

# **I Pity the Poor Immigrant Study Guide**

**I Pity the Poor Immigrant by Zachary Lazar**

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# Plot Summary

When Hannah Groff was 12, her mother died and her father, Lawrence, began a brief affair with Hannah's Hebrew teacher, Gila Konig. The affair ended when Lawrence told Hannah, who didn't take the news well. Despite Lawrence's sacrifice, Hannah never quite forgives her father or Gila, who had also been Hannah's caregiver during and after Hannah's mother's illness.

The story begins with an adult Hannah, a freelance crime journalist, having just published her first memoir and on the brink of covering a murder mystery that will lead to her second memoir, the novel itself.

The murder victim is an Israeli poet and essayist, David Bellen. Bellen comes from a rough Tel Aviv neighborhood that gave rise to much of Israel's organized crime. His work is critical of Israel and he uses the revered King David as a stand-in for the mobsters in Bellen's work, *Kid Bethlehem*.

Connected to all of these characters is Jewish-American gangster Meyer Lansky, one of the founders of Las Vegas. Gila had an affair with Lansky in the 1970s when he sought Israeli citizenship to avoid facing criminal charges in the United States. Shortly after Lansky leaves Israel, Gila begins an affair with Bellen before using the apartment Lansky left her to raise enough money to get to the United States.

Lansky, Bellen and Gila all have their own complicated parent/child relationships – Lanky's and Bellen's with their respective sons and Gila with her mother. Lansky's crippled son, his wife said, was a judgement from God for Lansky's criminal activities. Buddy Lansky becomes a gambling addict and eventually a destitute invalid. Eliav Bellen falls into a life of drug addiction, eventually leading to fundamentalist Jews forcing him to kill his own father. Gila's mother traded sexual favors for food while they languished in a concentration camp, and then Gila put her own life on hold for eight years to care for her cancer-stricken mother. Gila feels it's her duty and she loves her mother, but she also resents that she has to do it.

Through all of their trials, the various players explore their connection to their religion and their people's historic homeland. How does being Jewish shape them? What of Israel and its fight for survival in the midst of Islamic nations that would tear the nation apart? What responsibility does Israel have in its conflicts with the Palestinians?

As people who try but never quite succeed at fitting in with the rest of the world, Jews must fight for their place, and in many ways they must fight for their very survival. Hannah's response to this is to reject her heritage. Lansky's is to embrace his. Is either of them doing what's best?



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Summary

Chapter 1: "Checking Out," New York - 2012

The novel opens with the narrator, Hannah Goff, taking her father, Lawrence Groff, to lunch at an Italian restaurant in New York City. She had just published her first book, a memoir about her marriage. They're eating black squid, over which a waiter shaves white truffles from a bell jar.

Hannah's father says he lives in the present, the opposite of Hannah, who "remembers things." It was the last time they'd seen each other. Hannah is writing about it a year later. Shortly after that lunch, Hannah flies to Israel to write about David Bellen, a murdered Israeli writer and poet. He wrote a book portraying the biblical King David as a gangster. Following that story leads Hannah to other stories, which lead back to her father.

Hannah describes the book she's writing as a memoir that is about others, not herself. She says there is a need for such a memoir. She says the others are her proxies. Writing the book, she says, makes her feel like an immigrant in her own life, that the people she's writing about – though she doesn't even know all of them – shape her life.

Gila Konig is looking at photos in an old newspaper of a room full of murdered Mafia members. She's thinking of her former lover, Meyer Lansky, who knew the dead men. She cannot reconcile the man she knew with the violence and gore in the photos. She thinks there is a reason Lansky never became a murder victim himself.

The chapter jumps back in time. Lansky is in the back of a car in Tel Aviv, Israel. They drive past a crowd of people looking up, but they don't know at what. The driver says there is probably an eclipse, but Lansky says he didn't see anything in the newspaper about one. Lansky gets out of the car and walks into a hotel. Lansky finds Gila, still in her waitressing uniform, sitting in a chair and smoking a cigarette. Lansky tells his mistress that she should be working at all and she retorts with a sarcastic remark about his wife. They have a view of the beach from their suite. Lansky remarks about how cloudy it suddenly became when he rode into town. He's happy that the clouds distracted people from seeing him enter the hotel, something he had been worried about. Gila asks Lansky where he'll go if "they" make him leave, but Lansky says he doesn't think that will happen. Gila says he should go back to Poland and he tells her to watch her mouth.

Lansky takes his bags from the bellman while Gila admires the white gold bracelet Lansky has just given her. Lansky knows Gila is thinking of where she'll sell it. Lansky looks Gila over, thinking about how her mother had changed her name from Tsilya after they'd left Bergen-Belsen, a Nazi concentration camp. Gila means "happiness." Gila



cannot think of Lansky as a criminal, though he's a member of the Jewish Mafia. She thinks of him as understated in appearance and behavior. She thinks about Lansky's partners, shot to death and about how they'd been killers themselves. Lansky says his negative reputation is nothing but rumors and conjecture. He was in Israel to get away from the lies and the legal problems. He's a Jew seeking the right of return, the right to become an Israeli citizen.

Lansky and Uri Dan, a military correspondent, ride together from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. They go to a cemetery where Lansky's grandparents' graves are. They look over what's left of King David's domain and Dan tells Lansky that Arabs living nearby regularly vandalize the cemetery. A photographer snaps a photo of them men. Lansky is hoping Dan will write a balanced account of Lansky's purpose in Israel. He had also asked Dan to help him find his grandparents' Jerusalem graves.

Part 1: Chapter 2: "Displaced Persons," Tel Aviv - 1972

It's 1972. Lansky's family had lived in Grodno, Poland, and had to flee 60 years before. Lansky and his parents went to New York City. His grandparents went to Israel. At the grave, Lansky thinks about his grandparents as he'd last seen them in Poland. He thinks about his childhood in New York, where he often fought with other children. He prays. He talks about his father and grandfather arguing in Poland about where to go. Lansky's father wanted the entire family to go to the United States. They left after a rabbi had found a dead girl in the woods and reported it to authorities. They accused the rabbi of the murder, saying he wanted her blood for Passover. They cut him into pieces and nailed the four body parts to the city walls.

Lansky says he wants to die in Israel as a Jew, as his grandfather did. He gives the rabbi money to look after the graves. He thinks about how his life would have been had he gone to Israel rather than America. They go to the Western Wall. Lansky closes his eyes and presses his face to it. Lansky left Miami, Florida, for Israel while out on bail. The United States is trying to extradite him. The Department of Justice says he is involved in every Las Vegas casino as "'protection' for Jewish element." Uri Dan thinks Israel should give Lansky sanctuary. Lansky had given money to help Israel win independence and he'd broken up 1930s Nazi rallies.

Lansky drinks as Gila translates Dan's article from Hebrew, and the article wonders why he has never had a serious criminal conviction. The article asks if it's because Lansky's innocent or because of his "shrewd invisibility." He says he liked Dan. Gila says people like Dan look down on people like her – refugees. She thinks the article is more interesting that Lansky is. Gila talks about learning dressmaking in the "DP" camps. Americans oversaw the schooling, but then she and her mother couldn't find work when they got to Israel. They ate lentils and cucumbers. Lansky says he couldn't save Ben Siegel because Siegel liked to fight and expected people just to back down. Lansky says he survived because he was quiet. He doesn't want to have to leave Israel. He doesn't know where else to go. Lansky's lawyers argue in court that he's a retired hotel operator with little money, while the other side argues that he's head of the Mafia and has \$300 million. The hearings last five days.



Gila takes sketches of her dress designs to a man named Gelb who offers to put him in touch with a friend in New York City who makes swimwear and Gila finds the offer “scornful.” Her mother, younger than Lansky, suffers from cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy. Gila watches Lansky on television leaving court and she can tell he lost the case. He will have to leave Israel. He talks to reporters about the terrorists in Munich who killed Israeli Olympic athletes. Gila tries to see Lansky as an old, unattractive man.

Lansky looks out at Jerusalem from his room in the King David Hotel. He thinks about the surrounding Arab nations attacking the city, that it's only a matter of time and that everyone knows.

Gila and Lansky share a meal at a restaurant. She talks about how people reacted to Lansky the first time he walked into the hotel like he “owned the world.” Lansky suggests they go together for a few days to Caesarea and she tries to think of a way to say no. She has to care for her mother. She wonders how Lansky can come and go from his wife so easily. It's Lansky and Gila's last night together. She makes him a drink and they sip in silence. They have sex and sleep late the next morning.

One night after Lansky has left Israel, Dan comes into the hotel where Gila is working as a cocktail waitress. He doesn't know who she is. Another day, Lansky's driver comes to see her and asks her to come with him for a drive. He takes her to the apartment where Lansky lived and tells her that Lansky wants her to live there. The rent is paid. It's hers to do with as she wishes.

A war breaks out and Gila is stuck at home with her dying mother. She wants to move to New York City, but can't leave her mother. After the war, Gila reads in the newspaper that Lansky's trial in Miami ended in an acquittal. She thinks he is not innocent, just invisible. She goes to see the apartment every once in a while.

## Analysis

Hannah has a difficult and complex relationship with her father that she has a difficult time facing head-on. Through writing about other fathers and their children, she explores her own experiences and feelings. Though she thinks she's writing about others in this memoir, she's really working through personal emotions.

Colors play a large role throughout the story, the same ones repeating often. At lunch, Hannah and her father eat white truffles shaved over black squid. These represent extreme contrasts – good and evil, innocence and corruption, open and guarded. Hannah and her father are all of these things to each other.

Gila Konig, a concentration camp survivor, looks at black and white photographs of the murder of one of Gila's lover's closest friends. Her lover, Meyer Lansky, is an American Jewish mobster. The color contrasts magnify the life Lansky leads. His business thrives on hurting others, but Lansky is refined, calm, introverted. The man contradicts the profession.



Gila and Meyer come together in an Israeli hotel in a cornucopia of color. Gila wears beige and black. The beige marks her as calm, flexible, neutral, soothing; but she's guarded and secretive, too. She sits surrounded by the grounded, dependable brown. Orange, too, is a contradictory color. It's life, happiness and love, but also power and hatred. Both Gila and Lansky spent much of their youth paying with their lives for others' actions. Though Lansky escaped the camps, he had to leave his home and family in Poland to make a new life with his parents in New York.

Outside the hotel, orange beach umbrellas mix with green – rebirth. Gila's and Lansky's affair is an opportunity for them both to put their pasts behind them and start new lives. Lansky is in Israel trying to gain asylum from prosecution for his crimes in the United States. Gila is trapped there, caring for her mother and working a dead-end job. She wants out as much as Lansky wants in. Both need to realize the changes, but only one will get the opportunity.

Gila's name means happiness. Her mother changed it from Tsilya after they left the concentration camp. The name mocks her, as she never seems to be able to grasp true happiness. Her life is always in transition and she seems to constantly be leaving things behind.

Gila and Lansky in Tel Aviv – a modern city in the middle of an ancient land. Neither can stay. Neither can relax into life there. The city and the people – they exist in constant change. And all three exist in the middle of Judaism, a religion that is also a culture so that its members can never escape, even if they don't believe in it. To the Nazis, the religion a person practiced didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the bloodline.

Israel is a land conquerors built. Being a Jew means fighting for every scrap and holding onto it with all of one's strength. Lansky was built for it. Israeli law says all Jews have a right to citizenship. What does it mean when your own homeland rejects you?

Lansky goes with a reporter to a cemetery near the Mount of Olives, a symbolic place for King David. It's where he went when his son took control of David's kingdom. It was a place of his mourning. It's a symbol of struggle and heartbreak between children and their fathers. The struggle is ancient, ingrained, a rite of passage. One is constantly trying to wrestle power and autonomy from the other.

Nearby is the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy site. Islam sprung from Judaism's roots, it's "father" an illegitimate son in rebellion. Further on, they pass Christian holy sites – Christianity another child of Judaism. The world, it seems, is no more than the parent/child struggle from the large scale to the small.

In Jerusalem, unlike Tel Aviv, the past lives. Lansky can't help thinking about his childhood, his parents, their flight from Poland ahead of the Nazis. Being a Jew has meaning beyond which religion a person practices. It's an identity apart from spirituality and it comes with a long, tragic history. Lansky waits in the King David Hotel, thinking of how the Arab nations will eventually attack Israel from all sides, just as Lansky's



demons will soon come to take him down. Lansky is Israel and Israel is King David's legacy. David's legacy and life are highly flawed, despite the best intentions.

Lansky in gray – neutral like Gila's beige, but also a midway between black and white – is a person Gila can't rationalize as the man he is, the gangster of legend. She knows he's that person, but with her, he's just a normal human being. Pale blue paired with gray only magnifies his contradictory nature. Pink and orange narrate Gila's journey to see the apartment Lansky leaves her when he flees Israel after the nation denies his request to stay. Pink is a symbol of hope, caring, compassion and love. The apartment will be Gila's salvation, the instrument of her escape from Israel and deliverance to the life she wants most. But in order for Gila to reinvent her life, her mother must die from the cancer eating away at her. The walls inside the apartment are white.

## Discussion Question 1

How can a memoir be about someone other than the writer?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the term "useful Jews"?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think Gila's new name is fitting or ironic? Why?

## Vocabulary

memoir, circulated, aroma, truffles, pungent, self-aggrandizement, murky, recurring, investigate, sufficient, tantalizing, invariable, inexplicably, context, viability, scandal, embellishing, detachment, proxies, perceive, ramifies, guise, essential, aspect, kitsch, picaresque, quaint, cruciform, sensational, paradoxically, diminish, fastidiously, assemblage, concierges, eclipse, fluent, grovel, absently, dismissively, cognizant, racketeer, adhere, lapel, onslaught, vassals, proliferations, reprieve, indictments, subpoena, scrutiny, birthright, correspondent, sympathetic, crenellated, panorama, inscription, shul, Torah, subsumed, insouciant, yarmulkes, extravagant, forthwith, pursuant, revoked, extradite, allure, excesses, shrewd, contemplating, temperament, raffish, rhetoric, contradictions, Mafia, legitimate, alleged, knockoffs, couture, scornful, Orthodox, mezuzahs, ambitions, acquitted, crucial





# Chapters 3 and 4

## Summary

Part 1: Chapter 3: "Only Connect," New York - 2012

Hannah remembers covering a Florida murder trial for lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Previous news stories had linked him to Lansky. She thinks about when Gila first told her about Lansky and that Hannah wasn't interested in Gila's story. She recalls being interested in the women in Lansky's life. Hannah's wedding announcement follows.

Hannah recalls a song, "The Adulteress," that makes her think of Gila because the song is about a woman who "loses herself in secrets." When Hannah was young, she wanted to be the woman in the song. She realizes the song is "an indictment." Hannah first heard the song long after she'd first met Gila and she'd already forgotten how much Gila had meant to her. She quotes writers on love and beauty, then says she's going to tell one more story about Lansky's women before talking about herself.

Part 1: Chapter 4: "Immigrants, Part 1" New York - 1928-1929

Anne Citron, a Jew who has changed her name from Anna for a new beginning, touches up her makeup. She tips the powder room attendant with a nickel Lansky has given her. When she returns to her table, there is a box with an engagement ring inside. The ring is small. Lansky is nervous. He takes the box back and puts it in his pocket. He tells Anne to "think about it for a couple days."

They're in the backseat of a car and Anne mentions hearing that Lansky drove to Florida. He tells her he didn't. He attempts to touch her breasts and she pushes his hands away. Next Anne and Lansky are in a movie theater waiting for other patrons to leave. Anne reflects back on the movie's story, how American it was. She thinks the movie's male lead is like Lansky.

Anne and Lansky's families are dining together in a restaurant. Anne thinks about her friend telling her that Lansky and his friend Ben own property all over the city. Anne's father frowns through lunch and Lansky keeps his head down, not speaking. Lansky pays the bill before the waiter brings it to the table. Anne's father is jealous and she's surprised. He takes Lansky aside to speak privately, asking Lansky if he wants a job. Lansky accepts, though he doesn't need it. Lansky will help with the accounting because it's Anne's father. Anne is wearing an engagement ring. She imagines living in a fancy apartment uptown.

It's spring and Anne and Lansky are heading to Canada for their honeymoon. She's amazed to be where she is because of her humble childhood. Lansky also came from humble beginnings and is now making a lot of money as a bootlegger. In Grodno, they'd had more than in New York.



Anne calls Lansky to tell him she's having their baby, though it's three months early. He's meeting with his business partners. Lansky and Charlie Luciano speak in private about the Italians in the other room. Lansky is nervous about working with them. Lansky knows they don't like Jews. Lansky returns home to Anne boiling milk on the stove. He holds her and wonders when he can let her go. She throws the milk against the wall.

Early in her pregnancy, Anne thought the baby had died. Lansky doesn't know how to help her. Lansky won't set up the baby's room until the baby is born. He thinks it's bad luck. He also refuses to move to a bigger home. He's asleep, fully dressed, in the sitting room when Ben Siegel comes by. He says "they called," but Lansky doesn't know anything about it. They go down to the foyer then out to the stoop. Luciano is missing. They go back to the apartment to prepare to leave and Anne wants to know what's going on. Lansky hedges. Finally he tells her they're "going to a dark garage in the middle of the night."

They go to a basement card game where they use a pipe to beat one of the men. They tell the men where Vito Genovese can find them. Lansky thinks about how his life will affect his unborn child. Luciano is tied up and gagged with tape. He's been beaten and stabbed. Lansky rescues Luciano and Luciano gains the nickname "Lucky."

Lansky's son, Bernard, is born crippled. Anne says it's God's judgment.

The author credits the chapter to "Lansky" by Hank Mesick.

## Analysis

The theme of chapter 3 is women with secrets. It may be the most poignant chapter in the book, as Hannah holds herself emotionally apart from everyone. She doesn't let anyone truly in – her husband, her father, Gila or anyone else with whom she becomes close. It makes it easy for her to walk away when a situation no longer serves her or when she doesn't know what to do next.

Lansky's first wife is a foil to Gila. Both have changed names, though Anne's name change is her own choice in order to appear less Jewish. Gila's change is something her mother forced upon her, something that affirms her Judaism, her survival from those who would destroy it. Anne, too, is dependent and sexually reserved, careful not to allow too much physical contact before marriage. Gila, though, is the mistress. She has survived all of her life without Lansky and she isn't afraid to be without him. Their relationship is entirely sexual.

What they both have in common, though, is their desire to be American. For Anne, it's about belonging. For Gila, it's about ensuring she will no longer need anyone again, other than herself.

Lansky has recently been to Florida and he tells Anne there are no storks there – symbolic of fidelity, love, marriage. There are, though, pelicans and flamingos. They symbolize selfless motherhood and sexuality, respectively. The short conversation



foreshadows the fate of the Lansky marriage and Lansky's later behavior while married to his second wife. He's married when he meets Gila.

Blue and sepia dominate the movie Anne and Lansky see on a date – a movie about very American college students. There's a longing there for a life Anne knows she will never have. As a Jew, she will always be somehow on the outside of American culture, purely American experiences.

When the families go out for dinner together to celebrate Anne and Meyer's engagement, the meal consists of Jewish/Eastern European dishes. Anne's innocence is disappearing. She knows more about Lansky's business now. She watches Lansky pay the bill as her father acquiesces. Yet they continue playing their expected roles, Lansky accepting the job Anne's father has offered him.

Anne is the one part of Lansky's life he can't control, the one thing he doesn't know what to do with. She's nervous, frightened, irrational. But she's his wife and pregnant with his child. She's the only thing in his life he can't make disappear. This powerful man is helpless against this fragile woman.

When Anne says their crippled son, Bernard, is a "judgment from God," she officially absolves herself from her own life choices. She knew Lansky's business and she married him for the life he offered her.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Gila's story similar to "The Adulteress"? What does this song tell us about Hannah's personality?

## Discussion Question 2

How do the quotes at the end of chapter 3 relate to the story Hannah is telling?

## Discussion Question 3

When Lansky finds Anne in front of the stove, is it the same night as the meeting or another night? How do you know?

## Vocabulary

cultural, context, infamous, lobbyist, fedora, litigation, Semitic, haughty, derisive, illicit, flummoxed, arrayed, dour, abundance, tenuous, froth, devious, aroused, articulate, callow, infatuation, indicated, speakeasy, hale cad, blintzes, whitefish, borscht, chartered, discreetly, endured, scheming, trite, tenements, sheared, latrine, lathes, convulsed, homburg, receding, vagueness, silhouette, hamstrung, distorted, stunted



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Summary

Part 1: Chapter 5: "Criminology," Brooklyn - 2010

After speaking with Gila in 2010, Hannah takes the subway to Brownsville. Until a few Hasidic Jews get on board, she is the only white person in the car. Hannah takes photographs during her ride, one of garbage bags next to a church. A man wonders if "it" can be saved. Hannah's father's parents had lived in Brownsville, which was a Jewish community at the time. Their house is gone – a vacant lot. She says her destination is home, which is no longer there.

Part 1: Chapter 6: "Immigrants, Part 2," New York - 1982

It's New York City in 1982. Gila is in Central Park looking at trees and thinking about the forests outside of Foehrenwald and Bergen-Belsen. Her memories are fuzzy. She's been in New York nearly two years. She hadn't known how to break into the fashion industry once she got there. She walks into the private school where she teaches Hebrew. Something of note happened in class earlier. She greets the students in Hebrew and they answer back before moving on. She goes into the bathroom and washes her face.

She goes to the rabbi's office. They discuss how a student, Robby Karsh, angered her and she slapped him. The student had drawn a swastika on a doodled dragon's forehead on the cover of a notebook. The rabbi says someone else will teach Gila's classes the next week and Gila says the man can keep her classes. She says the other teacher likes talking about the Holocaust more than Gila does.

Gila finds Hannah in the classroom. Gila observes that Hannah seems upset. Gila thinks Hannah told the other student about Gila's time in the concentration camp. Gila had told Hannah about starving at Bergen-Belsen, eating only nettles with her mother. They didn't share their one bowl of nettle soup with others because then Gila and her mother would have starved. Gila did not tell Hannah about what Gila's mother did to get the nettles for them, to keep them alive.

Gila and Hannah walk together to Hannah's father's store. They are going all together to Lawrence's country house. Hannah asks Lawrence for a new coat and he says he'll buy her a whole new wardrobe, which Hannah doesn't want. Gila is Hannah's caretaker. Hannah's mother had died 10 months before after having a seizure and then being in and out of the hospital. Gila had told Hannah the nettle soups story to teach Hannah to be strong against her sadness. Lawrence had asked Gila on the trip because it was the first time without his wife. He'd said Hannah also wanted Gila to come.

When they get to the house, Hannah goes to her bedroom. She thinks about how her mother had described the things in the room. She thinks about the other Hebrew



teacher, Mr. Stone, always asking about her mother. Hannah told Mr. Stone about the camps, but not Robby. Hannah thinks that Gila doesn't know her at all, to think Hannah would have told Robby about the camp. The swastika had been a joke.

They eat dinner and listen to the radio. Lawrence is planning to go to a neighbor's house and Hannah wants to go, but he tells her it's too late. Gila isn't listening. She's thinking about the afternoon. She wonders how much Hannah suspects. Gila has been living in sparse conditions in an old building in Manhattan. She has a poster hanging that Lawrence gave her from his shop.

Lawrence returns and wishes he could have stayed at the Kleins'. He thinks about his wife's cancer diagnosis and treatment. He goes to Gila's bedroom. She's asleep and he wakes her up. She tells him that she quit her job. She wants to open a store and sell women's clothing, something Lawrence had promised to help her do. Lawrence says he had hoped Hannah would learn Hebrew. They argue, then Lawrence gets into bed with her.

When Hannah first sees Gila outside of school, they barely speak and Hannah realizes that Gila has a life outside of teaching. Hannah admits to having fallen in love with Gila in the early days of her mother's illness.

The next morning, Hannah and her father go for a walk. He tells Hannah about his and Gila's relationship, then apologizes for making "it" worse. She runs off.

Hannah watches her father carry Gila's suitcase to her building after they return to the city. An old woman yells at Hannah from her apartment window. It is the last time they see Gila together.

## Analysis

Hannah's grandparents settled in Brownsville when they came from Grodno. Brown – a symbol of stability, security and protection. Meyer Lansky lived there, too, his former building now a vacant lot. The formerly Jewish neighborhood is now an African-American neighborhood.

Israel, after World War II and the horror of the Holocaust, was supposed to be a safe, secure home for the world's Jews, a place of protection. They were supposed to be able to go there as a safe haven from wars and further persecution. But it isn't there anymore, either. It's a country itself torn apart due to war and another group of people trying to drive them out. There is no home.

For the first time, the Holocaust has entered Hannah's life in a way that affects her profoundly. Later in the novel, she remarks that as a Jew, all roads lead to the Holocaust and she thinks this is the reason she has always run from her heritage.

Her mother has recently died and the Hebrew teacher from the Jewish day school her father sends her to is also her caregiver – Gila, a concentration camp survivor whom



Hannah has come to care for. In the aftermath of slapping a student for drawing a swastika, Gila is in the bathroom noticing her black hair, green eyes, the grayish-pink walls and yellow soap. Black – evil – highlights her experience as a prisoner with the green of her eyes representing her new life in America. Pink is for her mother, her unconditional love – though it's tinged with gray. In the camp, Gila's mother was forced to do unpleasant things just to get meager rations of extra food for Gila and herself. Gila's mother's love is tainted, as is Gila's arrival in America. She's used money with origins in crime to finance her dream. Yellow is sunshine and happiness, goodness – but it also means impatience, criticism and cowardice.

The notebook on which Robby drew the swastika is blue, which represents depression, but also peace and tranquility. Gila and Hannah's worlds are full of contradictions and confusion.

Gila and Hannah need each other, but neither can voice that need. Hannah is someone who can give Gila a distraction, someone to care for and think about besides herself. Hannah's face is "like something carved out of sandalwood." Those who practice magic burn sandalwood to exorcise demons and evil ghosts, something that Gila needs in order to leave the past behind her.

Hannah associates her mother with pink and blue, but also black and white. White is pure goodness and innocence, which illness – blackness – stole from Hannah when her mother died.

Gila accepts her relationship with Lawrence Groff, though it involves him keeping her at arm's length, the affair a secret from both his daughter and his friends. This works for Gila because she can no longer handle deep feelings. She likes the human contact, but she doesn't want to let anyone get too close. The affair, once Hannah learns of it, also serves as an excuse for Hannah to shut her father out, to distance herself from feelings she doesn't want to feel. She can give up on becoming a better Jew now, too, because she no longer feels a strong need to make her father happy. The same event is Gila's excuse to leave the school, to leave her legacy behind, no longer bound to her religion.

There are cardinals in the bushes when Lawrence tells Hannah about his affair with Gila. Legend says cardinals are the spirits of loved ones come to visit, as though Hannah's mother is listening to the confession. Hannah's knowledge proves the end of the affair, but the implication is that her mother's spirit is looming and doesn't approve. Hannah is her instrument.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the Jews getting onto the train?

## Discussion Question 2

What do the garbage bags next to the run-down church mean?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Gila leave out part of the story about the nettle soup?

## Vocabulary

loitered, concertina, lore, cubist, rote, dyspeptically, obnoxious, beseeching, fraught, deranged, naïve, poise, obscene, inevitable, subsisted, typhus, logistics, jeopardize, vestibule, infirmary, spectator, assailed, eluded, candid, embodied, repudiation, intoxicatingly, potent, nostalgia, salvaged, exuberant, tableau, synthetic, concussive, allusive, condolences, sullen, contempt, impersonal, swastika, efficient, relevant, withered, congregant, obliged, cantor, modal, wraith, guilt, accumulate, obscene, interrogation, emaciated, erratically, waned, scruples, valances, garish, shrine, decimated, resent, preposterous, commemorations, remnant, inaudibly





# Chapters 7 and 8

## Summary

Part 2: Chapter 7: "To Israel," 2009

Hannah muses about what her father and Gila meant to her 30 years before. She says that what they meant to each other meant more to Hannah than she knew then. She doesn't know what they meant to each other.

Hannah receives a letter from Gila 28 years after the last time they'd seen each other. Gila has seen the article Hannah wrote about a Mafia-style murder in Tel Aviv.

Hannah has traveled all over Israel covering David Bellen's murder and it's led to a story about herself. In Israel, the airport screeners ask Hannah, a Jew, why she's never been to Israel before.

Part 2: Chapter 8

Hannah's article about David Bellen's murder is the entirety of the chapter. It begins with a quote from Bellen's own work about people not choosing their own obsessions. Bellen's body was in Beit Sahour, found on the morning of Dec. 23, 2008. It is a region in turmoil, a place with recent Jewish settlers. Israeli Defense Forces believe the murder is a terrorist act. Hamas is active in the area.

When Hannah tells friends that she's going to Israel, they are appalled because they believe Israel is guilty of human rights violations against the Palestinians. Hannah believes, though, that her friends would be the first to mourn the country if it disappeared. She says she never cared much for Israel, but it's because she didn't want to face "the idea of myself as a Jew." She feels shame from the security guards' questions.

Hannah describes Bellen as looking like a "wry pugilist, used to taking blows to the face." She says Bellen wrote his last book, *Kid Bethlehem*, in response to paintings by Israeli artist Ivan Schwebel. The paintings, depicting King David in modern times, came to be in a time of strife within Israel. Bellen's poems depict David as Israeli gangster Yehezkel Aslan. Hannah thinks the book is a clue to Bellen's murder.

Hannah travels to Beit Jala on the West Bank where she sees the wall dividing Israel from Palestine. She compares the new, more upscale Jewish settlement to the run-down Arab one. There are gaps in the wall. Her driver tells her that Arabs often shoot at cars on the highway and at Jewish houses. He says sometimes the Jews shoot back.

Hannah switches from her Jewish driver to a Palestinian driver. They stop to look at Shepherds' Field where King David is supposed to have grazed his sheep. It's too dangerous to descend the hill into the field. She thinks of Bellen's body – run over





several times with a truck – found in a vacant lot. The killers had mutilated him. Hannah wonders if it was a message.

Hannah is frustrated that she finds both ancient Israeli and modern Israeli politics confusing. She has trouble keeping track of names of tribes and nations. She mentions Arab teens arrested for desecrating Jewish graves – from her hotel room, she can see the cemetery where it happened.

Hannah meets with Israeli journalist Oded Voss. He's a handsome war veteran. Voss tells Hannah about his attempts to cover Bellen's murder, but there was quickly a lack of both new information and public interest. He has no explanation for why Bellen left Tel Aviv to illegally go to the West Bank in the middle of the night and he doesn't know why the killers left the body where they did.

Voss says he's glad there isn't a Palestinian in jail for the crime and Hannah wonders why a Palestinian would have wanted to kill Bellen. Voss says Palestinians murder Jews all the time, though the rest of the world doesn't want to remember. For a moment, Hannah doesn't think she can write the story. Bellen's murderers could have been Palestinian terrorists or fundamentalist Jews angry about his blasphemous treatment of King David. Bellen's editor, Galit Levy, wonders how someone ran Bellen's body over so many times without being seen. The implication is there is a militia group in the area. Voss dismisses the theory.

A passage from Bellen's book recalls him watching Scarface. He muses that Tony Montana is not happy once he reaches the top and Bellen thinks that's just like King David.

Hannah compares Bellen's writing to American Jewish writers who go out of their way to be funny. Bellen's book makes her see the world differently and she begins imitating its tone in her own writing.

Hannah and Voss go to the Valley of Elah where King David killed Goliath. It is at the separation wall between the Israelites and the Palestinians and was once the separation between Israelites and Philistines. They get lost on the way. A recent immigrant from England gives them directions. As they look over the valley, Voss says he sometimes thinks Bellen committed suicide.

Hannah goes to the Old City of Jerusalem and she thinks about how beautiful the country and its name are. Israel means "one who wrestles with God." She considers that the people living there now are as distant from the people who built it as Hannah herself is. Hannah thinks about Bellen committing suicide but decides against it. Voss explains his theory.

Later, Hannah wakes up in her hotel room and Voss is sitting in a chair reading. Hannah had dreamt about war. She'd expected Voss to come to her room with her. They'd had drinks earlier, though Voss didn't drink alcohol and had only a club soda. She tells Voss she's going to include the moment in her piece. Voss asks Hannah why she's never been to Israel and she says it's a long story. They agree to go later to see the Holocaust



memorial after Hannah finishes the story. Hannah and Voss visit Bellen's son Eliav in Tsfat where Eliav has a shop. Eliav bought the shop with the money he inherited from his father.

Eliav shows Hannah letters and emails his father received after he published *Kid Bethlehem*. Eliav lists known Jewish terrorists who have murdered both Muslims and Jews with whom they disagreed or thought were not devout enough.

Eliav says he last spoke to his father three days before the murder and that Bellen was at home cooking and planning to go to a bar later. Eliav tells them that his father liked to take a woman to a restaurant or bar a few times a month. He says his father met them either at the university where he taught or online. Eliav speculates that the women may have had something to do with the murder and that terrorism "was sexual frustration blown up to a messianic scale." Voss is holding himself back from speaking. Hannah says Bellen had no secrets and was easy to find. Eliav answers that Tel Aviv is secular and it's the future of Israel.

Hannah wonders if Eliav has actually given up drugs. Eliav says people are a disappointment to God and he fears God. Then he tells Hannah about a man who attended an appearance Bellen made at the University of Michigan. The man made "strange sexual noises" when Bellen began reading. Eight men subdued the man. Bellen said he'd seen the man before the talk and was concerned about him.

Voss tells Hannah that almost everything Eliav said was a lie. He says Bellen's friends told Voss that Bellen was a recluse and that he and his son had been estranged for many years. Voss leaves Hannah in Tel Aviv while he works in Jerusalem and he doesn't contact her for several days. She mostly stays in her hotel, though one night she walks to Lilienblum Street where Eliav said Bellen often went to bars. None of the bartenders know Bellen.

Hannah meets Voss for lunch the next day and he apologizes for not being in touch, but doesn't explain. Hannah thinks he was with another woman. Voss takes Hannah to Bellen's childhood neighborhood, Hatikvah. Voss says it was and is a center for organized crime. Bellen had been thinking about whether to show Hannah the area, and that was why he'd disappeared. He was worried about Hannah writing about it and giving more bad press to Israel. Graffiti on a phone booth says, in Hebrew, "There will be peace when the last Arab is dead."

Voss introduces Hannah to one of Bellen's boyhood friends and the man seems to Hannah to not embody the qualities she had always considered Jewish. He's a loan shark. The man tells Hannah about a birthday party Bellen's parents had given him. The man's parents were unhappy he'd been invited because they looked down at the Bellens as "soft." The man says Bellen was a child and criticizes Bellen's book as being about a world of which Bellen knew nothing.

Later, Voss tells Hannah he killed someone while fighting in a war but he won't talk about it further. The waiter recalls Bellen eating in the restaurant where they are every



few weeks and then walking around the neighborhood where no one recognized him. Bellen didn't want the restaurant to put his picture on the wall. Sitting on the beach, Voss tells Hannah about his old Arab friend. They are no longer in touch because Ali is still married and Voss isn't.

Later, in bed, Voss unexpectedly hits Hannah in the mouth, so hard she thinks someone shot something through the window. Voss touches Hannah's bleeding lip and she wonders if he's going to hit her again and thinks he's wondering the same thing.

Hannah takes a Taxi back to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem the next day. The driver asks why Hannah has never been to Israel before. He tells her she needs to see the Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem. Hannah muses that the reason she never wanted to directly face the idea of herself as a Jew is that "all roads seem to lead to the Holocaust memorial."

She goes to the memorial and sees a chart of human hair from Aryan gold to Semitic brown and says that is what brings it all into focus. She watches videos and she wonders what good the memorial can do. She cries when she sees another tourist crying and looking angry.

Hannah describes a Bible passage where King Saul's men are pursuing David and the men "go into ecstasy," as does Saul later. Ivan Schwebel painted the scene as David dancing on a railway platform where the Nazis are transporting Jews to Auschwitz. Hannah wishes she could talk to Voss about it. She wonders if anyone is currently writing anything as resonating at the Psalms.

Hannah received an anonymous email that says Bellen returned to his neighborhood in defeat because becoming a prize-winning poet didn't change anything. It says Bellen arranged his own death in order to drive up the worth of his work and provide for his son. The email says the people in Bellen's old neighborhood hate the Arabs, but also work with them. Hannah thinks she knows who sent the email, but doesn't say who she thinks it is. She's been back in New York for 8 months with no word from Voss.

A New York Times article published before Hannah went to Israel discussed a group that was clearing garbage and removing Palestinians from a section of Jerusalem said the be the spot where King David laid the foundations of Jewish Jerusalem. The piece says the aim is to make it more difficult to divide the city.

Hannah visits the site and is the only person to tour Hezekiah's Tunnel, which leads underground to the Pool of Siloam. The tunnel is so narrow that once entered, the person must walk to the end rather than turn around and go back. She hears yodeling and turns off her flashlight so she can stand in the dark and listen.

## Analysis

Everything at the airport is gray. This neutrality is representative of Hannah's ambiguity about her Judaism. She's on her way to Israel, a Jew who isn't a Jew. The El Al



screeners don't understand her any more than she understands herself, and her journey to self-awareness is beginning with her return to her ancestor's homeland that is no longer home.

Hannah's investigative piece about David Bellen's murder becomes Hannah's vehicle for investigating her own motivations. The opening Bellen quote discusses obsession over things people have tried to avoid. Hannah has stressed how little interest she had in Gila after she left and how she cared even less about Meyer Lansky, but she ends up writing an entire book – her own memoir – with them as the central figures. But that's secondary to the way in which Israel forces Hannah to confront her Jewishness and what it means.

During Hannah's time in Israel, there is an ongoing, active conflict between the country and the Palestinians on its outskirts. Though the two groups are always at odds, they are actively launching missiles at each other now. Hannah's in the middle of this while she navigates a minefield of romance and learns about organized crime. Bellen comes from a neighborhood that launched the Israeli "organization," though he was never a member himself. Bellen's life ties neatly into Gila's story and Lansky rounds it out.

One of the first things Hannah sees when she arrives in Israel is cypress trees, which symbolize death, life and resurrection in Christianity. In Judaism, they are both feminine and masculine, along with immortality and repentance. Jews use them in birth and marriage ceremonies. They are, in essence, a representation of the circle of life. Writing this memoir, Hannah is killing her old life – her relationship with her father, specifically, and being reborn into a new one where she embraces her identity in a way she hasn't before. The trip itself and writing about Bellen are reluctant embraces of her heritage.

Modern Israel is similar to Israel in King David's time, a sign that the world changes little, though people come and go, live and die. King David's relationships with his wives and his children, even, mirror those of the people Hannah writes about, especially herself. It's a constant struggle to break free from each other while holding on at the same time. The wall separating Israel from the Palestinian settlements is a stand-in for the wall separating these children from their parents.

When Hannah lets Voss in, it's like letting Israel in. He's a Jew. He lives in Israel. He fought a war for Israel that's scarred him for life. Those scars cause a rift between them when he unwittingly lashes out because of post-traumatic stress disorder. It's as though Israel itself has struck Hannah, a rebuke for her rejection. Black, red and gold mark the room in which they first have sex. They have a dark passion tinged with compassion. And as always, their affair, the Jewishness of it, leads to the Holocaust when Voss asks Hannah if she's ever been to the memorial.

Eliav, Bellen's son, is a drug addict, something that will ultimately kill him. He had a difficult and complicated relationship with his father. When she says Bellen believed "we were always a disappointment," he means he was a disappointment to his father – at least Eliav believes that. He tells lies about his father's life that are more wishful thinking than deceit. Eliav regrets that at the end, they still were at odds – like King David and



his own son, who tried to overthrow King David. In both cases, regret comes too late, when only one remains living.

Before leaving Israel, Hannah visits an excavation site where visitors can walk through a tight, dark tunnel. Once started, the traveler cannot turn back, but must complete the journey to the end. The moment Hannah chose to write about Bellen's murder, she entered a metaphorical tunnel and she has no choice but to follow it to the end, whatever that means to her life. That journey takes her back to Gila and away from her father. She will lose who she always thought she was and learn who she, maybe, really is. Or is it all an illusion?

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Gila contacts Hannah?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you think the world is right in its judgment of Israel? Explain.

## Discussion Question 3

What does it mean to be a Jew?

## Vocabulary

narcotic, momentous, inexplicably, provocation, retaliatory, ensuing, onslaught, inevitably, deviants, sentimental, cult, righteous, wry, pugilist, disillusionment, cynicism, oppressor, peculiar, decadence, controversial, circuitous, dilapidated, mutilated, factions, desecrating, symbolic, elaborate, skeptical, materialized, parsing, extremist, sacrilegious, notoriety, resonates, montage, compulsively, profound, intangible, phonetically, undulating, sparse, uncannily, white, precise, imbued, picturesque, mystical, exotic, seductive, sonorous, replicas, absurdist, elaborate, irrelevant, imminent, fanatics, frivolous, culvert, essential, tousled, preoccupied, wariness, corrupt, tranquilizing, contemporary, compelled, contusions, bludgeoned, lamented, caustically, ruthless, vitality, piety, reverence, kitsch, spectral, conjured, zealot, conceal, inciting, speculated, messianic, puritanical, wistful, cliché, scrum, subdue, peculiar, affect, recluse, hoarded, estranged, generic, nostalgic, impassioned, discreet, chintz, strife, pious, robust, wizened, beatific, fundamentalist, spontaneously, indigence, censures, adulators, ecstasy, contemplating, gentrification, excavation, cisterns



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Summary

Part 2: Chapter 9: "Immigrants, Part 3," 1972/2010

Lansky goes to Paraguay from Israel. Before he gets off the plane, three agents – one American – board and don't allow him to disembark. The plane's last stop is Miami and the agents only need to keep him on the plane so they can arrest him once they arrive in the United States. It's been 28 years since Gila and Hannah last saw each other. Gila has a letter for Hannah, hoping they can talk. Gila, who's undergoing chemotherapy treatments, wants to tell Hannah about Lansky. She's reading Hannah's story about Bellen.

Part 2: Chapter 10: "Reunion," New York - 2010

Hannah received Gila's letter 6 months after the Bellen story runs. Hannah hasn't yet written the rest of the book, not knowing what the Bellen story would lead to. She wasn't interested in Lansky. Hannah meets Gila for lunch, shortly after Gila's final round of chemotherapy. Hannah thinks Gila sought her out because Hannah is a writer and Gila is dying and wants Hannah to tell Gila's life story. Their meeting is awkward.

Gila shows Hannah photos of the apartment Lansky had given her, empty. She shows Hannah a photo of Gila's mother when she was dying of cancer. Gila talks about her life in Tel Aviv, working as a cocktail waitress and caring for her sick mother. Gila says there was no way she would have been able to get ahead. She says Lansky giving her the apartment made her feel diminished. No one would tell her who was paying the bills, but she knew.

Gila says she had wanted to be a clothing designer, but had no luck in Israel. She went to Bellen's old neighborhood. She saw Lansky's driver there and worked out a deal through him that she could have the entire year's rent on the apartment in cash and they could have the apartment. She got enough for a ticket to New York.

Hannah's father helped Gila sell her dresses to department stores and in the beginning, she worked in the Hebrew school.

Gila says her affair with Hannah's father began before his wife's death, and that it was what he needed in his grief. Hannah thinks back in anger at herself for the things she did to get back at him, including her failed marriage and promiscuity. Gila wants to know if Hannah is going to write Gila's story. Gila thinks there's money in it, but Hannah is reluctant. She refuses to ask questions because she doesn't want to give Gila what Hannah thinks Gila wants. Hannah writes that she knows she'll write about Gila and Lansky and about Gila and Hannah's father because Hannah is still angry with her father.



When the check comes, Gila says she'll tell Hannah more the next time they see each other. She asks the waiter to take their photo. A few days later, Hannah visits her father. She tells him about seeing Gila, but he doesn't have much interest. Her father is being accused of fraud for selling items as antiques that were not antiques and charging more for them than they were worth. He denies knowing the items were forgeries.

He shows Hannah a desk that he'd bought from their neighbors at the country house. Deborah Klein had needed money after her husband's death, but the desk was a fake and not worth what Deborah thought it was. Though he'd paid her \$75,000 – more than it was worth – she never spoke to him again. He says he doesn't like talking about the past because his family came from nowhere and he had become someone. Hannah thinks her father is unknowable.

Hannah's father plays her recordings her grandfather made, a mock radio show. Hannah's uncle has recently put them into CDs and given them to her father. Her father is on them as a little boy and Hannah recognizes his voice.

Two weeks later, Hannah receives an email from Gila with the photo of them at lunch. Gila invites Hannah to visit her in Sag Harbor. Hannah thinks of how alone Gila is, remembering her comment about being lucky to have her friend Hugh in her life. Hannah responds 3 weeks later but doesn't receive another email from Gila. Hannah thinks Gila is purposely ignoring her, but she receives a phone call from Hugh saying that Gila died. She wasn't ignoring Hannah.

Hannah goes to the house where Gila had been staying and meets Hugh. On her coffee table, Gila had a copy of Ivan Schwebel's *David, The King*. The house is immaculate. Hugh says only 7 people attended the funeral and that Gila didn't like people very much. She took compliments as patronizing. Hugh is skeptical of Gila's story about Lansky. She'd told Hugh a different story about a swimwear designer. Hannah believes the Lansky version.

New York feels less and less like home to Hannah and she begins losing interest in stories she's writing. Her father's name is again in the newspapers and Hannah tells him she's going to write Gila's story. Their relationship deteriorates. Hannah receives a letter from Bellen's editor.

## Analysis

Gila washes with lavender soap, which soothes the nausea from her chemotherapy. The lavender plant, an invasive species to the Americas brought over in the 1800s, is a feminine symbol of love, devotion and purity, while the color is associated with both weddings and mourning – a beginning and an end. Lansky's fight has ended, but he has begun a new chapter in his life, while Gila is tying up loose ends of hers, preparing for her own death.





The cream color Gila wears when Hannah sees her for the first time after Gila's relationship with Hannah's father ended represents Gila's new-found sophistication. She's reinvented herself and shed her Holocaust-survivor identity.

Hannah still feels conflicted about Gila, about the affair she'd had with Hannah's father. The meeting is strained, uncertain. The interaction isn't much different from the parent-child interactions throughout the book, perhaps the most telling sign that Hannah loved Gila as a mother, but had to let her go. Gila had to let her own mother go more than 30 years prior and it was a conflicted moment for her, to want her mother to live on, but also to die so that Gila could get on with her own life. She never quite fully recovered from the experience.

Gila never felt as though she belonged in Israel. Though she lived there and was a citizen, she was "yordim," which is the Israeli word for Jews who leave Israel. That she felt this way means she was uncomfortable in her own self. She, like Hannah and Lansky, has no home she can return to. None of them truly belong anywhere, though they all find a place to settle.

Throughout their lunch meeting, the color white pops up often. Gila is wearing a white blouse, the vase on the table is white, it was white toenails that first alerted Gila to her cancer. There is a white orchid in the vase. Gila's illness has given her an aura or purity. Ironically, a fern also sits on the table. Ferns symbolize health, something that has long since left Gila.

Hannah judges Gila for entering an affair with Hannah's father even before Hannah's mother has passed away. But Hannah's life hasn't taken a much different path, having cheated on her own husband, resulting in a divorce. In a biblical sense, Hannah pays for her father's sins. Hannah refuses to directly absolve Gila for her part in the past, withholding forgiveness from a dying woman.

Lawrence Groff's has arranged his living room furniture in lotus shape, a protection and illumination symbol. It had been his instinct to protect his daughter. He was honest with her about Gila and ended the relationship specifically to ensure Hannah's happiness, but in the end it didn't matter.

After Gila's death, Hannah visits with Gila's friend Hugh at the cottage where Gila spent her last days. Ivy and a weeping cherry tree, both symbols of friendship, adorn the front yard, along with a sycamore tree, which is a sign that "gifts" are soon to come. Some call the sycamore the "ghost tree." It's as though Gila is reaching out to Hannah even after death. The last thing she did was give Hannah the gift of a vehicle through which Hannah could explore her own life without having to look at it directly. Despite how Hannah felt about Gila, Gila was her true friend.

Outside of the lotus are bronze boddhisattva. Bronze, in Jewish biblical lore, means suffering and sacrifice, which Lawrence did for Hannah. He shows no interest in Hannah's story about meeting with Gila, as though it's a memory he'd prefer to forget. His defense to avoid further suffering is to shut everything out.





Hannah describes her memoir as a “Jewish story” and says it’s unflattering. Being a Jew, one can conclude, is to be an enigma. It leads down ugly roads.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you feel sympathy for Lansky? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why, now, does Gila want to talk about Lansky?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Gila’s expensive clothing?

## Vocabulary

expulsion, madras, disembark, terminus, pretexts, crux, metastasized, forbearance, kindred, trite, degrading, murk, stark, flatter, portrayed, lusterless, defiant, candor, conjunction, dazed, skeptical, credulous, definitive, dismissive, exploit, trajectory, congregation, indication, infuriates, rigid, predictability, promiscuous, vulgar, reproach, inherently, indulging, inevitable, peculiar, pistil, lankily, baffled, consignment, negotiated, forgeries, marquetry, spandrels, flanked, pilasters, cobbled, heirloom, impoverished, exterminated, gramophone, reflexive, poignant, indicator, vapid, insincerity, exuded, distorted, dignity, discounted, haughtiness, hostility, immaculate, vengeance, pared, turmoil, patronizing, venture, skepticism, conflate, notorious, intrigue, titillate, insouciant, flourish, induce, hypnotic, inertia, deteriorate, enigmatic, qualms, discretion, insatiable, ethics



# Chapter 11

## Summary

Part 3: Chapter 11: "I Pity the Poor Immigrant"

The entire chapter is an essay, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," by David Bellen. Bellen begins with a list of books he will discuss, all about Jewish Mafia members and activities. The first excerpt is from "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America" by Albert Fried. It discusses how the gangster sees the world as wolves and lambs – the predator and the prey. He asserts that only a few people see this distinction, and the gangster is one of them and is the only one who is honest with himself about it. Therefore, they see themselves as virtuous.

Bellen's essay recounts a story from the book. Meyer Lansky inserted himself into an argument between Benjamin Siegel and Salvatore Luciana (later Charlie "Lucky" Luciano) over a girl. Lansky hits Luciano with a crowbar. The police arrest all three and it is the beginning of their friendship. Bellen points out that Fried's account is an embellishment of another fictional account of the story by Hank Messick called Lansky. The book was part of the reason Lansky had to leave Israel.

In 2001, Bellen's son, Eliav, collects bottles so he can gather money for heroin. He sifts through bags of garbage. He lives in a room with a hot plate, jug of water, a mirror and a lamp. Bellen visits an old tenement in New York where Lansky once lived. Bellen imagines Lansky watching a street fight and wonders why Lansky doesn't leave.

The same year, Palestinians bomb several Tel Aviv locations and again a year later. Bellen can't watch the fighting anymore. Both sides disgust him. His son won't return his calls and Bellen says they are both going toward being homeless. Bellen muses that Prohibition gave life to Americans' fear of immigrants by turning the immigrants into criminals. Their criminality made them wealthy.

For two years, beginning with the torture of Luciano in 1929, the Castellammarese War raged between gangsters with an unknown number of casualties. Lansky's first son, Buddy, is born during this time. His second son, Paul, attends prestigious schools, going on to West Point. He thinks everything is "phony." Buddy is disabled and stops attending school at 15. He has trouble walking. Lansky's wife, Anne, goes mad. She attacks Lansky with a kitchen knife and they divorce in 1947. She goes to a psychiatric facility and escapes, collapsing in front of Buddy. Facility employees show up and take her back. Bugsy Siegel's murder occurs the same year in Los Angeles. Lansky sees himself in Buddy.

Eliav won't have any contact with Bellen, though he is in touch with his mother. Bellen blames himself. Bellen says he's going to make up his own version of the day Lansky, Luciana and Siegel became friends. Lansky is in the apartment he shared with Anne,



packing things he's left behind. The place is a mess. Anne tells Lansky he should take Buddy's friend Vince when Lansky and Buddy attend a ballgame the next day. Vince drives Buddy around. Anne says she hasn't been feeling well. Bellen and his wife divorced when Eliav was 10. Eighteen years later, Bellen's ex-wife gives him the Ivan Schwebel book of King David paintings.

Lansky takes Buddy and Vince to the game. Buddy has difficulty getting around and Vince helps him. Buddy knows Lansky is upset about missing the first man on base. It's Buddy's fault for being too slow. Buddy worries about having to get up again because he will have to disturb the entire row of people. Thinking about it makes him feel like he needs to use the bathroom and he finally asks Vince to take him. Lansky stands instead.

In 2002, Eliav is living in a group home, recovering from drug addiction. He's working in a cafeteria. Bellen wonders if there was anything he could have done to stop the devolution of Israel into conflict with the Palestinians. Mafia hitmen kill Joe Masseria in 1931, Ben Siegel in 1947 and Albert Anastasia in 1957. Joe Adonis dies in an Italian prison in 1971. The United States deported him in 1956. Vito Genovese dies in prison in 1969. They were the various American organized crime leaders.

Lansky goes to Ellis Island in 1946 to say goodbye to Charlie Luciano whose deportation back to Italy is following 10 years in prison. He tells the group that's come to see him off that he wanted to step out into Manhattan on the way to the island, but the detectives escorting him said no. Bellen asserts that there is a parallel between the founding of Las Vegas and "the dream of Israel." Bellen goes to Las Vegas in 2006 to read at the University of Nevada. He stays on the Strip, in the Bellagio. Las Vegas surprises him and he, unexpectedly, wants to stay. Lansky described Las Vegas as "horrible." He saw it for the first time when the Flamingo was only half finished. Work on it had stopped. Lansky tells Siegel he should keep an eye on things.

The Man Who Invented Las Vegas claims that publisher and restaurateur Billy Wilkerson is responsible for Sin City. The book claims Wilkerson started building the Flamingo Club in 1945. He gambled away the money he needed to complete the hotel and casino and Meyer Lansky sent someone to "help." Soon, Siegel presented himself as Wilkerson's new partner.

In 1946, Lansky and Luciano plan a meeting in Cuba, where Luciano will live in order to be closer to the United States. They meet with several other mobsters, Jewish and Italian, who have bankrolled both the Cuban and Las Vegas casinos. Bellen reflects on the night of rich food and ostentatious activities and wonders how Lansky fared. Bellen describes Lansky as "silent" and "inward." He believes Lansky went to his room after dinner, where a Cuban prostitute joins him.

Siegel becomes the authority on decorating as he becomes more involved in building the hotel. He'd watched a movie star try to charm Wilkerson in one of Wilkerson's restaurants. At first, Siegel admires Wilkerson, but it devolves into jealousy. The men begin arguing and Siegel and his mistress revise building plans, each new iteration



more extravagant. Plumbing for the rooms alone cost \$1,150,000. Siegel takes credit for the initial hotel idea. Wilkerson moves to Paris, afraid the mob will kill him.

Anne Lansky appears refined in photographs, but in real life she was “wrong” and “distorted.” King David first sees Bathsheba from the roof of his new palace. She’s bathing and Bellen thinks maybe David was also naked. Lansky and Siegel discuss Lansky’s marriage and Siegel suggests Lansky get divorced, despite Anne’s illness.

The Flamingo is \$2 million over budget and unfinished. He says he doesn’t know why he got so invested in the project. Virginia, Siegel’s mistress, serves them drinks. Siegel feels less attracted to her, thinking it’s the distance. Lansky has no place to return to. Everyone he knew ended up in concentration camps. He has no safe haven.

A woman approaches Buddy in a bar as he sits at a table. He decides not to tell her his name, figuring she already knows it. Sam has given Buddy permission to use his apartment any time, so he takes the woman in a cab across town. Once inside the apartment, the woman tries to put Buddy at ease. She puts on music and undresses and it doesn’t feel real to Buddy.

The Flamingo holds its grand opening, even though it isn’t complete. Guests must stay at different hotels. They use the money they win at the Flamingo to gamble at the hotels where they’re staying. Less than a month later, the Flamingo closes.

A week before the grand opening and four days early, Vito Genovese – Luciano’s lieutenant – arrives in Cuba. He’s been smuggling narcotics in Italy and had worked with Benito Mussolini during World War II. He and Luciano meet privately to discuss the hotel’s grand opening. Luciano guesses that Genovese tipped off the United States about Luciano being in Cuba, so Luciano beats up Genovese. It is the beginning of Genovese’s coup to take over the organization.

Cuba acquiesces to the United States and sends Luciano back to Italy. Ben Siegel’s murder occurs a few months later, leaving Lansky alone. Lansky fears for his life. Castro’s takeover kills the casino business in Cuba and Lansky never recovers from the losses. Several myths about Lansky’s fortune and role in organized crime cause him to lose his bid to stay in Israel. In June 1947, the Flamingo is complete and turning a profit. Siegel goes to the Sunset House in Beverly Hills for a shave, facial, haircut and manicure. He and a friend head to Virginia’s house. Virginia is in Paris, but her brother and his girlfriend are in one of the bedrooms. Someone outside shoots Siegel through a window.

In the Wilkerson book, it states that the matchbooks for the Flamingo list Wilkerson as the manager, which means proprietor and owner. Siegel orders them destroyed, then hires women to black Wilkerson’s name out so they can use the matchbooks for the opening. Thirty years after his death, almost everyone forgets Wilkerson.

Lansky wakes up thinking he’s in Florida, then several other places. He realizes he doesn’t know where he is. It’s dark where he is and his stomach hurts.



Bellen includes Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley here. Eliav has lost a bag and “is feeling crazy.” His knee hurts from walking a lot. He’s high and trying to get across town to meet a friend. He’s craving heroin, cocaine and marijuana. He’s been wearing the same clothes for two days.

Eliav recalls a sign that says “PAZ” in blue letters on a yellow background. He can’t remember if the sign is part of the directions his friend gave him or if the bright colors just make him think it is. He crosses through a hole in a fence into a lot full of weeds and bricks. He can’t remember if it’s the right place. Then he’s certain his friend never mentioned the sign or a vacant lot.

Drugs come through Lebanon from Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey. Hezbollah takes a cut of the profits to fund its terror campaign against Israel. Israeli crime families distribute the drugs inside Israel. The Jewish side began in the early days when the black market sold everyday staples. Bellen says the illegal activity fascinated him when he was a child and his father had to pay protection for his business.

The modern Flamingo Hotel and Casino includes a sign that is a lie that says the original structure was Siegel’s when it was really Wilkerson’s. Bellen visits Eliav’s girlfriend, who declines his invitation to go to a café. She’s waiting for Eliav. He’s disappeared with her money, but she’s concerned for him. Bellen wonders what caused Eliav’s addiction. In 2004, Bellen can’t focus on writing poetry. The fighting continues. He feels alone. He watches gangster movies and the soothe him.

The convalescent home where Buddy lives evicts him when no one pays his bills. The home packs up his few belongings and drops him on a street corner in North Miami. Lansky muses that he has lived too long.

At 49 years old, Buddy is divorced and living in a motel. He hasn’t moved into the home yet. He has a helper, Booker. Booker bathes Buddy and deals with Buddy’s diapers. He constantly asks for more money. They’d met when they both worked at the motel. Buddy had to quit when he lost sensation in his fingers.

Buddy lies in bed alone, waiting for Booker. He’s sweating and having trouble breathing. He’s bored. He urinates in his diaper and thinks about his ex-wife, Annette. He tries to pull himself into a wheelchair next to the bed. He can’t do it and he wishes someone would wheel him off of a bridge or out of an airplane. He needs to ask his father for \$50 a day to hire a full-time medical aide.

Buddy and Booker go to Lansky’s house, but Lansky isn’t home when they get there. Booker feeds Buddy as Lansky’s wife, Teddy, watches. She tells them a story about a friend’s daughter who had fibroids and had to have a hysterectomy.

Booker says Teddy didn’t like him in her kitchen. Buddy says she doesn’t like him, either. Lansky is by the pool. Booker and Buddy join him. They move to the veranda. Buddy is uncomfortable in his slacks and blazer. Booker walks away and Lansky wonders how Buddy will manage his drink. Lansky says Teddy will send Booker back.

Neither drinks and Booker doesn't return. Buddy thinks about his father's penthouse on the Havana Riviera. They'd spoken there about Buddy's then-fiancée.

Lansky isn't listening to Buddy. Buddy is sure Lansky is thinking about Buddy's gambling. That he'd lost so much money then hampers his ability to convince his father to give him money now for his care. Buddy says the motel will let him stay, but he won't receive pay anymore. Lansky talks about the markets being off due to a revolution in Nicaragua. Lansky says he always wanted Buddy to have a good life, but that Lansky can't keep taking care of Buddy. Lansky offers \$800 a month. He doesn't have \$1,500 a month to give to Buddy. Booker puts Buddy into Booker's uncle's car that Booker drives. Once Buddy is in the car, he notices a look of boredom on Booker's face.

The Lansky family gathers in 1985 to unveil Anne Lansky's gravestone. She'd lived alone until she was 74 and often neighborhood drug addicts raided her efficiency apartment. Lansky eats alone in his study in front of the television. He's drained from Buddy's visit. He thinks Buddy's condition is a punishment for Lansky's bad deeds. He thinks about Israel and how the people there made him feel deformed. He writes a letter asking to live in Israel, but received a denial. He dreams about Anne.

The ancient Israelites attack a Philistine camp, killing men, women and children by burning their locked dwellings with them inside. They hack the villagers with swords. One boy hacks at a corpse's head until someone pulls him away. In 2005, there is a temporary cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinians. Bellen and Eliav meet at Bellen's ex-wife's house. Eliav is clean and wearing new clothes. He says he's done with the drugs for real this time. They know the cease-fire won't last. Eliav's treatment teaches him that there is no reason to look for a cause of his addiction. Eliav tells Bellen not to look for a story in it. They hug.

Buddy is almost entirely paralyzed. His father is embarrassed by the care Buddy requires. He asks Buddy to arrive early for family gatherings so Buddy can eat before others can see that he needs someone else to feed him. Buddy undergoes an operation that attempts to correct his condition. Buddy must wear a "halo" as a result and Lansky can't look at it.

Absalom rises up against his father, King David. Absalom loses 20,000 men. Retreating, Absalom's hair becomes entangled in a tree's branches and as he hangs in the air, David's general Joab stabs Absalom with three sticks. David grieves, wishing to have died instead.

## **Analysis**

Like Hannah's memoir, David Bellen's essay "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" is a Jewish story, and also an unflattering one. It's also the story of fathers and sons so different from each other, yet so much alike. It's the likeness that causes rifts in their relationships.





Having grown up in a Tel Aviv neighborhood that gave birth to Israeli organized crime, Bellen's choice to reject crime and become a writer guaranteed him a place as an outsider from his childhood stomping grounds. The lack of a photo of him in a local restaurant that hangs photos of famous people from the area illustrates Bellen's status.

Bellen doesn't respect the Jewish mobsters. They're responsible for bringing drugs into the country and he's lost his son to the illegal substances. Without the drugs, perhaps Bellen and Eliav would be close.

In some ways, though, Bellen understands why some Jews would turn to organized crime. As Lansky states in his court appearance seeking Israeli citizenship, "A Jew has a slim chance in the world." Other groups make attempt after attempt to wipe Jews off of the planet. Those who dislike Jews don't simply want them out of their own nations, they want the Jews to disappear entirely. And so Jews must find a way to survive in environments of unending hostility. Even within the mob, the Italians have little love for the Jews. The Italians work with the Jews because the Jews offer no choice.

The current Israeli-Palestinian conflict begins in 2001 and a year later 21 Israeli teenagers die. On the 21st day of the 7th Hebrew month, there is a feast that marks the day God is supposed to allow Satan out of his prison to wreak havoc on Earth. This will lead to God's final judgment. And then the Palestinians target Holocaust survivors, with another attack "where children can watch dolphins." Dolphins symbolize protection and resurrection. One could consider Holocaust survivors resurrected, their time in the camps a death and their release a rebirth. Who needs more protection than children?

The Mafia, too, exists in a state of war. The object is to gather up as much territory as possible while doing their best to eliminate the competition. This is not unlike the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though with money as the underlying motive rather than religion. Money, though, seems to replace religion in these men's lives and so ultimately, they fight for their own version of God.

Lansky's life parallels Bellen's in many ways. Lansky's son, Buddy, is crippled and has a gambling addiction that's ruining his life. Both men divorce their first wives. Both are unfaithful in their marriages. Both become slaves to their chosen professions. Lansky builds Las Vegas, the gambling capital of America; Bellen grew up with the men who make drugs easily available to Israeli youth. They both bear some responsibility for their respective sons' addictions that ultimately claim their lives – one literally. Neither father can help his son in a meaningful way, and the sons serve only to remind their fathers that they failed at the most important aspect of their lives.

The pattern is much like that of King David and his son Absalom. Due to David's corrupt nature later in his rule, Absalom leads an army against his father. The battle ends in Absalom's death and David's grief. David, this founding father of Israel, of the Jews, set the tone for fathers' actions causing their children's downfalls – the father's sins, the sons' shortcomings.



## Discussion Question 1

What are the parallels between David and Eliav Bellen and Meyer and Buddy Lansky?  
How do they relate to Absalom and David?

## Discussion Question 2

What does organized crime have to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Bellen include the funeral Psalm in his essay?

## Vocabulary

arduous, distinct, distinguishes, putatively, legitimate, vocations, hypocrisy, perverted, virtuous, tenement, spluttered, allegedly, variants, distort, impinge, syndicate, diaspora, expulsion, translucent, schist, relic, punctuates, ravaged, garish, successive, bleakly, candid, commodification, inevitably, compelled, repulsed, seder, razing, declaration, veering, pretense, lavish, dismal, contorted, eccentricity, sheepishly, tentative, fatuous, jeopardize, instinctive, deterioration, improvising, countermythology, rigid, replenished, conflates, triumphant, reminiscent, mezzanine, induced, vertigo, awkwardly, amputated, lackluster, novelty, cauldrons, whorls, apprentice, zealots, impervious, pretense, exile, luster, impeccable, verdigris, cliché, urban, spectacle, lulling, ambient, gamelan, harrowing, contours, berms, haberdashery, opulence, potent, ebony, emblem, chronic, predicament, cohort, obscure, delegates, inaugural, bordello, preposterous, rebuke, gabardine, disintegrated, ostensible, extravagance, excursion, distorted, traipsed, frank, resolute, latent, analogy, beckoning, intimacy, recede, disastrous, coup, discreet, quintessential, perplexity, commemorating, mitigates, convalescent, incongruity, despondency, abasement, obtuse, morbid, increments, stilted, rilled, perverse, vaporous, melodrama, earnestness, consolation, thorax, keen, verboten, articulated, coherence, egotistical, decadent, luxuriant, demagogue





# Chapters 12 and 13

## Summary

Part 4: Chapter 12: "Ghosts," New York-Jerusalem-Tel Aviv - 2011-2012

Hannah keeps the first letter Gila sent her pressed inside a book on Jewish mysticism. Hannah thinks back on her article on Bellen's murder and her thoughts about not wanting to face being a Jew. She thinks Gila's letter is her own words coming back to confront her. The letter caused Hannah and Gila's meeting, which led to the book Hannah writes. Bellen's essay, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," reminds Hannah of something Gila said during the lunch about "the sense of going down ... of being corrupt." From this Hannah draw lines between Gila, Lansky and herself. She says writing the book makes her feel like an immigrant.

A newspaper article in 2011 describes the fraud indictment against Hannah's father. He faces 10 years in prison if convicted. The article quotes a friend stating that Lawrence Groff was having financial trouble. Hannah visits her friend Ellen Teague. They've known each other for more than 20 years. Hannah talks to Ellen, a therapist, about Hannah's father no longer speaking to her. She feels as though her father blames her for everything wrong in their relationship, but she also thinks it's an admission of his own guilt.

Ellen says Lawrence isn't speaking to anyone. Hannah's stepmother has also told Hannah not to take his silence personally. She realizes all of Ellen's patients have similar backgrounds to Hannah's. They all have eating disorders and Ellen has also suffered through the same problems. Hannah doesn't want to have Ellen's emotional life. Ellen thinks Hannah has more to say, but Hannah says she doesn't. Ellen suggests Hannah try art therapy. She doesn't know how to begin dealing with her feelings about her father and she feels ridiculous.

Hannah wants to return to Israel in the fall to find Gila's apartment and talk to the people connected to Bellen. She wants to try to make sense of their lives in order to stop thinking about her own. Then she received an email from Voss saying that Eliav is dead from a heroin overdose.

Rachel Kessler, Bellen's ex-wife, forwards Hannah an email Bellen wrote in 2008 to an editor of a magazine that had rejected "I Pity the Poor Immigrant." In it, Bellen says he saw Lansky in person in 1972 when Bellen was covering Lansky's trial. It was the day the court denied Lansky Israeli citizenship. Bellen thinks what Lansky said that day, comparing his situation to the recent murder of Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich, was poetic.

He returns to his apartment later than expected. He has been at the Dan Hotel bar, where Lansky has been staying. Bellen never liked the hotel because he feels it's for



foreigners. He meets a waitress there who tells him of her dream to move to New York. He doesn't think she will ever see New York, or that he will. They begin an affair.

Months later, the waitress takes Bellen to an empty apartment on Be'eri Street. Bellen later learns it was where Lansky lived when he wasn't at the hotel. He has gone back to the building several times. When Bellen returns home that first night, he calls Rachel's name as she stands at the stove with her back to him. She doesn't respond. When she turns, Bellen sees his own irrelevance. After reading the email, Hannah thinks it's possible the waitress wasn't Gila. She wonders what she'll say to Rachel when they meet. She realizes Bellen sent the email only a day before his death and he had returned to look at the apartment the day before sending the email.

Hannah goes to Israel in December. She wishes she had Gila's photos of the apartment, but they've disappeared, most likely thrown away. Rachel takes Hannah on a tour of Center City, which includes Rachel's neighborhood. There is a mansion there that previously belonged to a Palestinian who fled in 1948. Rachel says the Jew who moved in catalogued all the contents, anticipating the former occupant's return, but it never happened. Hannah disagrees with Rachel's account of events, but chooses not to say anything. Hannah has already told Rachel about Gila and Rachel responded with, "It's an interesting story," going on to talk about how different Gila's life would be now.

Hannah and Rachel go to a restaurant after the tour and talk about Gila, Bellen, Eliav and Lansky. Hannah asks Rachel what she thinks about the lambs and wolves analogy in Bellen's essay and how it relates to Bellen and Eliav. Rachel says what makes all the tragic events most difficult is the rift that occurred between Eliav and Bellen. She thinks its root is in Bellen's "boisterousness" against Eliav's quiet manner. She thinks Bellen embarrassed Eliav and that Bellen was ashamed of his own personality.

Bellen leaves his family when Eliav is 10. Rachel says both she and Eliav expected it. He had multiple affairs and Eliav witnessed the resulting tension between his parents. Rachel says the affairs made Bellen "paranoid and extreme." Rachel cries. Hannah touches Rachel's hand and says she's sorry. Rachel smirks in response. Rachel says there was little inheritance from Bellen for Eliav. She thinks accepting it led Eliav to relapse and overdose.

Hannah goes with Rachel to Rachel's house. Rachel shows Hannah some of Bellen's belongings. One item is an oil painting that Eliav made of his father. Rachel then shows Hannah more of Eliav's art and Hannah is impressed. He also took photographs of people on the streets of Tel Aviv and a quote from Kafka accompanies them.

Rachel's husband, Dov, comes in. Rachel says that the two of them have been going through old boxes as they moved into a new house around the time Eliav died. She tells Rachel that Eliav told her he'd had a recurring nightmare of standing in a room watching his father's execution.

On the news that night, Hannah learns about Jewish fanatics. They attack other Jews whom the immigrants don't believe are Jewish enough. West Bank settlers, the Hilltop



Youth, attacked a Jewish military base. The group is also responsible for attacks against Palestinians. She envisions the group killing Bellen.

The next day, Hannah goes to the “center of ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem,” a slum called Me’a Shearim. Signs warn strangers to stay away. She feels like a stranger there because she doesn’t feel Jewish enough. None of the people there look at her. It’s the third anniversary of Bellen’s murder and the third night of Hanukkah, as well as Shabbat – the Sabbath. Rachel had invited Hannah for dinner, but Hannah had declined. She doesn’t know the rituals.

Hannah returns to her hotel and reads over her 2009 piece on Bellen’s murder. She no longer believes in the theories put forth in the article. They make her think of Voss. Hannah is unable to speak with Voss before she gets to Tel Aviv, so she goes alone to Bellen’s childhood neighborhood. She goes to the same restaurant she went to with Voss the last time. She thinks maybe someone from the neighborhood killed Bellen because he wrote *Kid Bethlehem*.

She goes to the outdoor market and compares it to Me’a Shearim. It’s more abundant, the people more “ordinary.” She walks back to her hotel and thinks about how Eliav probably walked those same streets. African war refugees look for work in Levinsky Park. She passes the bus station where a young Eliav bought drugs. She takes a photograph of a graffitied abandoned structure that reminds her of Eliav’s PAZ sign. She later learns that the graffiti is the name of a revered Hasidic rabbi whose writing influenced Kafka.

She goes to the hotel bar and looks at the photograph of Gila and herself. Hannah feels they are kindred spirits. Hannah learns that Gila worked at the hotel until 1977, but there is no information about what she did between 1977 and 1980, when she arrived in New York. Hannah walks to the building with Lansky’s apartment. Looking at the building, Hannah decides how to end the first section of her book.

Hannah meets Voss at the Dan Hotel. Voss tells her he’s sorry about Eliav. She was angry the last time she’d spoken with Voss because she thought he should have told her about Eliav’s death sooner so she could have attended the funeral, though she knew she wouldn’t have. Hannah says Voss was correct about Eliav being “poisonous.”

Voss tells Hannah his parents are Holocaust survivors. He says they loved everything he and his brother did, and that’s “another kind of problem.” Hannah tells Voss she read his book the year before. It was about his war experience when he was 19. He had accidentally shot a 16-year-old civilian girl, but she didn’t die immediately from the wound. He tried to shoot her in the head to end her suffering, but keeps missing.

Voss tells Hannah that he sometimes thinks about her and she says she wouldn’t have expected that because she’s insecure. Voss says he’s sorry things didn’t work out between them and points out that she left out of the Bellen article the good things that happened between her and Voss. Hannah says she sometimes thinks about him, too, but that the distance makes a romantic relationship impossible.



Hannah tells Voss about Gila. She senses he doesn't believe the story, but that he doesn't believe most stories. They return to Hannah's hotel. They have sex and after, Hannah asks Voss how he could continue living in Israel after what happened in the war. He says the war is the reason he has to live there.

Voss takes Hannah to the airport the next night. Voss tells Hannah that there is no news about the investigation into Bellen's death and it's unlikely there will ever be a resolution. Hannah realizes it isn't as important to her as it once was. They kiss goodbye and Hannah tells Voss they will see each other again when he comes to New York.

Lawrence Groff's trial begins the following May. He and Hannah are still not speaking. She's begun writing the book, which she says they both know is really a commentary on their relationship. The book is a betrayal. Hannah visits Hugh. He shows her photographs of Gila. Hugh gives Hannah a poster he'd taken from Gila's apartment of a 1930s designer with the word "Shocking!" printed at the top.

Hannah sits in her home office and receives a message from Voss asking to Skype, so they do. He tells her about a recent murder. He tells her they are both voyeurs. He tells her he's thinking of coming to New York and he wants her to tell him if she wants him to come. She says yes.

Epilogue: Chapter 13: "The End," Tel Aviv - 2008

A boy tugs on Eliav's sleeve. They're in a flooded room, dark except for two floodlamps. Bellen sits in a chair, stripped to his undershirt, his glasses broken and strapped to his head. There is blood on Bellen's head. Eliav had been outside at gunpoint when he heard screams. Eliav holds the gun now.

One of the boys says Bellen and Eliav are there because of Bellen's ideas. He says maybe Bellen wants to die. He asks Bellen if Eliav's presence makes it easier. He tells Eliav to "show some mercy." Eliav begins crying. He shoots and Bellen's body slumps.

On Dec. 22, 2008, two groups of men – Jewish fanatics – abduct Eliav and Bellen and take them to an abandoned storage facility in Bat Yam. They torture Bellen for three hours before making Eliav shoot his father. In July 2012, an extremist named Sami Orlov, under arrest for conspiring to blow up a mosque, confesses to the murder. He follows a rabbi whose goal is to restore a Jewish monarchy throughout the territory that King David once ruled. Voss tells Hannah about the arrest.

Hannah has just finished writing about the Colorado movie theater massacre and isn't sure if she's going to go to Israel to continue covering the Bellen story. She's tired of writing about murder. She says she sees herself in the murderers, in their anger and "thirst for extremes." Voss is heading to New York shortly after the Bellen conversation and Hannah is thinking about what they'll do while he's there. She says she will go back to Israel, but not for Bellen or Voss. She will go for her own reasons.



## Analysis

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has dedicated his life to making the Talmud accessible to all Jews. It is between the pages of a book the rabbi wrote on Jewish mysticism that Hannah keeps the first letter Gila sent her. Both Gila and Judaism are important parts of Hannah's life that she's tried to pretend don't exist.

Hannah doesn't want to face her Jewishness because of the Holocaust and she doesn't want to face Gila because of the woman's role in who Hannah has become – someone Hannah has said she doesn't like. Besides, Gila is also a Holocaust survivor and was only a part of Hannah and Lawrence's lives because of Lawrence's desire for Hannah to embrace her Jewish heritage and learn Hebrew. Even Voss is a path back to the Holocaust, his parents being survivors.

Hannah's father is no longer speaking to her, and in the midst of this, Voss tells Hannah about Eliav's death. Her own troubled relationship with her father is mimicking the Bellens' dysfunction and the news drives that point home.

Gila's story, too, comes full-circle and connects back to Hannah in an unexpected way through the email from Bellen detailing his coverage of the Lansky trial that culminates in his affair with a waitress who was most likely Gila. Yet, despite all the evidence pointing to Gila's story's truth, Hannah still doubts it. She can't trust. Her cynicism clouds every aspect of her life.

Rachel Kessler, Bellen's ex-wife, is almost Hannah's foil. Though born in America, she embraces her Jewishness so fully that she moves to Israel, marries a Jew and then another after her divorce from the first. Rachel is the victim in the adultery game, where Hannah was the perpetrator.

Rachel's view of Israel is romanticized. The country to her is blameless. Hannah has no such notions. She sees the flaws, writes about Israel's role in the Palestinian conflicts. Yet she offers no solutions. She chooses not to correct Rachel, not to take away her innocence.

Eliav sees his father, as his portrait of Bellen reveals, in conflicting colors. He's the calm, relaxed beige, the father Eliav needed and perhaps wanted. But Bellen is also the negative black and the fiery, passionate red – also the color of love. Eliav's stepfather, Dov, is white and blue when he joins Hannah and Rachel. He's purity and peace. He's brought those things into Rachel's life, the opposite of the upheaval she experiences with Bellen and her son.

Rachel tells Hannah of a nightmare Eliav had of Bellen's death, where Eliav is in the room with his father when it happens. The nightmare hints at a truth not yet known. It's a foreshadowing of facts soon to come to light.

Hannah's assessment of the fundamentalist, radical Jews is almost an insightful, honest assessment of herself. They are "fighting nothing," as Hannah has been doing all her



life. To them, she thinks, she probably isn't a Jew. This revelation comes on the third night of Hanukkah, the Sabbath and also the third anniversary of Bellen's murder. Three is a biblical number, though more Christian than Jewish – three for the Holy Trinity. Christianity is the religion to which Judaism gave birth. Christianity is Judaism's child and they have also turned against each other, like all the rest. Christianity fights for its own, separate identity, its independence from its parent, to the point that it is almost an entirely different entity. The Jews barely recognize it as legitimate.

Eliav is a fan of Kafka, whose writing deals with alienation, parent-child relationships and brutality. It's as though Eliav knows the path his life is on and where he and his father will finally end up.

Voss and Hannah don't discuss their last time together, when Voss hit her. It's a silent apology and forgiveness at once. Later, she accepts a poster from Hugh that had belonged to Gila. It's Hannah's way of also forgiving Gila. Forgiving them heals Hannah. She suddenly is no longer interested in writing about murder, of dwelling in humanity's darkest corners. Letting go allows her to let Voss in.

In the Bible, King David's son dies trying to overthrow his father. Eliav and Bellen turn the tale on its ear when Eliav kills his own father. The result is not a positive one, as it causes Eliav to slip deeper into drug dependency and ultimately causes his death.

It is death that has brought all the novel's characters together. Hannah's mother, Bellen, Eliav and in the end Voss and Hannah renew their relationship over a random murder when Voss calls to tell her about it. Death makes way for life. Bellen's murderers say Bellen wrote his books because he wanted to be a martyr, something that would give him a holy aura. His death leads to Hannah's resurrection, and in a way, Voss' as well.

Before Eliav shoots Bellen, Bellen's glasses prevent Eliav from seeing the color of his father's eyes. Color denotes emotion, offers insight into people's souls. Bellen's last expression denies his son this one last chance to truly know his father.

## Discussion Question 1

Was there any foreshadowing that Gila and Bellen knew each other? What was it? If not, did the revelation surprise you and why?

## Discussion Question 2

What are your thoughts on the mansion Hannah sees on Rachel's tour, including its former and current occupants and the political climate that led to its abandonment and reoccupation? Are there parallels to the greater situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? What are they?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Eliav kills Bellen?

### Vocabulary

mysticism, ramifying, purportedly, fabricated, integrity, ascertain, accrue, provenance, embellish, shrewd, allegations, prudence, reconcile, diminished, disputed, tacit, affluent, monotonous, turbulence, cliché, evocative, disparate, thronged, impeccably, gravely, marveling, proximity, profoundly, scarcely, conjured, preyed, spartan, irrelevance, fluorescent, plausibly, remnants, renunciation, clerical, idealistic, contradictory, disparate, uncanny, predetermined, exuberant, boisterousness, evasiveness, furtiveness, irreverence, gaiety, succulent, idiosyncratic, smirked, bifurcate, bespectacled, prodigy, ingeniously, smites, fanaticism, intractable, cynical, gloating, disaffection, desecrated, encapsulate, corrugated, incoherent, repository, solemnly, shtetl, outlandish, imminent, paradox, prefabricated, laden, strident, pious, loitered, genocide, invocation, perturbed, nondescript, insignificance, vast, deployed, sentiment, pixilated, cynicism, contempt, solemn, incredulous, purveying, instigate, ambience, theoretical, persists, respite, transience, fatigue, deliberate, commentary, predicament, alienation, delusions, psychosis, permeated, vivacious, assimilated, keepsake, procrastinating, morbid, distinction, literal, belletrist, voyeur, clarity, stark, volatile, glinting, martyr, saturating, contours, resonate, swath, dispersion, devised, fascination, identification, vestige





# Characters

## Hannah Groff

Hannah Groff is the main character. The novel is a fictional memoir that she's written about the events surrounding her exploration of Israeli writer David Bellen's murder.

Hannah's parents are Jews, but Hannah has rejected the religion and much of the culture surrounding it. She never learned to speak Hebrew, though her father, Lawrence, wanted her to. It's because of her father's desire to bring Hannah into the folds of Judaism that Gila Konig comes into their lives. Gila is Hannah's Hebrew teacher and becomes Hannah's caregiver and Lawrence's lover for a short period during Hannah's mother's illness and after her death.

It's the affair between Gila and Lawrence that shapes Hannah's life. She's 12 when it happens and it ends when she lets her father know she doesn't approve. She doesn't see Gila again for 30 years, shortly before Gila dies of cancer.

Hannah goes on to marry at 25, cheat on her husband and get divorced. She describes herself as "promiscuous" and says she lives as she does as a kind of punishment for her father, whom she never fully forgives for his transgression.

Hannah grows up to become a freelance crime reporter, which leads her to her first trip to Israel in order to investigate and write about the Bellen murder. Mystery surrounds the circumstances. No one knows who murdered Bellen, and some believe he actually – somehow and improbably – committed suicide.

The Bellen story leads to Gila's reemergence, which leads Hannah to explore Jewish-American mobster Meyer Lansky's life. Through Bellen and Lansky's respective relationships to their disappointing sons, Hannah explores her own strained relationship with her father, who is not speaking to Hannah by the beginning of the novel. They have not been close since Hannah learned about his affair with Gila.

The twists and turns of the intertwining lives also force Hannah to explore herself as a Jew and the reasons she has run from it for so long. She says all roads lead the Holocaust and this makes her uncomfortable. Even Gila is a Holocaust survivor.

Though she never quite answers the question of whether she'll embrace her Jewish self, by the end of the novel, Hannah is ready to begin a serious relationship with Oded Voss. Voss is an Israeli journalist who helps Hannah explore Bellen's murder. He served in a war against the Palestinians years before and says he will never leave Israel because of what happened to him at that time. Hannah's embracing of Voss into her life signifies her new attitude toward her own Jewishness.





## David Bellen

Bellen is an Israeli poet and essayist. His mysterious death – most likely murder – is the catalyst for Hannah Groff writing her own memoir. Bellen grows up in a rough Tel Aviv neighborhood that produces more gangsters than intellectuals. Bellen is the exception to the rule, though he witnesses a lot of crime while growing up.

Bellen begins his career as a journalist and covers the Meyer Lansky citizenship trial in the 1970s before beginning an affair with Lansky's former mistress, Gila Konig. Bellen's wife, Rachel, is pregnant with their son Eliav at this time.

Though Bellen makes a name for himself as a writer, those in his old neighborhood don't acknowledge him. Much of the snub comes from his writing *Kid Bethlehem*, which casts ancient Hebrew King David in the role of a 20th-century gangster. The piece is an indictment of organized crime. It's because of this book that some suspect mob involvement in his death.

Later, Bellen writes "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," which is critical of Israel and provokes the ire of the fundamentalist Jewish community, which also becomes suspect in Bellen's death. Bellen takes a highly skeptical view of both ancient and modern Israel and paints King David in a somewhat negative light.

Bellen's son grows up to become a drug addict and he and his father stop speaking for a time. Bellen is concerned about his son, but doesn't know what to do to help Eliav. In the end, the answer to Bellen's mystery death is that fundamentalists kidnapped him and Eliav and forced Eliav to shoot his father.

## Gila Konig

Holocaust survivor Gila Konig emigrates to Israel with her mother after the war. Her given name is Tsilya, but her mother changes it to Gila, which means "happiness," after they survive the concentration camp. She dreams of becoming a clothing designer but has doors shut in her face every time she tries to break into the business.

Gila's mother develops cancer when Gila is 32 years old, requiring Gila to take a job as a waitress in a hotel while caring for her ailing mother, who lives 8 more years. Gila's mother traded sexual favors for food for herself and Gila in the camp and Gila is grateful. She cares for her mother out of love and duty, but in many ways Gila resents the obligation. She wants to move to the United States and get on with her life while she's still relatively young.

Gila is the link between all the main characters in the story. She has affairs with both Meyer Lansky and David Bellen. After her mother's death, she moves to the United States and begins teaching Hebrew at a Jewish day school in New York City where Hannah Groff is a student. When Hannah's mother becomes ill, Hannah's father,



Lawrence, hires Gila to be Hannah's caretaker and shortly begins his own affair with Gila.

When Gila sees Hannah's Bellen article 30 years after the last time Gila and Hannah saw each other, she contacts Hannah to tell her about her time with Lansky. Lansky is also a main subject of Bellen's "I Pity the Poor Immigrant." These incidents lead Hannah to write about both men in her memoir.

After Gila and Lawrence stop seeing each other, he helps her get started with a career in fashion and she finds her share of success in the business. When Hannah sees Gila again, Gila has just undergone her last bout of chemotherapy and she dies a few weeks later. Gila seems to want to rekindle a relationship with Hannah, but Hannah is still angry about Gila and Lawrence's affair and behaves coldly. The novel never elaborates on Gila's feelings about this.

Gila never seems to grow too close to the people in her life, whether they're lovers or friends. She keeps her distance and lives a mostly solitary life.

## Meyer Lansky

Meyer Lansky is a Jewish-American gangster who's involved in building Las Vegas. He grows up with Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, who's a victim of a Mafia hit, likely connected to the gambling mecca. Lansky manages, through his entire "career," to avoid ever being convicted of any crimes and becoming the victim of a mob hit. Bellen describes Lansky as unassuming, quiet and calm.

Lansky's life begins in Grodno, Poland, in a Jewish ghetto. His family flees before World War II. His grandparents go to Israel and his parents take him to New York City. Being a Jew in America leaves him with few options and he joins with other neighborhood Jews and eventually Italians to become a major player in organized crime. He marries Anne, who gives birth to their disabled son Buddy and declares him a "judgment from God" on Lansky's life of crime.

Lansky tries to be a good father to Buddy, but has a difficult time relating to the boy who has a difficult time just getting around. Eventually, Buddy gambles away all of his money and becomes completely disabled, unable to do anything for himself and needing a full-time caregiver. Lansky is unable to give his son the necessary money to pay for the caregiver. Lansky's shame over his son is internal, feeling as though he failed Buddy but no longer willing to enable Buddy's self-destructive behavior. Refusing Buddy what he needs seems to hurt Lansky, but he does it, anyway.

Anne becomes mentally ill and a shut-in. Lansky leaves her because he can't help her and remarries years later, moving to Florida. He's married to his second wife when he flees to Israel to escape prosecution in the United States, but Israel denies Lansky's bid for citizenship and he ends up back in the United States, facing a trial in which a jury finds him not guilty. He never serves prison time.



Though he's made a fortune from crime, Lansky takes care of the people who mean something to him. When he has to leave Israel, he gives Gila his apartment, which she's able to use to gather the funds to move to the United States. To Lansky, Israel is a mythological place where he's supposed to be safe and protected. It's supposed to be a sanctuary, but the Jewish homeland denies Lansky entry – perhaps another judgment from God.

## Eliav Bellen

Eliav Bellen is David Bellen's son. He's a drug addict who uses his inheritance to open a shop in Tsfat where Eliav sells New Age items. Hannah describes him as looking "spectral." Initially, Hannah says Eliav believes right-wing Jews killed his father. It's later revealed that this is true and that they had kidnapped Eliav and Bellen and forced Eliav to shoot his own father. Eliav has already died of a drug overdose, having relapsed, when the facts finally come out.

Eliav is a talented artist and photographer, but he never develops his skills or attempts to make a career of either. He's spent his entire life wanting a positive relationship with his father, but Bellen's promiscuity while married to Eliav's mother has poisoned Eliav's opinion of Bellen.

## Buddy Lansky

The day he's born, Buddy Lansky's mother, Anne, declares he's a "judgement from God" for his father, Meyer Lansky's, criminal life. Buddy is born disabled, a cross he bears his entire life.

People know Buddy is Lansky's son and they think they can use him. His father has power and money. Buddy takes advantage of his status, but he's ashamed of his physical failings. He becomes addicted to gambling and "dates" (prostitutes), eventually losing all of his money and coming to rely on his father's generosity. Lansky eventually tires of supporting Buddy's vices and refuses to give him more money when Buddy needs it to pay for a full-time caregiver.

Buddy's situation is a blight on Lansky. The relationship between them is built on guilt and duty and ultimately, it destroys Buddy and in a smaller way, it destroys Lansky.

## Oded Voss

Oded Voss is the Israeli journalist who shows Hannah Groff around Israel and gives her the known details of David Bellen's murder. He takes Hannah to Bellen's old neighborhood, explains the complex political situations and introduces her to Eliav Bellen.



Voss and Hannah become lovers during her first trip to Israel. He's a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after accidentally shooting a civilian in the war and having to watch her die because he couldn't bring himself to shoot her again.

At one point while having sex, Hannah triggers Voss' PTSD and he slaps her. Though Hannah knows it's an accident, the incident drives a wedge between them and they don't see each other again for years, though they do stay peripherally in touch. Voss keeps Hannah up-to-date on Bellen's family and news surrounding Bellen's murder.

Voss remains a skeptic both about Bellen's murder and Gila Konig's claim to have had an affair with Meyer Lansky. When Hannah returns to Israel, they resume their affair. She's read Voss' book about the war and now knows all the details. Voss says the war is why he has to stay in Israel, but he agrees to visit her in New York.

## Lawrence Groff

Lawrence Groff is Hannah Groff's father. When Hannah's memoir begins, they are not speaking. They've had a strained relationship since Hannah's mother died and Lawrence confessed to an affair with Gila Konig.

Lawrence wants Hannah to embrace Judaism, but she never does, which is probably a disappointment to him.

Lawrence is an antiques dealer and has made a great deal of money from the business. At the time of Hannah's memoir, however, he's been charged with conspiracy to commit fraud for being involved in a scheme to sell fake antiques for far more than they're worth. Lawrence insists he didn't know they were fake, but the court case is the beginning of his refusal to speak to his daughter.

Lawrence feels like an outcast in his family. His brother took over their parents' jewelry business and Lawrence went off on his own, which his family doesn't like. He's unhappy with Hannah airing family skeletons through her two memoirs.

## Anne Lansky

Anne Lansky is Meyer Lansky's first wife and Buddy Lansky's mother. She changes her name from Anna to Anne to appear less Jewish and more American.

When Buddy is born disabled, she says it's a judgment from God for Lansky's life of crime, though that crime was the very thing that drew Anne to him. She wants to be wealthy and live in a large house in an upper-class area of New York.

Anne eventually becomes mentally ill. After she and Lansky divorce, she becomes a shut-in and dies alone in a dirty apartment in a bad neighborhood.



## Rachel Bellen Kessler

Rachel Kessler is David Bellen's ex-wife and Eliav Bellen's mother. She's an American-born former dancer who fell in love with and relocated to Israel. She gives historical tours of Tel Aviv.

Rachel tried to help Bellen and Eliav heal their relationship, but was unable to do so. Though she's lost so much and had a lot of sadness in her life, she has a mostly positive attitude and serves as a wealth of information for Hannah Groff.

## Booker

Booker is an employee at the hotel where Buddy Lansky is working when his body finally gives out and he can no longer move. Buddy hires Booker to be his caretaker, but Buddy begins demanding extra money. Buddy needs his father to give him the money, but his father refuses.

## Teddy Lansky

Teddy Lansky is Meyer Lansky's second wife and Buddy Lansky's stepmother. She talks a lot and doesn't seem to like Buddy or his caretaker, Booker, but she tries to pretend she does.

## Ellen Teague

Ellen Teague is Hannah Groff's old friend who's a therapist. She points out to Hannah that Hannah could benefit from therapy and that Hannah isn't much different from Ellen's own patients. Ellen's patients are mostly women who grew up privileged and developed eating disorders.

## Sami Orlov

Sami Orlov is the first person charged in David Bellen's murder. Police arrest him on an unrelated charge several years later and he confesses to the murder, giving details and implicating Eliav Bellen as the one who ultimately committed the actual murder. Orlov is a fundamentalist Jew and a member of an organization intent on forcing out the Palestinians and turning Israel into a fundamentalist state. They hate Bellen because he's critical of both the religion and the nation.

## Robby Karsh

When Gila Konig is teaching Hebrew at the Jewish day school, Buddy Karsh one day draws a swastika on his notebook. She thinks Hannah has told Buddy about Gila's time



in concentration camps and that he's drawn the swastika as a dig at her. She slaps him, which leads to her leaving the school – along with the end of her affair with Lawrence Groff. In fact, Hannah never told Buddy anything and he draws the swastika as a joke.

## Hugh

Hugh is one of Gila Konig's few friends at the end of her life. He helps Hannah understand Gila and gives Hannah a poster that Gila owned. It's a poster that Lawrence Groff had given Gila early in their affair.

## Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel

Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel is a Jewish-American mobster. He grows up with Meyer Lansky and the two of them help build Las Vegas into a gambling mecca. Bugsy is egotistical and irrational and he messes up the grand opening of the Flamingo Hotel, which makes him enemies who have lost money. Bugsy dies when someone shoots him in the head through a window.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Color

The prevailing symbolism in "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" is color. Author Zachary Lazar goes into great detail in each scene about the colors of characters' clothing, as well as colors in the background, including wall paint, umbrellas on the beach, the food someone is eating, among many others.

The prevailing colors throughout the novel are gray, beige, blue, brown, pink, black and white, orange, green, yellow, gold, red and cream. Each color sets the tone for the individual scene and the characters' interactions.

Black and white generally appear together and often gray accompanies them. These colors dominate interactions between parents and children in the book, including Gila Konig and Hannah Groff, symbolizing that Gila is a stand-in for Hannah's mother, even if Hannah doesn't want to accept that. As complex parent/child relationships are a major theme in the book, it makes sense to use these contrasting colors that symbolize the darkest and lightest aspects of the world to illustrate the difficulties the various characters endure.

Many of the colors have dual meanings. For example, blue can mean sadness – a feeling that dominates the novel – or peace. All the characters are on a seemingly hopeless quest to find peace while tragedy permeates their lives. Yellow, too, holds a dual and contrasting meaning. It means happiness and joy, but also deceit. Everyone has something to hide.

## Water

Water is a symbol of life, rebirth and healing, but also death. It appears often in the novel, especially in Israel.

All of the characters are on a spiritual journey to find happiness and peace, but they have all taken a wrong turn somewhere in their lives. Gila Konig and Meyer Lansky, two of the novel's more tragic figures, gaze out of their hotel room at the Mediterranean Sea, but they never physically go to the beach themselves. Later, Hannah Groff and Oded Voss – lovers in a later era – eat lunch and look out at the sea, but again they never approach.

Later, Hannah enters a tunnel full of rushing water. She's afraid there, a foreshadowing of what she will eventually learn about David Bellen's death, which occurred in an abandoned building flooded with several inches of water.





In "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," water represents the characters' most optimistic hopes and greatest fears. It represents their struggles to be good people, despite their tendencies toward vice.

## Tunnel

Before leaving Israel for the last time, Hannah Groff visits an archaeological site where workers are excavating an ancient tunnel. Like many of the other symbols in the novel, tunnels represent a journey. One enters through one end and comes out the other a changed person.

For Hannah, this tunnel parallels her trip to Israel. She's avoided facing her Jewish heritage all her life. She believes this is because of the Holocaust, that being a Jew means being connected to that horror. Yet before she leaves Israel, she decides, on the advice of a cab driver, to go to the Holocaust Memorial and face her deepest fear head-on.

The day she enters the country, she's there only to research her article about David Bellen's murder. By the end, she's begun a troubled affair with a former Israeli soldier, visited the memorial and explored ancient sites precious to the religion she's successfully avoided for 40 years.

The airport was the mouth of her personal tunnel, while the memorial was the exit. The journey is frightening, but it's necessary. Hannah is learning that being a Jew is about more than learning Hebrew and attending Temple on Friday nights. It's an identity and a responsibility that she may have no choice but to take on.

## Trees

Pine, cedar, cypress, ailanthus, elm and alder trees appear throughout the novel at various points..

Cedar and pine are both evergreens with religious meanings. Evergreens represent rebirth and are attached to Christ's birth. Hannah Groff, Oded Voss and Gila Konig are all characters who either reinvent themselves or heal their old wounds enough to move on in their lives and leave the past behind. These are forms of rebirth and everlasting life, refusing to figuratively die regardless of how difficult their lives have become. Gila, in particular, reinvents herself and lives several new lives. Gila's mother even gives Gila a new name when they leave the concentration camp. Gila goes from a normal childhood to time in the camp to a life in Israel to two or three different reincarnations after arriving in New York City.

Voss, through writing a book, frees himself of the chains that have bound him since he accidentally killed a civilian while fighting a war. Hannah, too, exorcises her demons. By the end of the novel, she's reached some understanding of Gila's role in Hannah's life.



Hannah has also lost interest in crime. She no longer wants to spend her life writing about murder and she is ready to attempt to have a healthy relationship with Voss.

The cypress is a mourning tree, which also feeds into the idea of death and rebirth, though the catalyst of Hannah's memoir is David Bellen's actual death. Ailanthus is the "tree of heaven." The novel contains a significant amount of death and destruction symbolism. They allude to the deaths and self-destruction that take place throughout the book.

Alder and elm, however, symbolize strength and winning battles. They are the foils to the cypress and ailanthus. The alder and elm stand for the people who make it to the end, who conquer the world that's working so hard to destroy them.

## Bell jar

In the prologue, Hannah Groff is having lunch with her father, Lawrence. It is one of the last times she sees him before he stops speaking to her. On the table in the upscale New York City restaurant is a bell jar.

In the Sylvia Plath novel, "The Bell Jar," the main character uses this item to illustrate that she feels cut off from the world. The novel preceded Plath's own suicide.

While this can easily convey the feelings of Hannah and many others in "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," it also is a stand-in for the experience of being Jewish in a world that doesn't want Jews. Meyer Lansky experiences this in his dealings with the Mafia. The Italians will do business with the Jews, but they won't like it and they will never truly accept the Jews as equals. It's much the same in the legitimate side of the world.

Jews have made their way in the world. They've educated their children and run successful businesses. But much of the world resents their success and works to keep Jews out of the mainstream. Hannah rejects her Jewish heritage. To her, it means the Holocaust. The Holocaust is only a more recent and particularly horrific reminder that, like the character in the Plath novel, Jews will never really be a part of the world. Their only choice is to be strong and fight for survival or give up and stick their heads into the proverbial oven, Plath's suicide method.

That the bell jar shows up on the novel's first page sets the tone for what's to come. It is a novel of people cut off from the world around them, but also from the people closest to them. Hannah's father stops speaking to her, Eliav Bellen kills his own father, Gila Konig resents the mother who saved Gila's life at the cost of her own dignity and Meyer Lansky must turn his disabled son away at Buddy Lansky's moment of greatest need.

## Wall

There is a wall that separates Israel from the Palestinian settlements. It's possible to see from one side to the other while standing on a high hill, but the people cannot cross



it. The literal wall illustrates the figurative walls that exist between the characters in the novel.

In each parent/child relationship, a certain amount of selfishness and expectation serves as a barrier to healthy interaction. Between Hannah and Lawrence Groff, Hannah can't forgive Lawrence for his affair and he can't forgive her for being too open in her books. Eliav Bellen also resents his father for cheating on Eliav's mother and eventually leaving the family while Eliav is still a child. David Bellen, on the other hand, doesn't know how to handle Eliav's drug addiction. Gila Konig resents her mother for forcing Gila to put her own life on hold while caring for her ailing mother. Finally, Meyer Lansky, who worked hard and broke down barriers, even risked his freedom and life, to give his family a good life raised a son whose legacy is a gambling addiction that leaves him broke.

Outside of the families, there is Hannah's interaction with Oded Voss. His time in the war has damaged Voss, while Hannah's need to punish her father through promiscuity and failed relationships keeps her from getting too close to Voss. Gila and Buddy Lansky also never can quite form healthy, lasting adult relationships.

## Flowers and plants

When Hannah Groff and Gila Konig have lunch, seeing each other for the first time in 30 years, there's a white orchid on the table. Hannah is surprised that Gila seems so together and sophisticated. White orchids signify elegance and beauty, but are also flowers associated with birth and christening. Hannah's reconnection with Gila is a rebirth for Hannah. Gila's story, that becomes Hannah's memoir, leads to Hannah's own rebirth. It's the first step on her journey to finally understanding herself; forgiving her father, Gila and herself; and finally growing up and accepting potential happiness and peace.

Ferns and ivy, respectively, represent exorcism and healing. Hannah has to exorcise the metaphorical demons she's been holding onto her entire adult life in order to heal. This also brings forth spiritual imagery, with the result being that Hannah is no longer running from her religion.

## Dolphin

Another symbol with religious undertones is the dolphin, which carries on the theme of rebirth, but also, ironically, harmony. In the novel, David Bellen mentions "a place where children can watch dolphins" as a site where Palestinians have bombed Israeli private citizens. Modern Israel is supposed to be a safe haven for Jews. It grew from the aftermath of World War II, a war during which one group made it a mission to wipe Jews from the face of the Earth. And so the citizens can stand on the beach and watch dolphins swim by while another group makes its best effort to destroy Israel itself, to destroy the safe haven. It is also a doomed man whose son is on a crash course with



murder, guilt and death who mentions the dolphins in the book. Bellen is also a critic of Israel, especially in the nation's treatment of the Palestinians.

## Photographs

During their lunch, Gila Konig shows Hannah Groff several photographs and they end the lunch by asking the waiter to take a photo of the two of them together.

There are cultures that don't allow photos because they believe the camera steals a piece of their souls. The photos Gila shows Hannah are of the apartment Meyer Lansky gave her and of Gila's mother. Hannah speculates during the lunch that Gila is lying about Lanksy, or that Gila is worried her true story sounds false. The apartment in the photos is empty – no furniture and spots on the wall that appear to have once been where pictures hung, but someone removed them. Stark and dull. It's almost haunting.

In the photo of Gila's mother, the woman is already dying of cancer. It's a sad photo of a woman covering her chemotherapy-caused baldness. She also appears dull, her skin affected by the illness and the treatment.

Hannah doesn't want to take a photo with Gila, with whom Hannah is still angry. Hannah's face in the photo is expressionless and cold and when Gila sees it, she realizes that Hannah hasn't forgiven her.

All of these photographs hold a piece of someone's soul. An empty apartment, with evidence of its previous resident, tells a story. Lanksy had to leave it because Israel, which was supposed to be his homeland, denied him citizenship. His grandparents are buried there. He has left a piece of his own soul behind. Gila's mother sacrificed a small part of her own soul to keep them alive in the concentration camp and her dullness in the photo reflects the missing piece. The cancer seems to have taken the rest. And the photo of Hannah took a piece of her soul when she agreed to it and a piece of Gila's when she saw Hannah's expression.

## King David

King David defeated Philistine giant, Goliath, winning the ancient war for the Israelis and giving them the ancient nation of Israel, where David ruled for many years. David gets credit for writing the Psalms and is Jesus Christ's reputed ancestor. He's also a hero of the modern Jews.

However, King David is deeply flawed. He has extramarital affairs, is cruel to his wives and also to the husbands of the women with whom he wants to have affairs. When David's son challenges his corrupt father for power, he ends up dead and leaves David grieving.



The ancient Israeli king serves as a metaphor for the novel's characters and lives. He is the epitome of being a Jew and a lesson in human resilience. He's a hero despite his flaws and has several opportunities to redeem himself.

To David Bellen, King David is equivalent to the Mafia in the 1920s, born from the people's desires and grown too powerful. He manages to alienate nearly everyone who once loved him, something with which Bellen is familiar, having lost his own wife and son as a consequence of his own inability to temper his most base desires.

King David is the figure who has set the tone for centuries of Jews, always at war, always hunted. Hannah Groff thinks all Jewish roads lead to the Holocaust and King David is the man who started it all.



# Settings

## New York City

Nearly every character in the novel spends time in New York, whether visiting or living there. It was the place immigrants dreamt of at the turn of the 20th century. It represents the American dream, but for the people in "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" it becomes a city of frustration. It's Hannah Groff's home, but she's never really been happy there. The novel ends with her lover, Oded Voss, planning a trip to visit her there and Hannah optimistically planning all the things she's going to show him when he arrives.

## Tel Aviv

Hannah Groff spends most of her time in Israel in Tel Aviv, the capital. This is the city where David Bellen grew up and the city where Israeli organized crime began. Hannah describes it as more modern than Jerusalem and a place where someone like Hannah, a Jew who isn't a Jew, can be comfortable.

## Bat Yam

Bat Yam is the Israeli city where the extremists take David and Eliav Bellen and murder Bellen.

## Tsfat

Tsfat is a mountain town near the Golan Heights where David Bellen's son Eliav lives. It's been the center of Jewish mysticism for hundreds of years and is a mix of Hasidim and hippies. It's near the Lebanese border. Hannah Groff and Oded Voss visit Eliav there.

## Miami

Meyer and Buddy Lansky eventually both live in Miami, Florida. It's where they are when Lansky tells Buddy that he can't give Buddy the money he needs to hire a full-time caregiver. It's hot and humid and uncomfortable, yet the characters spend all their time sitting outside wearing suits.

## Las Vegas

Meyer Lansky visits Las Vegas with his friend Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. They're there to take over building the Flamingo Hotel and Casino when its original owner runs out of money. Las Vegas is empty, dry, and ugly.





# Themes and Motifs

## Parent/Child Conflict

Relationships between parents and their children is the main theme of "I Pity the Poor Immigrant." The book explores the main character, Hannah Groff's, relationship with her father, Lawrence; murder victim and Israeli writer David Bellen and his son, Eliav; gangster and one of the founders of Las Vegas Meyer Lansky and his son, Buddy; concentration camp survivor Gila Konig and her mother; and ultimately, ancient Israeli King David and his son Absalom.

Each one of these relationships is complex and troubled. Most of them involve a disappointed parent and a rebellious child, but they all involve people not understanding each other fully, which leads to severe dysfunction and in some cases, premature death.

Hannah's mother dies when Hannah is 12. Lawrence hires Gila, Hannah's Hebrew teacher, to care for Hannah during the illness and after her mother's death. Lawrence begins an affair with Gila, which he tells Hannah about later. Hannah insists her father end the affair and Hannah doesn't see Gila again for 30 years. Despite Lawrence's willingness to sacrifice Gila for Hannah's happiness, Hannah never forgives him, especially because the affair began before her mother's death. Hannah rebels against her father by being promiscuous and sabotaging her short marriage. She goes on to write a memoir in which she says too much about their family and Lawrence doesn't like the exposure. Around the time that Hannah decides to write another memoir, Lawrence becomes the subject of a fraud investigation. The two events lead him to stop speaking to his daughter. Lawrence has wanted Hannah to embrace her religion, but she has refused. She left the Jewish day school she'd been attending and never learned to speak Hebrew, another rebellion against both her father and Gila, her stand-in mother and Hebrew teacher.

The Bellen story is much more tragic and fraught with dysfunction. David has affairs from the beginning of his marriage, woman after woman, until he finally leaves when Eliav is 10 years old. Eliav is angry with his father, while at the same time he wants his father's approval and attention. He doesn't get enough of either. Eliav grows up and becomes a drug addict, using drugs as strong as heroin. The irony is the Israeli illegal drug trade has its roots in David Bellen's childhood neighborhood. David and Eliav stop speaking for a while, just as Hannah and Lawrence do. They've only recently reconnected after Eliav gets sober when Jewish extremists kidnap them both and force Eliav to kill his father, shooting him while David is tied to a chair, beaten, in an abandoned building. An Oedipus complex is a son who wants to kill his father in order to take his father's place. Eliav cannot take his father's place and in the end, the event leads him back to drugs and a fatal overdose.



Meyer and Buddy Lansky have a similar relationship to the Bellens. David Bellen details both in conjunction in his piece "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," the text of which Hannah includes in her memoir of the same name. Buddy's failings are that he's born disabled and he develops a gambling addiction. Meyer makes his fortune through organized crime and being a major player in creating the Las Vegas we know today. When Buddy is born, Meyer's wife calls Buddy a "judgment from God" because of Meyer's illegal dealings. This foreshadows that Buddy will take up just the thing that his father created. Buddy becomes destitute after spending all his money in casinos and on prostitutes, both Las Vegas staples. Meyer finally reaches a point where he can no longer support Buddy's addiction. He feels he's done all he can for his son, and it's time to let Buddy go. When Buddy needs full-time care because he can no longer move, Meyer refuses to give Buddy the money to pay for it. This refusal is the last time the two appear together in the novel and it's as though Meyer has declared Buddy dead, though he's physically still alive.

In Bellen's "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," he tells King David's story along side his own and Lansky's. But in the king's version, the father is the disappointment, having become corrupt. When Absalom attempts to usurp his father, he dies in the battle, leaving David broken. Absalom's story ends Bellen's piece, with the king lamenting that he wishes he'd died in his son's place. In a previous writing, *Kid Bethlehem*, Bellen casts King David as a 20th-century gangster just like Lansky. Lansky finds himself in a similar position, wishing he could take his son's pain for himself but having to instead stand by while Buddy suffers. David Bellen, though, is able to take his son's place – or so it seems. Death, the characters discover, comes for everyone and David Bellen's death leads directly to Eliav's. King David could never have saved his son.

For Gila, things are much more ambiguous. She loves her mother and she's beholden to her. Gila's mother traded sexual favors while in a concentration camp so that she could get more food for the two of them and keep them alive. But Gila is still a relatively young and single woman when her mother, to whom she owes her life for more than one reason, develops cancer and needs Gila to care for her. Gila wants to move to the United States and have a career in clothing design, but instead she must spend the next 8 years waitressing in an Israeli hotel. Gila's mother gave up her pride to save their lives and Gila gives up her life in order to pay back the debt.

## What it Means to be a Jew

Hannah Groff says she has avoided the fact of her Jewish heritage because "all roads lead to the Holocaust." Is this simply a new way to rebel against her father, or is it true? And what does it mean?

All of the book's characters are Jews. Only Hannah has found it necessary to rebel against that, though David Bellen is critical of Israeli policies and actions, something that gets him killed at the hands of a group of Jewish extremists.



Unhappiness and restlessness rule the characters' lives. Gila Konig and her mother were concentration camp inmates, as were Oded Voss' parents. In their cases, Hannah's metaphor is literal. The state of being a Jew led them to the Holocaust. Meyer Lansky's parents moved the family to the United States because of anti-Jewish violence in Grodno, Poland, decades before the Nazi Holocaust began. His grandparents, who also fled Grodno, went to Israel, to their homeland. It wasn't yet modern Israel under Jewish rule, but it was the place they felt they should be, as Jews.

Years later, after becoming a major figure in organized crime, Lansky seeks Israeli citizenship in order to avoid prosecution in the United States. Israel denies his petition, a subtle judgment against his status as a Jew. While in Israel, Lansky feels his religious heritage stronger than he has at any other time of his life. It's a place Hannah has never gone until she has to cover Bellen's murder. Where Lansky feels at home, Hannah feels uncomfortable. The airport screeners wonder why someone with a Jewish name has never been to her homeland.

Hannah answers that question when she says home no longer exists. Israel is a war zone. Innocent civilians die regularly. Like the Holocaust, the victims' main crime is being Jewish. But Israel has always been a war zone. In King David's time, enemies surrounded the nation and the Jews had to fight.

The obvious conclusion is that being a Jew means never having a true home and always having to fight for a place in the world. Lansky fought for his place in the mob. Voss fought for Israel and it nearly destroyed him. Gila wanders from Hungary to Bergen Belsen to Israel to New York. Nowhere is she ever quite comfortable. Buddy Lansky and Eliav Bellen fall head-first into addictions that ruin their lives, Eliav's leading him to his own death and Buddy's to helplessness in a cruel world.

To be a Jew is to suffer. The Holocaust was the ultimate in suffering. Hannah thought she could avoid that by avoiding her heritage, yet she suffers all the time she's avoiding it. It's when she finally lets go she appears to be about to be happy, finally. But that happiness will be a struggle because Voss still lives in Israel and she still lives in New York. Somehow, they will have to make that work and it may mean that neither of them will have a home.

## Outsiders

Except for Hannah Groff and Buddy Lansky, none of the book's characters were born in the United States, but all except Oded Voss have either lived or visited there. Most are immigrants or children of immigrants, both in the United States and Israel. Gila Konig immigrates to Israel first and then to the United States – a double immigrant.

They all struggle to fit in where they land. For Meyer Lansky, that struggle leads him to the mob, where he has a great deal of success but because he's a Jew, he never finds full acceptance among the Italians with whom he must work in order to be successful.



Hannah's an outsider among her own people, but it's of her own doing. Her choice to deny her heritage casts her in a role of not understanding the people surrounding her. Thought she never learns Hebrew or practices Judaism, she's surrounded by those who do, including her own family. Much of the time in which the novel occurs, Hannah is in Israel. She can't understand the language most people around her speak, but worse, she doesn't understand the customs. She bonds with Rachel Kessler, David Bellen's ex-wife, but doesn't accept Rachel's dinner invitation because it's both Passover and the Sabbath. Hannah wouldn't understand the rituals that Rachel has embraced completely, having moved from the United States to Israel because she loves it there. Of all those in the novel, she's the only one who belongs where she is.

Gila is closed to her emotions. She has few friends, and the ones she has, she keeps are arm's length. No one really knows her. Throughout the novel, those who have spent the most time with her question her honesty about having been involved with Meyer Lansky. Even Voss, who never meets her, doesn't believe her – even when Hannah presents him an email from Bellen that seems to verify what she's told Hannah. It's the curse of the outsider, that no one knows the person well enough to judge the person's truth.

Buddy Lansky and Eliav Bellen have famous, respected fathers and both of the sons grow up to be addicts who never do more with their own lives than live off of their fathers' legacies. People are drawn to them not because of who they are, but because of who their fathers are. People use them for prestige or money, but none of those people ever really care about either of them. Eliav doesn't have friends; he has dealers. It's a coping mechanism. Gambling and taking drugs help them feel they belong to something bigger than themselves.

## Addiction

Several types of addiction appear throughout the novel. Hannah Groff is addicted to her own banger and resentment toward her father and Gila Konig, holding onto it like a security blanket. Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel is addicted to power. Eliav Bellen is addicted to drugs, and Buddy Lansky is addicted to gambling.

These addictions destroy each character in one way or another. The characters, however, can't move past what they perceive, at least subconsciously, as their personal protection from emotional pain.

Hannah loses her mother while Hannah was young, only 12 years old. While still reeling from the loss, she finds out her father began an affair with the woman, Gila, who has become Hannah's caregiver, friend and stand-in mother. Hannah can't accept the relationship and Gila disappears from Hannah's life for 30 years. The incident drives a rift between Hannah and her father and she spends the next few decades holding onto her hurt and trying to avoid experiencing more pain. This leads her to an inability to form close romantic relationships.



Siegel is Meyer Lansky's good friend and "business" partner. They build Las Vegas together, having effectively stolen the Flamingo Hotel and Casino project from its originator. Siegel goes out of his way to wipe any mention of the man out of the hotel's history and make it seem as though the entire project is Siegel's idea. His ego needs the power this brings him. The power, or rather the ego behind it, is his downfall. He spends so much money and time on wiping his rival's name from everything that he puts the hotel in financial ruin and the grand opening is a failure. The hubris drives someone to shoot Siegel in the head and kill him.

Eliav and Buddy have more conventional types of addictions – drugs and gambling. Sons of famous and powerful fathers who are also deeply flawed, the men have trouble finding their own identities. Eliav is a talented artist, but he never tries to become successful at it. Buddy is severely disabled and copes with what he feels is a personal failure against his father's successes by blowing money through gambling, while Eliav sinks into deep drug use to dull the pain of his father's role in his parents' divorce. Later, after getting sober, he falls back into the drugs because he can't handle that he murdered his father.

## Ambiguous Morality

Adulterers and gangsters and killers make up the characters in "I Pity the Poor Immigrant." During their affair, Meyer Lansky gives Gila Konig a bracelet and he assumes she's already thinking about selling it. She'd rather have the cash than the gift. But they all rationalize their actions as necessary, justified or at least the only choice they had.

Jewish-American mobster Meyer Lansky immigrated with his parents from Grodno to New York in the early 20th century. It was not an easy time for Jews or Eastern Europeans in the United States, but he found a way to move up in the world, to make money and provide well for his family. Lansky beat and murdered people, stole and intimidated. When he faces prosecution for these crimes, he runs to Israel for protection, believing he deserves it. Both Gila and David Bellen describe him as a man they can't picture perpetrating the crimes he's accused of. He's calm and quiet. He loves his family, feels helpless against his own son's disability and self-destructive behavior. Who is Meyer Lansky, really? Is he this calm, loving man who just wants his share of the American dream any way he can get it? Or is he a cold, evil mobster who takes what he wants because he can?

Gila has affairs with three married men – Lansky, Bellen and Lawrence Groff. Groff's wife is dying when their affair begins, but Gila is also Hannah Groff's trusted caregiver at the time. She puts her life on hold to care for her dying mother for 8 years and she genuinely cares for Hannah. Gila has been a victim of the worst kind, having survived a concentration camp. She learns in the camp that a woman can trade sex to obtain something she needs, as her mother does to get extra food from a guard. That exchange keeps both women alive. Gila needs money and a way to reach the United States after her mother's death. And once there, she needs the right connections to



begin her desired career. The men with whom she has affairs help her achieve her goals. For his part, Lawrence is a man facing his wife's sudden death and a life raising a teenage daughter alone. He's afraid and lonely and Gila gives him comfort.

Both Eliav Bellen and Oded Voss kill innocents in the novel, but under different circumstances. Voss is a soldier fighting a war and accidentally shoots a civilian. When she doesn't die immediately and is clearly suffering, he's unable to deliberately shoot her again to end her pain. His conscience won't allow him to deliberately murder, though the first bullet has already assured the girl's death. Eliav, however, finds out that he is indeed capable of committing an atrocity. Whatever his motivation – fearing for his own life, perhaps, if he refuses – he barely hesitates to shoot his own father. The question is, does David Bellen deserve his fate for the way he's treated Eliav and his mother?



# Styles

## Point of View

"I Pity the Poor Immigrant" offers a variety of points of view. In some areas, the story is in first person, while in others, it's in third person.

The novel is fiction, but the premise is that it's Hannah Groff's memoir. It begins with an explanation, then goes on to tell a story about her former caregiver, Gila Konig, and her lover, mobster Meyer Lansky. Hannah never witnessed any of the things she writes about. She knows them only from an account from Gila. She does the same with snippets from Lansky's life, then David and Eliav Bellen. It's not possible to know how accurate the accounts are. David Bellen's own account of Lansky points out that people have come to accept legends and rumors as facts, so that there's no way to know for certain what really happened.

Hannah she briefly tells a childhood story in third person, referring to herself by name and "her" and "she" rather than "I" and "me." It's the story of the last weekend she spent with Gila. The third person account is a way for Hannah to distance herself from it, as though she wasn't really there or wasn't responsible for Gila leaving.

Besides Hannah's direct accounts of her own actions and those she witnessed, she includes David Bellen's writing as part of the overall story, so that the novel again swings into first person, but it isn't from Hannah's point-of-view.

Hannah says she is writing a memoir about herself by using others' lives and experiences. She explores who she is through their actions, feelings, successes and failures. The multiple, almost confusing points of view demonstrate Hannah's confusion and how lost she feels in her own life. She can safely explore herself as a Jew and a potential Israeli without having to look too closely at her personal motivations.

## Language and Meaning

Zachary Lazar uses a muted tone in the prose of "I Pity the Poor Immigrant." The words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters are calm and lack emotion. Though in another story, this could lead to the reader losing interest due to lack of connection to the characters and story, it works in Immigrant because it a story about people who have trouble connecting to anything or anyone. They are Jews who have become disillusioned with their religion, some outright rejecting it. They are characters who began life in difficult situations and who have struggled against their parents, the very people who are supposed to be their greatest support. The book's tone conveys this feeling.





Lazar focuses on color to set the book's tone. Though there are several colors that appear throughout the story, he focuses mostly on blue, white, black and beige. The Israeli flag is blue and white, but these colors have other meanings as well.

Black and white are opposites – good and evil, dark and light, knowledge and ignorance. Tossing these colors into specific scenes invokes strong feelings in the reader and sets the tone.

Beige is a color of calm and dependability. This color shows up often surrounding Gila Konig, but the irony is that no one seems to understand this about her. She's cold on the surface, a way of coping with her difficult past. Underneath, she loves deeply and is loyal.

Blue is a color of sadness, a pervading emotion in this novel. But it also stands for tranquility, relaxation and peace. The characters are seeking these states, though none of them is able to find them. At the end, the book leaves the reader with optimism that perhaps Hannah Groff and Oded Voss might finally be the ones to achieve these.

## Structure

The novel takes place over several time periods and in different parts of the world, switching back and forth from Israel to the United States. The Israeli sections occur in the 1970s and between 2009 and 2011 with several main characters coming together in unlikely ways. For example, though David Bellen and Meyer Lansky never meet, they each have affairs with Gila Konig, Bellen's beginning almost immediately after Lansky's ended. In addition, Bellen is a report covering Lansky's citizenship trial.

Gila is the main link between all of the characters, since she becomes Hannah's caregiver and Hannah's father's lover after moving to the United States. By coincidence, Hannah covers Bellen's murder and it's this article that prompts Gila to contact Hannah 30 years after they last saw each other.

Though the book is Hannah's memoir, it includes an entire chapters that are Bellen's essays and poems that focus on Lansky and also Bellen's own life, especially his relationship with his son Eliav. This allows the author to tell a complete story without leaving out any essential details due to the main character not being a witness to them.

Additionally, the author split the novel into 6 distinct parts and 13 chapters. This choice prevents reader confusion because the different stories and time periods, though related, don't blend together. It's easy to distinguish whose point of view is occurring in each section.



## Quotes

We don't choose our obsessions.

-- David Bellen (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** The book's premise is that it's a memoir by a fictional freelance crime reporter named Hannah Groff. She sets out to write an article about the death (and probably murder) of Israeli writer David Bellen. The article results in someone from her past reentering her life with a story Hannah isn't certain she believes, but that leads her from Bellen to Jewish-American gangster Meyer Lansky and ultimately to face things about herself she never wanted to think about.

He wanted her blood for the Passover – that's what they said.

-- Meyer Lansky (chapter 2 paragraph 44)

**Importance:** Meyer Lansky is explaining to Israeli reporter Uri Dan why Lansky's family left Poland. A rabbi had found a raped and murdered Polish woman in the woods and local officials hanged him for the crime, citing this as the reason. Hannah Groff, the "author" of the novel, says she has avoided facing herself as a Jew because "all roads lead the to Holocaust." Thought this incident occurred decades before Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany, it's an example of why her fear is correct. There has been, for centuries, a tendency to blame Jews for all the world's ills and to destroy them for the perceived crime.

Unlike Charlie, most of them never denied how much they liked the taste in their mouths of the word 'kike.

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 45)

**Importance:** This quote references the Italian mobsters that Lansky and his Jewish friends work with. Because Lansky and the other Jews have to work with the Italians in order to be successful, they don't like it. They don't like it because they know the Italians hate them. They know that most people who aren't Jews don't like Jews. It illustrates the struggle Jews have had just to survive in the world and the important part Israel plays for them, a safe haven and a place they should be able to relax and not have to pretend anything.

Across from it was a juvenile detention facility.

-- Narrator/Hannah Groff (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Hannah is remarking on the building currently across the street from the empty lot that was Meyer Lansky's childhood home. He lived there when he first met the boys with whom he would grow to manhood and with whom he would start his life in organized crime. It's both ironic and a form of hindsight foreshadowing that this jail for children exists now directly across from where Lansky grew up. It seems as though his fate was sealed from the moment his family set foot on American soil.



Her mother didn't share the soup with the dozens of other starving women in their barracks, with the thousands of other starving women and children outside the barracks. To share would have been to jeopardize their own lives.

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 27)

**Importance:** This passage describes how Gila Konig and her mother survived inside a concentration camp toward the end of World War II. Gila's mother began having sexual relations with a guard in order to gain extra food for herself and Gila. The incident taught Gila that to survive, it was necessary to put herself first and to ignore the needs of others if it means your own suffering. The lesson serves Gila well as it helps her get to New York from Israel and then to become successful in her chosen career.

Jews are murdered here all the time. ... The world doesn't really like to remember that.

-- Oded Voss (chapter 8 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Early in the chapter, Hannah mentions that her friends are appalled that she's going to Israel because of how they perceive the Jews treat the Palestinians. Hannah has asked David Voss why Israeli officials think the David Bellen murder might have been terrorism. Her question speaks to the fact that people around the world focus on Palestinian deaths, but rarely does the media report on Israeli deaths at Palestinian hands. Voss' simple explanation is a resignation to the world's response to the conflict. It is the way it's always been and always will be. It isn't even worth being angry about it.

I had to come to terms with the powerful fact that Israel is physically beautiful.

-- Narrator/Hannah Groff (chapter 8 paragraph 34)

**Importance:** Since she was a child, Hannah has rejected that she's a Jew. She's never visited Israel, she didn't learn Hebrew. All of this has disappointed her father and is partially responsible for the wedge between them. She's avoided the subject, but faced with it now, looking out at the Jewish homeland, she must admit to herself that perhaps her attitude has been somewhat unwarranted. Maybe her religion and her people's homeland is worth exploring.

I didn't want her to die, but obviously her living meant I had to keep taking care of her.

-- Gila Konig (chapter 10 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** Gila took care of her cancer-stricken mother for 8 years. Gila was 32 when her mother got sick and 40 when her mother died. It was the last of her youth and she never married in that time, though she spent some of that time having an affair with the married Meyer Lansky who was going to be forced out of Israel, anyway. The novel's characters all have complex and difficult relationships with their parents or children. Gila's is unique in that she and her mother seem to have a positive past as far as their interaction goes. They've been through the worst together and protected each other. Gila owes her mother for saving both their lives in the concentration camp, and so she willingly gives up a huge chunk of that life to care for the woman who gave birth to her. And yet Gila resents her mother for stealing those years. It's not an easy thought for Gila to accept.



We would always be yordim, never olim.  
-- Gila Konig (chapter 10 paragraph 18)

**Importance:** In Hebrew, yorim means descending or corrupt while olim means ascended. Gila is speaking of herself and Meyer Lansky, specifically. However, the quote could apply to all of the book's characters. They are all on the outside, looking in. They're all corrupted somehow. There is little hope for most of them to recover, and ultimately, only Hannah and Oded Voss manage to set themselves on a path to become olim.

Why had Buddy assumed that Vince would take him and not his father?  
-- Narrator/David Bellen (chapter 11 paragraph 42)

**Importance:** Buddy Lansky is at a baseball game with his father and his friend Vince. Buddy needs to use the bathroom, but because of his disability he needs assistance and he immediately asks Vince instead of Meyer Lansky. A major theme throughout the novel is strained relationships between parents and children. Buddy and Meyer have one of the most dysfunctional relationships of all. It isn't even a question to Buddy that his father won't help him when he needs it most. But instead, Meyer stands to accompany Buddy. Meyer, however, doesn't ever look at his son. It's easier for him to do something for his son if he doesn't face the issue head-on.

Perhaps he's just David, like so many other Israeli men.  
-- Narrator/Hannah (chapter 12 paragraph 52)

**Importance:** Hannah has this thought after reading an email from David Bellen that describes an affair he has in the 1970s, likely with Gila Konig. Hannah wonders if Gila knew the man she'd known was Bellen, whether he'd ever told her his last name or who he was. But it has a secondary meaning. Bellen writes a lot about ancient Israeli King David and contrasts King David's life story with Bellen's and Meyer Lansky's. Bellen compares King David's relationship with his son Absalom and with his wives to Bellen and Lansky's own relationships with their children and wives. King David is a Jewish hero. Many Jewish men bear the name, including the man who served as Jesus Christ's father by marrying the Virgin Mary. To Hannah, it seems, to be a Jewish man means to bear the sins of the father, to be King David not just in name, but in deeds. It's the legacy of being a Jew.

If I go back to Israel, it will have to be for reasons of my own.  
-- Narrator/Hannah Groff (chapter 13 paragraph 23)

**Importance:** At the end of the novel, Hannah Groff says she no longer wishes to cover crime. Oded Voss has called to tell her about a break in the David Bellen case and there's going to be a trial. Hannah isn't going to cover it. The quote is Hannah's acceptance that even flawed people deserve forgiveness and that she can be a Jew and be herself, as well. She can explore this part of her life and she can accept Voss into it, as well. It's time to break the cycle.