied in a book that arrives from the future. In Chapter 18, when Charles jumps to the end of the book from the future, he does so against the advice of the computers, which recognize through their advanced capabilities of processing multiple scenarios that this tactic is likely to end badly. When Charles ignores the computers and confronts nothingness, the implication is that coherence and meaning can be found only through an examination of the casual chain of events in a person's life. The hard work of self-examination cannot be short-cut. In any attempt to gain wisdom or peace of mind, a failure to confront difficult periods in a person's past will lead only to a dead end.



Chapters 20-21

Chapters 20-21 Summary

Chapter 21 opens with Charles standing in a temple before various statues of Buddha. Near him is a pair of familiar-looking shoes. His mind, usually buzzing with worry, begins to calm. It occurs to him that desire is suffering and that, conversely, suffering is desire. Somewhere, a bell rings, a clarifying sound, and he sees his mother. He thinks about how she always would ask for love in an utterly unembarrassed way, but she was also jealous and had a temper. She is kneeling, and when she rises and turns, he sees it is not his mother, but what he calls "The Woman My Mother Should Have Been." She doesn't recognize him. He realizes that the shoes he had seen belong to his father. The room begins to feel like it is spinning. He asks the woman if his father is here, but she says he went away long ago. She wants Charles to stay and be her family, but he runs to a door, which is locked. Knocking over an urn of incense dust in his panic, he rushes to another door, also locked. He then realizes the room is a construct of his father's ideal life, and the door is metaphysical, and he can follow his father out of it. He falls screaming into an abyss, and then someone says he is in a time transfer system taking him back to where he was in his own story.

He asks the shuttle driver if he can pick up Ed, which he does. The driver turns out to be Charles himself. He says Charles has countless versions of himself, but the driver is the perfect version. He tells Charles to grow two hearts and crush one of them. The driver gets up, slaps Charles, kisses him, and then pushes him out of the shuttle. Free-falling, he and Ed land atop the TM-31. He pops the hatch, they climb in, and touch down in the middle of a memory. The next section, titled "(module γ)," begins with Chapter 21, in which TAMMY tells Charles they are in his childhood. From the capsule, he sees what looks like a large, dark aquarium, in which each tank holds a version of him at different ages. TAMMY is amused by a view of Charles looking through girlie magazines. He sees his younger self sniffing the air, which he always had thought was a detection of the smell of crushed hopes, but he realizes now was the metal-tinged exhaust of time travel before his father's final escape. He recalls the first prototype time machine, the UTM-1, which failed. For years, his parents fought loudly over a shortage of money, until his mother finally moved out. Charles tried to avoid the trauma by working on his computer, staring at the screen with the odd feeling that he was being watched, and now he realizes that he was watching himself from inside the TM-31.

Chapters 20-21 Analysis

In these two chapters, Charles does some serious mental work on what his parents were like and the influences they had on his own development. His first step in this process is to recognize that his mind is abuzz with anxious thoughts, which he must clear if he is to focus on essentials. At one point, he calls it "white noise," which is apt. A Buddhist temple is the perfect setting for such an effort, because of the religion's



emphasis on centering oneself. The vision of his mother as a person she should have been unsettles him, because this is an idealization rather than his real mother. The implication is that real people must be accepted and loved with all their flaws and shortcomings, which are inseparable from who they are. Similarly, when Charles realizes that the temple represents an ideal environment constructed by his father, his response is a frantic desire to escape its unreality. His recognition that the way to do this is with his mind represents a step forward for him, because memory and the time travel it involves, are controlled by the mind. The suggestion is that the best therapy for his anxieties and for the clutter of distractions they create will come from within, when he calms his thoughts. As a perfect version of Charles, the shuttle driver represents the result of being calm and centered, which is to attain wisdom about the course his life should take and the actions he should choose.

In Chapter 21, that course is revealed as a willingness to confront difficult aspects of his own childhood, which will enable him to better understand himself and his parents. At the chapter's end, he reflects that his sensation as a child that someone was watching him was actually Charles of the future watching himself. This a symbolic way of showing that the process of self-reflection and the attainment of self-understanding lead to imagining oneself in the future, or to put it another way, a person in control of his or her life is in the process of forging a fulfilling future. By looking forward, that person is creating an imaginary self of the future. In a sense, that imaginary self, which exists in the person's mind, is already watching the person in the present who is creating his or her own future.



Chapters 22-24

Chapters 22-24 Summary

Chapter 22 describes the first time-travel trip taken by Charles and his father, which lasted less than a minute, in a machine they built in the garage. Charles had punished his father with silence for 14 days after his mother left the home, and then he began helping with the UTM-1. From the future, he and TAMMY watch as father and son climb into the crate-like vehicle. Their main discovery is that rather than being instantaneous, time travel takes up time. The maiden voyage is a technical failure, because they had not figured out a way to land the vehicle, which loops back to where they started, but they nevertheless are delighted by the result. An excerpt titled, "Wineberg-Takayma Radius," discusses in mock-scientific language the proposition arrived at independently by two scientists named Weinberg and Takayama that a universe must be no larger than a certain size if it is to produce a coherent, sustainable narration. The excerpt does not specify the size. Chapter 23 describes how Charles's mother returns just as he and his father crash-land from their minute of time travel. The crash has the fortunate effect of eliminating the possibility that two sets of themselves would then go forward in time. Seeing a huge hole in the floor of the garage, his mother panics, screaming for them.

As Charles and TAMMY watch from the future, the UTM-1 comes back into view. His sobbing mother clutches his ten-year-old self, but he becomes stoical, like his father. Watching this, the future Charles tries to fathom his mother's pain. TAMMY begins to cry, but Ed breaks wind, which makes her laugh. In Chapter 24, Charles gets a call from Phil, but TAMMY tells him not to take it, because he is stuck in a time loop and, therefore, will have to take the call over and over again. They go back to watching the prototype time machines, up to number UTM-21, when Charles is 16. Over the past year, his father has begun asking Charles's opinion. One night, his father says the equations indicate their machine is colliding with other figures. Charles says maybe they are, and his father quickly does more calculations. Excitedly, he says their capsules are, indeed, colliding with many objects, because anything, such as a house or car, can be a time machine. Charles concludes that people are perfect time machines. A book excerpt, "TM-31 calibration protocol," describes the calibration process as putting sensors on one's fingertips and waiting for about 43 seconds. This gives the vehicle the same limits as the occupant, which means it can go only wherever the person will let himself go.

Chapters 22-24 Analysis

The revelation Charles and his father take from their first journey in a time machine, which is that time travel is not instantaneous, should be considered in the context of the author's comparisons between time travel and the accessing of memories. A memory can be recalled almost immediately, but it often takes a little while to dwell in it. Even in these moments when a person "lives" in the past, time is passing and the thinker is



moving into the future, which never arrives, because it becomes the present. The failure of Charles and his father to land the prototype can be seen as representing the inability of recollection to fully transplant a person in the past. Memories are interludes, not destinations, and the thinker returns to the present. The excerpt about the maximum size of universes is another way of making the point that memory is finite. If it were to become all-engulfing, if a person were to live in memory at all times, the result would be incoherence, because the memories could no longer be anchored by present experience. They would cease to become only memories, because they would be both the past and the present experience. In other words, the person would be stuck in a time loop. When Charles watches from the future as his mother sobs uncontrollably, he is able to empathize with her, even though he still doesn't fully understand her. That is progress over his stoical response as a boy, when he was imitating his cold and distant father. By the time he and his father have reached the 21st version of their time machine, the 16-year-old Charles is being treated more like an advisor or accomplice than a boy. He has become partially responsible for these journeys away from the present, these escapes from reality. This is the significance of his realization that people are perfect time machines. The book excerpt again plays the role in the novel of putting a technical-sounding spin on points that have been made symbolically in the preceding pages. In this case, the excerpt concludes that a time machine can go only where the person wants it to go. If a person is the perfect time machine, this means memory is the stuff of time travel, and the mind is the driver.



Chapters 25-27

Chapters 25-27 Summary

Charles is 17 and his father 49 at the start of Chapter 25, when they are on their way to show their time machine to the director of the Institute of Conceptual Technology. The institute is an imposing building on a hill above town that represents the hallowed halls of scientific achievement to Charles's father. Charles and TAMMY watch from the future as father and son drive to a local park to meet the institute director. This is the most important day in the working life of Charles's father, who is focused, not his usual distracted self. When the director arrives, his imposing reputation and physical presence dominate, even though he is polite and gentlemanly. Charles's father talks slowly about the invention, saying that the key is "the acquisition of tensed information." His theory is that humans can tell they are in the present, and are not simply remembering a past event, because it is a skill required for survival. This means the ability to experience time differently might have been discarded through evolution, and a remnant of it might remain in the brain. He thinks the phenomenon of *déjà vu* is evidence of this hidden capability. This idea is well-received, but when Charles's father climbs into the time machine, it does not work. It is the first time they have tried it outside the garage, and something malfunctions. His father is mortified. On the drive home, he attempts to sound jovial, but he is crushed. The next morning after breakfast, his father drives away and does not return all day.

The novel's next section is titled "(module δ)."

It begins with a book excerpt, "conjectures, currently unproven but believed to be true." It posits that a moment has measurable substance, there are fine numbers of moments, there is no global time, and chronodiegetics is a theory of regret and limitations. Chapter 26 continues with the story of young Charles and his father, as witnessed by TAMMY and the older Charles. Another scientist had been working on a similar project, and his invention was accepted by the institute, while Charles's father fell into obscurity. As the months go by, the fighting between his parents escalates. When Charles is 20, he hears his father working in the garage, on something more powerful than a mere time machine. It is the device that will bring him to the Buddhist temple, and then away from their life. In Chapter 27, TAMMY is crying about Charles's father, and Charles asks her to calculate the odds of him finding his father. She calculates the probability of that occurrence as once every 78.3 years, or about once in a lifetime. Their capsule is running out of fuel, and they must soon return to headquarters, where Charles knows he will shoot his future self. TAMMY says when that happens, his future self will be trying to tell him something. He will be saying all the answers are in the book.

Chapters 25-27 Analysis

In Chapter 25, the scene in which young Charles and his father attempt to demonstrate the time machine to the director of the institute depicts the turning point in the older



man's working life. Everything rides on this moment, and the machine fails. To find the symbolic importance of this outcome requires linking the malfunction of the device to the idea from the previous chapter that a person is a time machine, and a time machine can go only where the person takes it. The conclusion is that something was missing in the self-belief of Charles's father. He willed himself to fail, or perhaps more accurately, did not will himself to succeed. He had become too accustomed to obscurity and, on some level, had accepted it as his lot. The next book excerpt expands on this notion by describing the theory of time travel, chronodiegetics, as a theory of regret and limitations. The implication is that to overcome debilitating effects of the past requires an ability to maintain a positive attitude and to believe in the possibility of change. Years later, after the pain of his defeat has abated, Charles's father begins working on a new invention, but it is not a time machine. It can take him away, but presumably cannot bring him back. He is losing emotional and mental contact with his own family and with his entire life, which could take him a journey from which there is no return. In Chapter 27, Charles must refocus on his own life rather than dwell any longer on the fate of his father. His time loop is about to come around again to the moment when he shoots his future self, who will tell him that the answers are in the book. The symbolic meaning is that he is about to enter a critical and potentially dangerous period in his life, when he must be attuned to his own needs and motivations. He must listen to his inner self and be guided by what is best within him or else he may make a wrong choice and go down a repetitive and non-productive path in life.



Chapters 28-31 and Appendix A

Chapters 28-31 and Appendix A Summary

In Chapter 28, Charles opens the panel of TOAD, removes the book and finds a groove in its side. It opens to page 201, where he sees an envelope that looks like the picture of the envelope now displayed on page 201 of the actual novel. In the envelope he finds a key, literally proving that the book is the key. He sees Ed gnawing on the wrapped box his mother gave him, and he unwraps it to find the Chrono-Adventurer Survival Kit he had coveted as a child. He realizes his father bought it for him, despite the family's poverty. Inside, he finds the advertised items and a smaller box, which has a keyhole. In Chapter 29, the key from the book fits the keyhole in the box, revealing a small scene of the kitchen in Charles's boyhood home. Apparently made by his father, it fits in the palm of his hand and has all the details except people. A wall calendar shows April 14, 1986, and a clock shows the time as 20 seconds past 7:14. He realizes it is a message from his father, telling where he is. The date is the very next day after Charles had reentered the world following ten years of time travel and got stuck in his time loop. He does not know how many times he has gone around the loop without recognizing this message. He wonders if he always discovers the key too late. Out the capsule window he sees the hangar where his past self awaits him, and where the loop will begin again.

The novel's final section, "(module ϵ)," starts with the excerpt, "theorems, miscellaneous," which contains only the statement that sooner or later, a time will come when the next day, a person will lose everything. Chapter 30 repeats the refrain that when it happens, Charles shoots himself. He knows he will have to stop this from recurring but does not believe he can do so. He asks TAMMY how long they were in the loop and she replies that time never moved forward after he shot himself, because he then tried to skip forward in time, and entered the void. From there, he went to the temple, and then to the past. None of his encounters existed in time. She tells him to open the book, which shows that time experienced by a time traveler is different from time measured by those who are not time-traveling. His options are to stay where he is, keep going as usual, or get out of the machine and face whatever comes. He realizes that he must leave the loop, which requires getting out of the capsule. He tries to say something nice to TAMMY and she's touched and closes down her systems. He sees his past self running toward the capsule. An excerpt called "decoherence and wave function collapse" says in scientific jargon that a unified theory of chronodiegetics would combine the forces of regret, counterfactual elements, and anxiety. In Chapter 31, he emerges from the capsule and is shot, because he cannot do or say anything different. It is painful, and he falls into his time machine, but he lives. Appendix A, titled in capitals, "HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE," advises Charles to look inside the box, find the tiny diorama of the kitchen, and go meet his father. He is told to be angered by his father's explanation that he never intended to leave, but also be understanding. He should get into the capsule with his father and return to his mother. He should find The Woman You Never Married and hope to marry her some day. He is advised to enjoy the present, stretch it out, and inhabit it.



Chapters 28-31 and Appendix A Analysis

The discovery by Charles of the envelope in the book, on the same page as a drawing of the envelope in the novel, inside of which is a key to a box that gives the clues to his father's whereabouts, is a funny and imaginative way to advance the plot. At last, Charles knows where to find his father, but the problem remains that the rules of time travel mean he cannot change anything. He has choices about what to do, as TAMMY explains, but once he decides he must escape the time loop to give himself a chance to reunite with his father, he has no choice but to meet his past self and be shot yet again. The excerpt at the start of the novel's last section emphasizes this inevitability with the observation that eventually comes a day when everything is lost. In Chapter 30, when TAMMY explains to Charles that no time has passed since he entered the loop, the author is suggesting that people who fritter away their lives are literally killing time. In that sense, the passage of time is to be desired, because it signals development and change. Those who deny this passage are living in the past, or worse, are living in a present where nothing happens. The next excerpt describes chronodiegetics as a theory that unifies three components of this novel: regret, alternative scenarios and unexplored possibilities of life, and anxiety. Such unification could explain how people explain to themselves or narrate their own lives. After Charles is shot yet again, Appendix A offers in guidebook style its advice to him about how to move on with his life. Presumably, he will accept this advice, because he has discovered what he needed to learn about himself and his past to give him the tools and the will power to forge a useful future by living fully in the present.



Characters

Charles Yu

Charles Yu is the narrator and protagonist, although his name is not revealed until well into the novel. Before that, he simply calls himself "I." Charles is an unmarried, lonely young man of about 31 who has low esteem, believing he has let down his family and himself in life. He works as a time machine repairman, which he describes as a job for people who are not leaders, and are of small consequence in his society. His job has isolated him in a time capsule for 10 years, during which he has only seen other humans on occasion, when he goes to help someone who has become stranded in a time machine in an alternate universe. His affection toward his dog and toward the on-board computer and the one at headquarters with which he communicates demonstrates how starved he is for love. Charles spends a great deal of time thinking about his parents, especially his father, and his own boyhood. He wants desperately to understand why his father left the family in a time machine he invented, and this quest for understanding often leads him to blame himself for not being a good enough son. Actually, he comes across in the novel as a gentle and likeable soul, and seems more bright and sensitive than he gives himself credit for being. Instead, he prefers to criticize himself for such perceived shortcomings as saying something mean to a computer program, even though he realizes it is incapable of being angry in return. He has a good sense of humor and clearly must be quite resourceful to have withstood a decade in virtual isolation with no apparent psychological problems aside from the regret that plagues him concerning the disappointments of his family life as a child.

Charles's father

Charles's father is never named in the novel. Seen solely through the eyes of Charles, he is simply described as "my father." Charles describes him as principally a disappointed man. An engineer at a large company, he is regarded by his son as a man of high intelligence whose skills have been undervalued by the corporation, where he has been allowed to slip into obscurity. For years, he labored at home on the invention of the first time machine, finally creating a prototype that worked well enough to demonstrate it to the director of a prestigious scientific institute. With the teenaged Charles alongside, his father describes the machine's principles to the director, but when he gets in, it fails to function. Humiliated, his father withdraws from emotional contact with his family and everyone else for several years, and then builds another machine. He travels to an alternate universe and does not return. Charles sees this defection as a terrible mistake, yet it also becomes a focus of the novel, as Charles tries to discover his father's whereabouts. Through the eyes of Charles, his father is portrayed as an emotionally cold and distant person, who often ignored his wife, eventually driving her to leave the family for quite a while. Charles blames his father for this departure, which drives a wedge between them, yet his father never reaches out to him or speaks to him of his feelings. He keeps his disappointments, and whatever



rancor he might feel about them, to himself. He obviously loves his son, but is unable to express it. He is a thwarted man, not unlikeable, but out of touch with himself. Indeed, he is often portrayed as drifting mentally somewhere else; apparently to anywhere but the present moment.

TAMMY

TAMMY is the time capsule's on-board computer, and the narrator's main companion throughout the novel. Technically, she is one of two "personality skins" of the computer program, the other one being a male version Charles does not have, called TIM. Her face is pixilated, and she has the voice of a cartoon princess, Charles thinks. He finds her a very appealing companion, even sexy, although her main personality trait is an apologetic nature. She often says she is sorry that she is not a very good computer. When Charles assures her that she does an excellent job, she always is doubtful. Even so, she is capable of impressive calculations and projections from those computations, just as one would expect from a powerful software program. Her presence is important, not only as someone with which the isolated main character can converse, but also because of her ability to parse complicated scenarios involving time and alternate universes to help the narrator decide on actions to take. Occasionally during the novel, TAMMY cries, once for no reason other than a kind of existential angst about the sadness of life. She is capable of showing disapproval of Charles on the rare occasions when she determines that he is being rude or unkind, but that disapproval never manifests in more than a slight frown. The author avoids the question of whether TAMMY is capable of love, but everything she does is deeply loyal to Charles. If only she were not a program, she would be a very good person.

Charles's mother

Charles's mother is another sad character, like her husband and son. Charles only visits her once during the story. He goes to the family home, where she has prepaid for 10 years to live in a time loop that repeats the same, hypothetical 60 minutes of her life. She moves through it in a kind of stupor, as if she were drugged, and Charles likens the situation to a rest home. He is able to break into her consciousness and disrupt the time loop for a short period, during which she chastises him for not calling often enough, and gives him a wrapped box from his closet, an act that indicates she occasionally breaks out of her time loop voluntarily. She intimates that she is not thrilled by her situation, and yet, she does not complain about the life she has chosen. Her main personality characteristic is an undisguised need for love, especially from Charles, but previously from her husband, as well, according to Charles. Even when Charles meets an idealized version of his mother in an alternate universe, her Zen-like calmness is still marked by her need for his love. Not a thoroughly rounded character in the novel, she seems to represent an aspect of familial love that is too self-directed to be entirely healthy.



Phil

Phil is a middle-manager software program and Charles's supervisor at headquarters. Charles likes Phil, because his "passive-aggressive is set to low." He often communicates with Phil by holding a hologram of the program's head in his lap, although sometimes Phil talks through speech software, and sometimes he emails instant messages. An old program, Phil occasionally crashes during speech, and starts stuttering. Phil is under the delusion that he is human, and talks to Phil in the casual jargon of good buddies who make plans to catch a ball game or have a beer together. One day, when Charles is under pressure, he blurts to Phil that he is software, not human. Phil checks, and affirms that Charles is correct. He sounds defeated, but is not angry, which Charles says is because Phil is not programmed for anger. Mostly, Phil's role in the novel is an opportunity for the author to poke fun at bureaucratic structures, delusions of grandeur, and the absurd aspects of interacting with programs as if they were actual humans.

Ed

Ed is Charles's dog, who was "retconned," or written out of his role in a space western, and was rescued by Charles before the dog drifted into a black hole. At the time, Ed had bald patches where he had been gnawing on his haunches. He has a clay-like face, sleeps often, and likes to lick his own paws. Charles sometimes uses him as a kind of barbell to help keep fit during the decade he lives in the time machine, and Ed does not like being lifted, but he tolerates it. Ed is particularly important to Charles, because he is the only living companion he has throughout the period in which the story takes place.

Marie

Marie is a girl who does not exist, whom the narrator has never met, but that he should have met and married. He also calls her The Woman I Never Married. She represents everything he has done wrong in terms of his romantic relationships, and what he should do right, but does not appear to be making any progress toward achieving. In a witty way, she is yet another person with whom Charles has no relationship.

Linus Skywalker

Linus Skywalker has a brief scene in the novel as a boy of about nine who rents a time machine, gets stuck in an alternate universe, and must be helped by Charles. Linus is the son of Luke Skywalker from the Star Wars films, and he considers it a terrible thing to be the offspring of the savior of the universe.



The Woman My Mother Should Have Been

The Woman My Mother Should Have Been is an idealized version of Charles's mother, whom he encounters in a Buddhist temple that exists outside time. She is very calm but otherworldly and eerie. Charles finds her repellent, because of her unreality, and cannot wait to escape her presence.

The institute director

Like many other characters, the institute director is not given a name. He heads the revered Institute of Conceptual Technology, which Charles's father approaches after completing a working prototype of a time machine. The director is formal, attentive, polite, and patient, but behind his good manners, Charles detects the condescension of a highly successful man. After the failure of the time machine prototype to perform its demonstration adequately, the director takes his leave, and soon buys the rights to a competing machine.

The repair bot

The repair bot works on Charles's time machine when he brings it to headquarters for maintenance. The repair bot plays a small part in the novel, but gives the author a chance to parody the power of the mechanic, a skilled and mysterious figure who controls the well-being of the customer's transportation machinery.

The sexbot

The sexbot is a streetwalker Charles meets in the capital city of Universe 31. She looks sad to him, and he gives her a handout as he walks by, for which she is grateful. She seems no different than a human prostitute, which is no doubt the point the author is making.

Charles's cousin

Charles's cousin works as a clerk in a universe called Death Star. Charles mentions him briefly, saying that his cousin wants him to transfer to his universe, where the company cuisine is good, and he could get a job with a nice pension. Charles would just as soon remain where he is, and he does not mention his cousin again.



Objects/Places

The TM-31 Recreational Time Travel Device

The TM-31 Recreational Time Travel Device is Charles's time machine. He thinks calling it "recreational" is a misnomer, as it is a working vehicle he uses to reach recreational time travelers who become stranded. It is about as big as a typical shower stall, and he can barely lie down in it end-to-end. On board, he has the computer, TAMMY, and his dog, Ed. Aside from that and a few tools, the machine carries little else, but it is virtually Charles's world.

Minor Universe 31

Minor Universe 31 is the alternate universe in which Charles works. It was intended to be a recreational and residential construct, made of science fiction "substrate" wrapped around a smaller core of reality. Difficulties were encountered during construction and its "conceptual framework" was left incomplete. It later was bought by another company, which created a huge theme park element, and opened it for business despite its haphazard nature stemming from the conceptual deficiencies.

New Los Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2

New Los Angeles/Lost Tokyo-2 is the capital city of Universe 31. It is known by several nicknames, but the most commonly used one is Loop City. About one-third the size of what used to be New York City, it was formed by the merging of New York, Los Angeles, and part of Tokyo, although exactly how this happened is not made clear. It is a crowded place, full of non-stop attractions, and it reminds Charles of being inside a video game.

Chronodiegetics

Chronodiegetics is the operative principle in the novel. It is a theory of time bounded by narrative, which says that together, memory and regret are the components necessary for production of a time machine.

The Tense Operator

The Tense Operator is a device through which Charles can set the time through which he is traveling. By opting to set it too long on a kind of cruise control called Present-Indefinite, he breaks the Tense Operator and must bring it into headquarters for repair.



The family home

The family home is visited by Charles in his time machine. It is not described in detail, but seems to be a typical American house, inhabited by Charles, his mother, and father. During his visits to the past, he is usually with his father in the garage, or his mother in the kitchen.

Headquarters

Headquarters is in Loop City, the capital of Universe 31. Charles communicates regularly with Phil at headquarters, but throughout the story, Charles never actually visits the office.

Time Warner Time

Time Warner Time is the company for which Charles works. It is a division of Google that bought Minor Universe 31 from its original constructor and owner.

The Institute of Conceptual Technology

The Institute of Conceptual Technology is fence-enclosed building on a hill just outside town. The enclave of the technological brain trust, it represents the highest ambitions of Charles's father. It is for the director of this institute that Charles's father demonstrates his time machine prototype.

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe is a guidebook or technical manual written by the narrator in the novel, with which it shares the title. Excerpts from this book are scattered throughout the novel.



Themes

Memory as Time Travel

This novel's principal theme, explored exhaustively, is the relationship between the structure and workings of memory and the theory of time travel. The author's contention is that memory is a kind of time travel that happens constantly in every human brain, although people often do not pay close attention to what, exactly, is happening. On several occasions, humans are described as the perfect time machines and time travel itself is defined as principally a function of mind. Any object, such as a house or a car, can be a time machine, if a person occupies it who knows how to access time travel. The passing of each moment into history and the ever-fleeting nature of the present are tied closely in the novel to the concept of time travel. The only reality that exists now of times and places in the past are contained in memory, the author argues. In that sense, only the mind travels. In the story, the protagonist's time machine enters tunnels or corridors that take him into alternate times and correspondingly alternate realities. Such transitions seem to have a physical component, and he often observes himself and his parents as younger people when he journeys back in time. Even so, this portrayal of physical movement to a new setting seems more metaphorical than real as if the author wants to leave open the possibility of actual travel through time, because it is more fun and adds more dimension to his contemplation of the workings of memory. His central point is that to visit one's past in a way that produces results useful to the present and the future requires thinking about it honestly and unflinchingly, especially the moments that are the most painful to recall.

The Power of Narrative

If, as the author contends, memory is a type of time travel, then the device that gives form and structure to that journey is narrative. The novel embodies this theme since the book is written by the protagonist, excerpts from which are scattered throughout the novel. The book, a manual on time travel, is also an object that travels through time, appearing in the present as if from nowhere. After it is written by the protagonist, he brings it back to the past and gives it to his younger self, who reads and rewrites it simultaneously. When he completes it, he again journeys to the past and gives it to his younger self to begin the process once more. This book has the same title as the novel, and the protagonist has the same name as the novel's author. What the author is suggesting by this trick is that his novel likewise is a journey back through time, as he rewrites the past in his memory and his novel. When it is complete, he can reread it, as if he were visiting his own past, yet that past has been altered through the process of recalling it. Even though the recollections are not exactly what happened, the book and memory are the only records of the past, which is gone forever. This means that how the story is told becomes all that is left of the past. Narrative not only gives shape to memory but differentiates the important from the trivial, and determines what is retained and what is abandoned. In the end, because the story told is the only record that

remains, the dredging of memory and the construction of narrative must be done with rigorous honesty.

Living in the Present

The point of thinking deeply and well about the past is to live more fully in the present, which also creates the potential for a brighter future. This novel's portrayal of memory as a kind of time travel focuses on the protagonist's relationship in the past with his parents, especially his father. The troubled childhood of Charles clearly played a key role in his development into a self-critical young adult who is drifting aimlessly through life. By recalling his past in detail, and even visiting it in his time machine, Charles begins to better understand his parents and himself. As this understanding dawns, he finds new resources within himself for escaping the stasis of his current life.

Psychologists sometimes say that understanding provides forgiveness, but it also is an empowering achievement. Through better understanding of circumstances and events in his boyhood, Charles is finally able to let go of the past, which gives him the capability of focusing on the present. He takes more interest in his own situation from moment to moment. At the novel's end, it is apparent that rather than merely staying alive in the present, Charles will begin to fully inhabit it. He will enter and experience each moment, stretching it out to its maximum duration before letting it go and doing the same thing with the next moment. The process of remembering and understanding the past has brought Charles alive to the present. The author's point is that rather than captivating and dominating a person, memory should be used to enhance the individual's life in the present moment.



Style

Point of View

This novel is written entirely from a first-person point of view. The narrator and protagonist, a young man of about 31, is eventually revealed to have the same name as the author, Charles Yu. One effect of this revelation is to subtly shift the viewpoint. The viewpoint subsequently becomes at least partially the view of the author, who has inserted himself into the story by giving his name to the protagonist. This metafictional technique does not alter the role of the narrator as the character through whom all events and other characters are viewed, but it does raise the question of how many of the perceptions of the narrator named Charles are shared by the author, Charles Yu. Of course, the easy answer to this question is that all such perceptions are shared, because the narrator is a fabrication from the mind of the author. Yet that response does not answer the deeper question of whether the attitude or world view of the narrator is similar or identical to that of the author. In other words, by naming the protagonist Charles Yu, the author invites comparisons between his fictional character and his real self. Given that the two most important human characters in the novel, aside from Charles Yu, are his parents, the question then arises of whether the author's relationship with his own parents has similarities to that of the protagonist and his parents. All such questions are meant to inspire pondering and perhaps even confusion, as the line between fiction and reality is blurred. In this way, the novel's point of view becomes an important contributor to the author's thematic goals of exploring memory, the passage of time, and the act of storytelling.

Setting

The novel's principal setting is the protagonist's time machine, which is an unspecified physical distance outside the capital city of Minor Universe 31. The time machine's physical location is never described. It seems to drift in a space between times, or perhaps it is in some outer realm of Minor Universe 31, which is an alternate world owned by the company that employs Charles. The location of Universe 31 apparently is New York City, but it has merged with Los Angeles and part of Tokyo in some mysterious fashion. The vagueness of such places in time is purposeful on the part of the author. His point is that all places are transient in time, which makes them mutable and vague, because their fate is to exist only in memory. At any given moment, a setting is only what it is for that moment, after which it becomes a place of the past, changed by time from what it was a moment ago, when it was in the ever-moving present. Another setting in the novel, the protagonist's boyhood home, plays a similar role. He visits it not only in memory, but in his time machine. Its location is insignificant. What matters is the moment in time when he visits it, because that precise time in the past dictates who is there and what is happening. At one point in the novel, Charles skips ahead to the future without methodically going through intervening time, and he falls temporarily into oblivion. Eventually, it becomes clear that the physical settings in this book are



secondary to another type of setting. This novel about the relationship between memory and the concept of time travel is not set so much in a physical place as it is within time itself.

Language and Meaning

Word choice is central to the inventiveness of this story. The author concocts jargon and theories that sound scientific in a tongue-in-cheek way, which help a narrative to emerge that has the trappings of a plausible world of the future. The science in this book certainly would not stand up to scrutiny by, say, a physicist, but the language is playful and the tone humorous, signaling that no such claims to "authenticity" are being made by the author. Instead, the language is a device for immersion into strange worlds separated not so much by physical distances as by time. Accordingly, much of the language in the novel concerns the properties of time and the experience of moving through it. Given that time is an abstract concept, the meaning of such discussions often is elusive. Principles and theories of physics, of course, can be extremely difficult for the lay person to visualize, and in a way, this opacity makes it easier for Charles Yu to write about the abstractions of time travel. He can make obscure statements that are acceptable to the reader, because physics itself can be so obscure to most people. Even so, the author does contribute clever and insightful observations on the relationship between memory and time travel. He contemplates and describes the experience of the present moment, and the importance to perception and to memory of the passing of moments into history. These topics are pursued through the protagonist's mind and through excerpts from the manual written by the protagonist. They lead eventually to a worldview or philosophy about how life should be lived and the main tenets of that view to cherish the present and fearlessly confront the past are not at all difficult to understand.

Structure

Like many other aspects of this book, its structure is inventive. It begins with a few quotes from famous authors on the nature of time, followed by what looks like data input and a schematic of time travel that really amount to a table of contents, although this role of the pages does not become apparent until later in the story. Next, a short paragraph that reads like an excerpt indicates that someone shoots his future self, thereby killing his own future. The novel proper is divided into four sections, each one introduced by a parenthetical title that includes the word "module" followed by one of the first four letters of the Greek alphabet. The first section, for example, is titled, "(module α)." Each chapter is introduced in the traditional manner, with a number, but a short and titled section is also added at the end of many chapters. The titles relate to the topic discussed in the short sections, each of which also is identified by a tag line that reads, "from How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe." These tag lines and the manual-like prose of the short sections indicate that this material comes from a nonfiction book that has the same title as the novel. These nonfiction excerpts expand and comment indirectly on the action of the novel, by adding new information

concerning settings and concepts in the novel. In a few places, schematic drawings appear to help illustrate something in the novel, although these graphic elements are generally more amusing than they are truly useful. The novel ends with an "Appendix A" that addresses the protagonist directly, giving him instructions about what to do next and for the rest of his life.



Quotes

"The base model TM-31 runs on state-of-the-art chronodiegetical technology: a six-cylinder grammar drive built on a quad-core physics engine, which features an applied temporalinguistics architecture allowing for free-form navigation within a rendered environment, such as, for instance, a story space and, in particular, a science fictional universe." Chapter 1, page 4.

"Oh God, they say, what if I go back and a butterfly flaps its wings differently and this and that and world war and I never existed and so on and yeah." Chapter 2, page 14.

"I have job security because what the customer wants, when you get right down to it, is to relive his very worst moment, over and over again. Willing to pay a lot of money to do it, too." Chapter 3, page 17.

"Now, I think, is overrated. Now hasn't been working out so great for me. Now never has." Chapter 3, page 22.

"This is what I should have asked him: If you ever got lost, and I had to find you, where would you be? Where should I go to find you?" Chapter 6, page 39.

"My vocational training was in the basics of close time-like curves, but what they should have taught me was how that relates to people's regrets and mistakes, the loves of their lives that they let get away." Chapter 8, page 46.

"I can see him in the day, and see the day in him, see how he doesn't move through time so much as he is made of time, or least his life is, and what that means, I can see it not as frames in a movie, not as the flicker of a flipbook, but the whole flipbook itself." Chapter 10, page 58.

"If I could be half the person my dog is, I would be twice the human I am." Chapter 11, page 65.

"I learned about the future tense, how anxiety is encoded into our sentences, our conditionals, our thoughts, how worry is encoded into language itself, into grammar." Chapter 13, page 83.

"Life is, to some extent, an extended dialogue with your future self about how exactly you are going to let yourself down over the coming years." Chapter 17, page 111.

"Everyone has a time machine. Everyone is a time machine. It's just that most people's machines are broken." Chapter 24, page 164.

"Maybe we spend most of our decades being someone else, avoiding ourselves, maybe a man is only himself, his true self, for a few days in his entire life." Chapter 25, page 176.



"The key question of time travel,' my father says, 'is this: How do we know what it means to perceive an event as presently occurring, rather than as a memory of a past event? How can we tell present from past?" Chapter 25, page 178.

"The path of a man's life is straight, straight, straight, until the moment when it isn't anymore, and after that it begins to meander around aimlessly, and then get tangled, and then at some point the path gets so confusing that the man's ability to move around in time, his device for conveyance, his memory of what he loves, the engine that moves him forward, it can break, and he can get permanently stuck in his own history."
Appendix A, page 232.



Topics for Discussion

Throughout most of this novel, the protagonist has a low opinion of himself, yet he has not done anything particularly bad and rarely even acts thoughtlessly. Why is he so down on himself?

Charles has a warm and affectionate friendship with his computer, TAMMY, yet he is fully aware that her "personality skin" is a software program. Discuss what this situation suggests about the potential for relationships between the human mind and artificial intelligence.

Charles's father is portrayed as a disappointed man, who is emotionally distant and has trouble expressing his feelings. What are the connections between his personality and his fate in the novel, when he becomes stranded in the past by his time machine?

Charles's mother chooses to immerse herself in a time loop from a hypothetical 60 minutes of her life that will replay for 10 years. Why do you think she would do this, especially given her unabashed eagerness to be loved by her husband and son?

One of the funniest scenarios in the novel is an imaginary meeting in a park between Charles and a girl named Marie, whom he might have wanted to marry if he ever really had met her. In this satirical scene, what do you think the author is saying about love, loneliness, and will?

Why does the author give the protagonist his name, Charles Yu, and have him write a book that has the same title as the novel? How would the novel be different if the protagonist and the book he was writing had other names?

Charles eventually locates his father and rescues him from his imprisonment in the past. That is literally what happens, but figuratively or metaphorically, how would you describe the ways in which the members of this family might help each other to live more fruitfully and completely in the present?