

Imagining Argentina Study Guide

Imagining Argentina by Lawrence Thornton

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Plot Summary

Imagining Argentina is the story of a man named Carlos Rueda who is given the extraordinary ability of being able to see into the lives and fates of people that have been taken by Argentina's government without trial or reason. When Carlos's wife, Cecilia, is taken from their home after writing a sharp editorial in the newspaper about children who have been taken from La Paz in a school bus and never found again, Carlos is overcome with grief. However, he slowly learns over time that he has been granted the gift of seeing into the fate of other people who have been taken away in a manner similar to Cecilia's.

Carlos is the head of the Children's Theater in Buenos Aires and has a highly defined sense of the imaginative and theatrical. He understands the importance of paying attention to the imagination. For Carlos, he will fight a war against the generals who have taken Cecilia and countless others away in an effort to "cleanse" Argentina from those that disagree with the government and its decisions. He will use his words and imagination as a dagger of hope against the destruction and emptiness that the generals create during their regime.

Shortly after Cecilia is taken, a principal actor at the Children's Theater tells them that his father was taken suddenly. Hearing his story, Carlos can see the world that unfolded for Enrico's father just at the time of the disappearance. It is as if he is transported from the darkened theater directly into Raimundo Garcia's world. He tells Enrico what happened to his father, as well as his father's fate, which is to return shortly to the family. Days later, the vision comes true and from that point on, Carlos's world is transformed.

Word spreads that Carlos has the gift of finding the fate of the people who have disappeared in the streets. Simply by talking about them, Carlos can resurrect their thoughts and environment at the time they were taken by the government. He begins to hold weekly meetings in his garden, asking people to tell them what has happened to their loved ones. For some, the ending is not pleasant, as the individual is killed. Others hear a better story and are told that their relative, friend or family member will return to them in the future. Regardless of the answer, the power of having the knowledge of what has happened to the individual is a start to solving the question of "What happened..." to the person for the family and friends.

Carlos writes a play at the Children's Theater called *The Names*, which he uses as a vehicle to demonstrate to the community children that what is happening is real. The play is a direct act of aggression to the government and they close the theater, attack Carlos and take his daughter Teresa. Carlos will be able to see Teresa's fate as well as define the actions and fate of Cecilia as well. Although Teresa will be killed, Carlos will foresee that Cecilia is alive and well, fighting hard against her captors.

As the political environment changes, Carlos attends Carnival in Buenos Aires, presumably to glean more information for the upcoming play that he is writing. The



Children's Theater reopens and Carlos's meetings start to occur twice a week rather than just weekly. He helps more and more people until one night, he realizes he has done all that he is capable of doing. While in Carnival, he sees Cecilia and they are finally reunited. Four years later, they will be present in the courtroom when the generals who created all of the destruction and desecration are finally prosecuted, given life sentences in jail. However, the final stories for millions of individuals will never be revealed.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

The novel opens with the narrator, Martin Benn, looking back on what has happened in Argentina's recent past and the remarkable gift that his friend Carlos Rueda possessed during that time. His accomplishments would be easier to discuss if their culture more readily accepted the supernatural, but instead, Rueda's gifts are difficult to talk about and fully appreciate after the fact.

Benn describes a typical night in the garden at Rueda's house, where numerous individuals who have suddenly lost their loved ones, taken mysteriously by the Argentinian government, huddle together to hear what Rueda has to say about the events that took place. For some, the endings are not pleasant, but for others, there are remarkable stories. The story of Ruben and Clara Mendoza are one such example as they were told that their son, daughter-in-law and grandchild were taken, but the grandchild would return to them shortly. Days later, they received a knock on the door and the unthinkable occurred: someone handed them their grandchild, just as Rueda had predicted.

Benn takes some time to explain himself more. He has retired from full-time journalism at the time the events take place. He does not openly attack the regime, but instead writes under a pseudonym for a French publication. Six years before he retired from La Opinion, a woman named Cecilia began working there. Benn befriends her and her husband Carlos over time and they establish a close bond. While Cecilia is factual and hard-minded, her husband Carlos is much more imaginative and metaphorical. Benn sees much of his deceased son in Carlos, and in no time, their daughter Teresa calls him Uncle Martin.

When the atrocities of the Argentina government start happening, few speak out. Cecilia, on the other hand, writes a scathing, sharp editorial about students who had protested about bus rates and were suddenly taken after their bus was taken. Known as the incident in La Plata, Cecilia's words are read throughout the town and her editorial grates on the nerves of the generals who are responsible for the latest atrocities. Her words would not be ignored.

At 5:15 on May 23, 1976, Cecilia's neighbors are going about their usual daily tasks and report seeing her come home from work. By the time Carlos returns from the Children's Theater where he works, shortly after six, Cecilia is not in the house. Later, he will learn that a man named Alfonso Marquez saw men take her away in a green Falcon, and it appeared she is yelling as they pull away from the house. The only thing she will leave behind are some crudites she was preparing for dinner and her glasses on the bedroom floor. When he sees these, their daughter Teresa walks in and he realizes that the government has taken Cecilia.



Benn comes over as soon as he hears and stays with Rueda and Teresa until five the following afternoon. However, the pain and distress of losing Cecilia makes Rueda nearly inconsolable and lost and there is little that Benn can do to help.

Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

Benn becomes a father-like figure for Rueda and his family. Although Benn is not related to them by blood, his voice will be the overriding tie throughout the novel, voicing the events that occur throughout the novel for Carlos and his family.

Cecilia is one of the first people to be taken to a detention center by the Argentinian government. As devastating as the disappearance is, Cecilia is taken for talking out against the government and will lead the way for her husband to do the same. Also, Cecilia's disappearance will ultimately help thousands of other Argentinians who will use Rueda's gift to their advantage.



Chapter 4 - 6

Chapter 4 - 6 Summary

Carlos grieves the unusual grieving of someone who does not know what has happened to his loved one. Benn believes that things would have continued on in this manner, except that a thirteen-year-old principal actor at the Children's Theater named Enrico Garcia lost his father in a manner similar to how Carlos lost Cecilia. Enrico does not show up for practice and Carlos calls home to find out why. He learns that Enrico's father has been taken. The boy does not come to practice for a week. When he does return, he stays late after practice, staring out into the black emptiness of the theater. Carlos sits next to him, suddenly feeling very close to him, and foresees what has happened to his father.

After Carlos is finished telling Enrico about his father Raimundo, Enrico leaves with some hope of his father's return and Carlos feels horrible, believing he has just told the child a horrible lie. However, the next day, Enrico arrives and tells Carlos that it all happened exactly as he had said. Carlos is terrified.

He arranges to meet with Benn at the Raphael, a restaurant where Carlos and Benn frequently meet and what has become Benn's quasi-office since retirement. When Carlos tells Benn about what happened with Enrico, Benn relays that he would have never believed him except that his whole body conveyed the conviction of which he told the words. Benn says that when Carlos leaves the Raphael after their talk, Benn has the impression that he is looking at a man with a special aura surrounding him. Benn is sure that Carlos will use his gift to find his way into the hearts of those suffering in his city.

Carlos returns to work and is highly distracted. He later recalls that he has one foot in reality and another in the surreal. He leaves work on a feeble excuse and drives to the bank by a river where he and Cecilia used to spend many peaceful hours. Now, however, all Carlos can see are the pain and anger of his situation. He stays until he calms down, forcing himself to see the sunshine and children playing. He does not know what his next step will be, but he knows that he is waiting for something important to happen.

He doesn't have to wait long. He is hard at work on a new play at the Children's Theater when Esme walks into his office without knocking. She tells him that he must go to the Plaza de Mayo to see something that cannot wait. He travels with Esme to the square and sees a group of mothers walking silently with signs, asking where their loved ones have gone. Carlos stares for twenty minutes and then disappears. He finds a sign and writes "I am Carlos Rueda. They have taken my wife. I can help." and starts to walk with the mothers. They are all walking in front of Casa Rosada, silently questioning what has happened to their loved ones. Toward dusk, the mother disband and some of them remain behind, shyly staying near him to see what help he can offer them.



Chapter 4 - 6 Analysis

The situation with Enrico sets the stage for what will become the most important period in Carlos's life. He does not know what initiates the visions that he sees, but he is smart enough to relay the information to Enrico without questioning or censoring himself as many others might have done.

It is remarkable to note that both Benn and Carlos are highly intelligent men. Although Carlos is more prone to the fantastical and imaginative, Benn is a grounded man whose profession has been built on relaying the facts of a situation. Yet both men accept the information and situation that Carlos is faced with as if foreseeing the events that happen to people he has never met before are a perfectly justifiable and real possibility.

Carlos is lost, filled with the knowledge that he can help people but not sure how to proceed. When he sees the mothers marching silently in the plaza, he realizes this powerful statement is the ideal vehicle for him to tell his city that he can help people. Interestingly, he proclaims his gift and his desire to help directly in the faces of the generals responsible for the disappearances and chaos of the city. He imagines seeing them take his picture with their photolens and yet continues to march on. This decision will be symbolic of how Carlos silently, methodically and effectively shows his discontent with the activities going on in his city.



Chapter 7 and 8

Chapter 7 and 8 Summary

When Carlos tells Benn that he made a sign and marched with the mothers, Benn is upset with him. Why call attention to yourself, he asks. Carlos responds that in order for the mothers to understand that he was serious, he had to be strong in the face of the enemy as they were. Otherwise, no one would take him seriously.

He plans to have people come to his house that Thursday evening to listen to their stories and help them find their loved ones. Almost immediately on that Thursday, people begin to show up. Carlos greets everyone in his garden, which was designed and cared for lovingly by Cecilia. Her presence is strongly felt in this place and it is certain that Carlos has planned for it to be this way. At first, the mothers and sisters are hesitant, but soon one speaks. For some, he has no response. For others, something will capture his vision and talent and he will immediately begin to relay information about what has happened to the loved one, predicting their fate one way or another.

When he is finished talking, the atmosphere is still. Carlos responds by telling his attendees, "I know what you think. You have to understand that we have left that place where everything is unchangeable. Give me more names." Even Benn is stunned. The crowd should be telling Carlos he is a fake with outstanding intentions. And yet, he believes he is in a place where anything can happen.

The names continue to come again and more stories are told. Some people are scared, torn between not knowing and knowing what will happen with certainty. Not all of the endings to Carlos's stories are positive ones, but for some, knowing for sure that they have lost their loved one helps to provide them with the closure they desperately need. They can begin to heal.

After an hour, Carlos interrupts them and tells Teresa to speak. He needs to find out about his wife and it has to come from Teresa. She begins to talk and as she does, Carlos can envision what has happened to her. He sees her raped and tortured in minute detail. His vision ends with Cecilia escaping through a bathroom window and being found by her guards. She screams "Carlos! It's Cecilia" and loses her shoe in the middle of the road in the dark of night. That is where the vision ends for Carlos. The crowd realizes that it is time for them to go and quietly disperse.

Carlos immediately drives to La Boca, which is where Cecilia believes she is being held captive in his vision. He walks around, seeing parts of what Cecilia must have seen. He goes to a bar and is punched by men who want him to leave, knowing that he is an outsider and does not belong there, snooping so near to their detention center.

Benn sees Carlos shortly after the incident and urges him to be careful. Yet despite this attack, Carlos continues on, and the next Thursday, there are even more people in his



garden. After an evening of hearing Carlos tell stories, a man named Silvio verbally attacks Carlos, telling him that what he is saying is obscene. He fights him, questioning why he would make such things up, and Carlos responds by telling him that the government sees them as sheep and terrorists, doing whatever they are told. His convictions silence Silvio, but he makes it clear that he will never believe Carlos or his retellings of events. By this time, Benn also believes that Cecilia is dead, but Carlos tells him that he is leaving Teresa with a relative so he can go to the pampas to gather more information.

Chapter 7 and 8 Analysis

Oddly, Carlos's visions are a melding of the past and present into one. He sees what happened to Cecilia, but cannot predict her future. However, he can see the future ending for a number of other loved ones for people who come to his garden to hear about their fates. Carlos will eventually see that he cannot foresee Cecilia's ending because it is his visions and strength that are keeping her alive.

The crowd in Carlos's garden should be bitter and reject his stories of the return of their loved ones. However, perhaps because of the unique situation and tense political environment, the human spirit of these Argentinians allows the possibility that Carlos is telling the truth. After all, he is nothing to gain and a great deal of hostility to incur from the Argentinian government each time he speaks to these strangers. Moreover, it will be demonstrated over time that Carlos is telling the truth and the predicted returns of some of the disappeared individuals in his stories will in fact return, giving merit to his words.

The elements of magical realism seep more strongly into this part of the novel. There are surrealistic portions of the novel where the dreams of Carlos become merged with his reality. The elements of the fantastical are often seen in Latin American literature and this book is no exception. However, with Carlos's dreams, he sees information and facts that are based in reality, blending the possible with the seemingly impossible.



Chapter 9 and 10

Chapter 9 and 10 Summary

Benn is close with Carlos, but he is happy to see him leave for a little while. Carlos complicates Benn's life and forces him to think about the government changes and the disappearances. His old life welcomes him when Carlos leaves town for awhile. He wanders one Thursday towards the Plaza de Mayo and watches the march one afternoon. Because there is no sense of the dramatic, few people last long and most leave after a few minutes of staring. The newspapers call the mothers the Crazy Ones and they are openly dismissed and mocked. Carlos returns from the pampas with a story that will glitter with hope for Benn.

Carlos drives through the pampas and comes to a cafe. He speaks with a man named Domingo who asks why he is there. When he says he is passing through, the man accuses him of being the police and asks him to leave. When he says he is there to help find his wife, the tension immediately leaves. Domingo's nephew has also been taken. Carlos later wonders why the individuals at the cafe accepted him so readily, but he soon learns that the pampas is the key to a number of the disappearances in the city.

He continues to drive through the pampas the next day when something in the landscape catches his eye. He pulls over and sees a sign for a home called Esperanza (Hope in Spanish) and sees the owners are Amos and Sara Sternberg. The road is covered with exotic birds that take up the landscape, including parrots, macaws and goldfinches. As Carlos drives down the lane, he sees an elderly man staring at him, who smiles as he approaches. He welcomes him inside for a drink.

Carlos parks and goes inside, speaking with both Amos and Sara, who are in their early seventies. Without meaning to, he ends up telling them both his entire story in full detail. Amos asks what will happen if Carlos does not see Cecilia again, and Carlos responds that he will, that this is his belief.

Carlos takes a nap and then spends the afternoon with Amos, drinking wine and spending time looking around the property. He does not see Sara again until after dinner. As Amos and Carlos talk, Amos tells Carlos the story of their history in the Holocaust and all that they suffered there. They also talk about the importance of the imagination and the power of being creative. At the end of the conversation, Amos urges Carlos to continue telling his stories to help himself and other people. As he leaves the next morning, he sees a strong vision of Cecilia in the trees and runs towards her, only to have the image disappear.

Chapter 9 and 10 Analysis

The trip that Carlos takes into the pampas will have long-term effects for him and his stories. His chance encounter with Amos pushes him to realize the importance of the

imagination and its power to build hope and provide sustenance in the face of utter despair and ruin.

For Carlos and his family, each member will come to visit the pampas in the novel and each will have a unique fate while in the countryside. For Carlos, he receives the hope and push that he needs to continue on despite the inevitable hardships that lie ahead of him. If a couple like Amos and Sara can survive through one of the most horrific genocides in humankind's history, then certainly Carlos can pull on the inspiration of their lives to help him survive what is happening to him now.



Chapter 11 and 12

Chapter 11 and 12 Summary

After losing the mirage of Cecilia yet again, Carlos tells Benn that he no longer feels despair. Instead, he feels a problem of insufficient vision and energy to see what has happened to her. When Carlos tells Benn about the events in the pampas, Benn finds himself fully letting go, giving himself over to a world where anything is possible and giving up his fear of what could happen.

The following Thursday, Carlos continues to walk with the mothers and another man joins them, named Gustavo Santos. Gustavo tells them that he has lost his sister, Marta. Carlos later tells Benn that the anger and frustration in Gustavo's eyes worries Carlos that he will do something absurd and foolish. He invites him to his garden and tells him that the mind of Casa Rosada is no more real than Gustavo will allow for it to be.

A few weeks after this conversation, the mothers decide that more pressure needs to be applied to the generals. They decide to meet in a church. After passionate speeches made by some of the mothers and by Gustavo, the green Falcons drive up and men take nine of the mothers away. No one speaks afterwards and Carlos returns home, exhausted and dispirited. He knows that the capture represents the anger from the generals, but it also means that the mothers have been infiltrated and later that night, he dreams of Gustavo Santos. He is woken by a brick being sent through his front window as a warning.

The next Thursday, Carlos calls on Gustavo to speak about his sister Marta. Gustavo makes up a story about a woman who used to work for General Guzman, the most powerful of all generals. When Gustavo finishes speaking, Carlos is quiet for so long that many people begin to worry, even Teresa. Carlos eventually speaks and with each word, reveals that he knows that Marta does not exist, but uses the situation to speak about the political environment in general. In the end, Carlos speaks about Gustavo himself and reveals that he is wearing a cassette recorder to infiltrate the garden and those who have come here to attend the stories.

Gustavo's face changes as he realizes that Carlos has found out his secret. The crowd turns to Gustavo and asks him to remove his shirt. He refuses until it becomes clear to all that he is clearly guilty of having a tape recorder. Carlos allows him to leave, telling him to take his recording to Guzman and tell him that all they want are their loved ones back. After he leaves, the crowd is changed. They realize that this is no longer a silent protest, but has become a more open and aggressive demand for the release of those who have disappeared. Carlos tells the crowd not to worry; that the power of vision and recording is the right of the generals. They knew about the group all along and there is nothing for the group to hide. Then he continues on and asks people to resume telling him the stories of what has happened.



Chapter 11 and 12 Analysis

Carlos's reaction to Gustavo could have been vastly different. However, in the end, he deftly handles the traitor and allows the group as a whole to portray him as the traitor that he is. They are all fearful of the generals' reactions to their meetings, but Carlos reminds them that the generals have known for some time. It is their job to have vision, to record and watch, but they are not asking for anything more than the return of their loved ones who have disappeared.

Also, Carlos's dreams are becoming more and more powerful. The symbols and actions that he sees in his dreams remind him and push him towards the truth of his waking life. After the shock of the mothers being taken in the church, Carlos is confused until he dreams of women breaking like stones and the presence of Gustavo. Then he realizes who the real traitor is, and with this discovery he is able to handle him the next time he arrives in the garden.



Chapter 13 and 14

Chapter 13 and 14 Summary

After "Gustavo" is revealed, he resumes his original role as a guard who patrols the streets, taking individuals away in a Ford Falcon of his own. When another person disappears that Carlos knows, he decides that he has had enough. He is going to speak with General Guzman. He walks boldly into Casa Rosada and asks to speak with the general. He is granted permission.

While Carlos had expected an office filled with awards, pomp and circumstance, he is instead confronted with a more austere environment and a man who is more like a theoretician, plotting his next move. He asks the general where his wife is and is told that there must be a mistake; if his wife is gone, perhaps his wife left him, but the general has no knowledge of her location. The overall conversation frustrates Carlos and the general accuses him of speaking in riddles. In the end, Carlos tells him that if it is riddles that he wants, he has just one — the imagination. He walks away disheartened and frustrated, but he knows that Cecilia is still alive because he can see it in the general's eyes, even as he maintains that he has no recollection of her.

Benn has a bad case of the flu and misses Carlos for three weeks. When he returns, he goes to the Thursday meetings in the garden. An old man is there named Solomon Levy, who has been sent there by Amos and Sara Sternberg. Solomon tells the story of an incident that happened during the Holocaust. His family was all taken to the concentration camps with the exception of his grandson Avrom. Despite the years that have occurred between Avrom's story and the present day, Carlos picks up the thread of Avrom's life and tells Solomon what happened to the young boy. He survived, got married and moved with his family to Argentina to be near his wife's family. He is living nearby, unaware that Solomon is alive.

Chapter 13 and 14 Analysis

Carlos's talk with Guzman has little impact on the overall plot of the novel, but plays an important role in building the mental state of Carlos. He realizes that the strongest weapon he has against a man like Guzman is his imagination. For the general, the power of the imagination and hope that it can provide can destroy his entire conglomeration and Carlos will use this information to his advantage as the novel progresses.

Interestingly, Solomon's request for the story of Avrom shows that Carlos is not limited in his gift to only help the Argentinians looking for lost loved ones. Instead, he seems to be able to help anyone who has suffered the grief of not knowing the fate of a specific loved one. This gift is more universal and helps to connect Avrom to Solomon.



Chapter 15 and 16

Chapter 15 and 16 Summary

After the incident with the Sternbergs, Carlos begins to write a play called *The Names*. He wants to bring in the images of the birds he saw at Esperanza and give the children a vehicle to understand what is going on in their community. The two people that Carlos works with — Silvio and Esme — think that the idea of writing a play about the disappearances is suicidal, that the Theater is still open only because the generals have allowed for it to be and that this play is a huge mistake. Carlos continues on regardless.

The play opens on a Saturday afternoon. It is a stark play with Carlos playing the guitar, telling the stories of those individuals who have disappeared, depicting them as birds. There are members of the Argentinian government in his audience, as he expected there would be. He goes home that evening tired but satisfied and dreams of Cecilia being freed. Instead, he is awoken by Teresa's screams and brutal attacks to his head until he passes out.

When he awakes, the pain in his head is intense and he hears a woman's voice that he is not familiar with. He immediately asks for Teresa and realizes that they have taken her. He is distraught and in pain; he falls back to sleep dreaming of the individuals who have disappeared — including Teresa — as if they are stuck in a cave of ice.

Chapter 15 and 16 Analysis

Carlos's play is a direct assault to the generals. This act of bravery will not be ignored by them and they respond by taking Teresa. They have now captured the two most important women in Carlos's life, but have not taken him. Perhaps they leave him as a sign of what happens if you attempt to speak out against the government since he has become such a public figure.

The dreams of the ice cave become a central theme and problem for Carlos. It is as though he can see all of these individuals but cannot rescue them and is unable to break them free from their chains. Everyone knows who has disappeared, but officially, the statement is that nothing is happening and no one is missing. In this way, the metaphor of people being stuck in an ice cave is fitting.



Chapter 17 and 18

Chapter 17 and 18 Summary

Carlos is afflicted with the dream for the rest of the week and every time he dreams, he returns to it. After a week, he recovers and his power of speech is restored as well. However, his visions return as well and he can see his own daughter's torture and rapes by the guards who hold her captive. With this vision, he throws the sheets off of the bed and takes a cab back to his house. When he walks in, the house has been cleaned and everything is restored to how it was before the attack, thanks to his friends.

He realizes now that he had thought the generals still had a belief in the essence of humanity, but that their actions told him otherwise. He was naive to think he could create a play like this and not suffer extreme backlash. He follows General Guzman with a gun and decides to kill him. He has the perfect opportunity, but Guzman's daughter races out to meet him at his house and for that reason alone, Carlos cannot pull the trigger. Afterwards, he feels that he has failed his daughter and wife yet again.

For weeks after, he continues to dream about the ice cave and can hear Teresa's screams the same as Cecilia's would have been on the day she was abducted. He drives to various places during the day in an attempt to find them, but is unsuccessful. He meets with Benn finally and wants to talk about his aborted attempt on Guzman's life. He realizes that if he had shot Guzman, he would have been sent to a life of silence and exile. Now, however, he is free to write and play music, talk and express himself. And Guzman's life is a puny exchange for that kind of creative power.

Chapter 17 and 18 Analysis

Carlos is given the ideal opportunity to kill General Guzman; however, he does not take it. In the end, he will realize that the power of creativity and imagination that he holds is far greater than Guzman's life. Carlos is able to express the situation to others and help those in his community, which Guzman cannot take away from him.

He continues to dream about the ice cave, knowing that there are so many stuck in detention centers, although the government says that these people do not exist. He is again suffering the loss of not knowing what to do about the loss of his wife and daughter and is stuck in a kind of limbo.



Chapter 19 and 20

Chapter 19 and 20 Summary

With Teresa gone, Esme takes up the task of lighting the lanterns in Carlos's garden during the meetings. There are newcomers to the garden and the look of despair is everywhere. When Carlos asks them to speak, Esme raises her voice. She starts telling the story of Silvio, the colleague of Carlos and Esme at the Children's Theater. Carlos tells his story and it is not a fortunate ending. Yet another close friend of his will be gone.

After he is finished speaking, Esme and Carlos sit in the garden for a long time. He can see Silvio's body being pushed into the sea and follows him down, down, down until he sees the ice cave again with children and Cecilia screaming for him, but he is unable to understand what they are saying.

The next few days, Carlos spends taking care of Esme until she finally decides to leave to visit her family in the country. He calls Benn and asks him to come with him to the now-closed Children's Theater. The government officials have smashed and destroyed the opening doors of the Theater, which Silvio hand-carved figures from classic children's literature. Carlos is distraught, but realizes that the actions were intentional. He walks in the back door of the Theater, which is oddly left open, sits down on the stage and pulls out his guitar. Then, he plays the haunting music from *The Names* and tells Benn that it was for Teresa, Cecilia, Silvio and everyone else who has been taken so that they know not a single name will go forgotten.

Chapter 19 and 20 Analysis

Carlos loses yet another close friend to the generals, and yet he continues to plod on. This loss is the first death that he has predicted of someone so close to him, but it will not be the last. His response to the loss of Silvio (a highly unlikely choice for the government to take) is to go to the Theater and play his music from *The Names* as a symbolic gesture. He knows that he is somewhat powerless to stop the generals from taking another person, but he can personally stand up against their actions and what they are getting away with by playing his music and continuing to hold his meetings in this garden.



Chapter 21 and 22

Chapter 21 and 22 Summary

After learning about Silvio, Carlos goes into seclusion not out of depression, but in order to consolidate his strength for what will happen next. The next time Benn sees him, he is as strong as can be after the disappearance of his wife and daughter. He travels to cafes and finally finds a job working as a guitar player for the cafes. Esme returns and they spend an afternoon together in La Boca. After they are finished eating, Carlos notices a silversmith shop with the sign "Avrom Levy, Silversmith." He goes in and sees the Avrom from his visions. Unfortunately, he is late for his gig as a guitar playing at the local cafe, but Avrom follows him there and after he is finished around midnight. Then, Avrom tells him all about his experiences which reflect what Carlos sees his vision of him.

As they walk home to Avrom's home, Carlos suddenly feels like he has walked into the supernatural. He sees the first visions of what he saw happened to Cecilia, including the shoe she lost. He speaks with an old woman there who tells him that she heard a woman scream out in the middle of the night "Carlos! It's Cecilia!" just as he had pictured it. She tells Carlos that this happened over a year ago.

Carlos continues to walk with the mothers in the square and in the intense heat, he sees a vision of guards taking turns with Cecilia and Teresa. Without knowing why, he suddenly takes off and begins to run directly for Casa Rosada. He is stopped by guards at the doorway. They kick him down the stairs and brutally beat him.

He holds his meetings that evening in the garden and tells the story of a weak, fragile man who withstands the tortures of the generals solely because when asked to give names of people who have betrayed the government, he simply states famous authors of the past who are all dead. He is saved thanks to his true conviction that these writers truly did stand up to the Argentinian government and will eventually be set free. In later years, he will contact Carlos to hear his stories and the visions that he had while in the garden.

Chapter 21 and 22 Analysis

When Carlos sees proof of his vision with Cecilia, he finally has some concrete evidence that Cecilia is alive — or at least was a year ago. He also knows that his visions of her are as accurate as the ones he has been having for other people. This knowledge sustains him with unparalleled hope. However, it also intensifies his anger and frustration over the fact that his wife and daughter are being subjected to pure torture and there is nothing he can do to save them.

The story that Carlos tells of Thomas Hirsch is an unusual one. Thomas should be one of the first people destroyed by the generals and yet not only survives, but is freed. He



is freed because of his conviction in the power of literature, imagination and creativity, which fits Carlos's theme of power in the imagination. He realizes as Thomas does that their strongest weapon is to fight their war with words and expressions, which the generals cannot comprehend and therefore cannot defend or attack against. Their words and most simple deeds are more powerful than anything the generals can do against their community.



Chapter 23 and 24

Chapter 23 and 24 Summary

Carlos begins to see Teresa's face in the faces of other young women in crowds. Finally, one evening, he asks Benn to tell him what happened to Teresa. From there, he tells Teresa's story and her death. He tracks her pain and torture until finally she is taken with a number of other women to the pampas where she will be shot in the back of the head. Up until the moment of her death, however, she is not afraid because she feels that she might finally be saved after hearing the stories about the Sternbergs and the pampas from her father's stories.

Carlos leaves, taking a train trip to the coast. He cannot escape Teresa's death and cannot stop imagining it. While at the coast, he swims every morning and evening. Each day he swims farther and farther until one afternoon, he nearly gives in the urge to sink far below the waves and drown. He can see and imagine every aspect of it. However, a large wave slaps him in the face and he comes back to, swimming as fast as he is able back to the shore and collapsing in the sand. He realizes how close he came to letting the generals win everything.

Chapter 23 and 24 Analysis

The tone in these chapters change. The power of omniscience from the narrator is lost and Carlos's actions and thoughts are vague. For the most part, Benn can relay the stories and events as they happen, but there are times when Carlos's actions become fuzzy. After the death of Teresa, Carlos's actions are not as clear as other times, most likely because Carlos himself is not sure what he will do next. The near-suicide attempt demonstrates that this is Carlos's lowest point yet in the novel.



Chapter 25 and 26

Chapter 25 and 26 Summary

Carlos returns and tells Benn his revelations during his trip to the coast. He says that he has finally deciphered the problem with the ice cave. Before, when he told his stories, he was in the minds of those who had disappeared and free from the generals' influence. However, every time he tried to find Teresa or Cecilia, he was still in the minds of the generals and for that reason, he could not speak or understand the visions trying to talk with him. They were stuck as the generals saw them, behind a sheet of thick ice.

With this new knowledge, Carlos asks Benn to tell him about Cecilia at the next meeting. This time, his vision extends much further and he can see her fate. Cecilia starts to write her story using the swirls on the wall as her guide for memorization. She feels depressed, knowing she will die there. But then one day, she hatches a plan. She invites a guard into her cell, telling him she needs a man. She strangles him, takes his uniform and walks out of the prison. She walks until daylight and hides under a bridge. She finally goes into a farmhouse named Souza and there is given respite. They tell her that after a month, they will try to send a message out to her husband.

Chapter 25 and 26 Analysis

Finally, Carlos is given good news about what has happened to Cecilia and her fate. He knows that she is in the pampas somewhere with the Souza family, safe from harm. This vision calms Carlos and gives him the hope that he so desperately needs. However, this revelation will also incur some of the most patience and perseverance that he will be forced to comply to. After all, he knows that Cecilia is safe and in the pampas, yet does not drive out to try to find her anywhere. He rests in the knowledge that they will find each other soon in the future.



Chapter 27 and 28

Chapter 27 and 28 Summary

Despite initially believing in everything Carlos said, Benn resists believing the story about Cecilia. He's not sure why, but he cannot accept that Cecilia is alive. But things are changing in Buenos Aires. The march of the mothers in the plaza is growing and they have become an enduring symbol of questioning and resistance, but now there is also a tinge of urgency as well.

The environment in the city is changing. The people who have disappeared are becoming even more lost as the generals are losing their hold on the country. And since the generals are the only ones with the answers, the community is getting desperate, not wanting them to leave without giving them the answers that they need about their loved ones. The generals are afraid and are working to cover their tracks before all of their horrors are discovered.

As Carlos imagines it, the generals are racing around erasing the things that they have done. Carlos now works overtime, offering two meetings each week to hear the stories and help people to find their loved ones. He works constantly to help find those that have disappeared and asks Benn to help him keep Cecilia close to him so that he doesn't lose her.

Chapter 27 and 28 Analysis

The environment has changed for Carlos and he must work harder to help those that have disappeared. He knows that time is running out and that his stories are the only thing that can help people to find their loved ones when there are no answers available anywhere else. Interestingly, Carlos is most desperate that he will lose sight of the person that matters most — Cecilia.



Chapter 29 and 30

Chapter 29 and 30 Summary

Carlos quits his job at the Cafe Bidu as a guitar player. He goes back to the Children's Theater and peels the boards off the opening doors, revealing in detail the damage that Silvio's doors have suffered. He travels back to La Boca to see the old woman and notices that the shoe is gone. The woman had removed it from the window and now hands it to Carlos at his request. Carlos worries that he hasn't had a message from Cecilia yet, but realizes it must still be too risky for her to communicate with him and that she is in the pampas and is fine.

Carlos can almost hear the generals shouting "Nothing happened! Nothing happened!" as the situation changes in town. His stories in the garden are mostly failures now, filling with bones and dust. Benn feels more and more like the ending of Cecilia will happen at any second.

Chapter 29 and 30 Analysis

Everyone is now desperate. With outsiders asking more and more questions, the generals are trying to erase their actions while the citizens are trying to find out what has happened before the silence is permanent. Carlos himself is desperate, but can do no more than work constantly and sleep only when he absolutely must.



Chapter 31 and 32

Chapter 31 and 32 Summary

Carlos prepares for yet another meeting and asks Benn to take a walk with him afterwards. He tells him that tonight was his last night telling the stories, that he has done all that can be done now.

Not long after, the human rights leagues come and start to confirm what the people of Argentina already knew — that people had been taken. What no one had realized, however, was just how many people had been taken. Groups like Amnesty International start to find the trail to the generals' cave to learn more about the people that have been taken. People hear about Carlos and his gift and want to cover the story for international media outlets. While Benn is outraged, Carlos barely hears him. He has decided to travel to see the Carnival this year and asks Benn to go with him. Benn turns him down, but later regrets the decision as the biggest mistake he makes during that period of time.

Chapter 31 and 32 Analysis

Carlos is again outside the normal range of reaction when it comes to everyone else's actions during this time in the city. Instead of focusing on punishing the generals and following what will happen to them, Carlos prefers to return back to his Children's Theater and to writing a new play that concentrates on the theme of celebration.

The upcoming visit to Carnival will forever change Carlos and his situation with Cecilia will be resolved. It is fitting that the entire situation will happen in the backdrop of the Carnival with its extreme chaos and celebrations.



Chapter 33 and 34

Chapter 33 and 34 Summary

Carlos drives to La Boca for the Carnival celebrations. As usual, there are scantily-clad women who grab him to have him dance with them in the street and visions from dreams come alive and walk down the street. Everywhere, there are costumes and songs. Carlos drinks when he is handed a drink and smokes a hashish pipe when offered. However, when he sees the children dressed up in their costumes, he knows that this is why he has come — for inspiration with his play.

He is taken by the rush of the crowd and merges with them until suddenly, a word catches his eye: Souza. He sees the symbol of an owl that he recognizes from his vision coupled with the name that he knows has sheltered Cecilia. He cannot break from the crowd to stop to get to the truck and it feels like he is caught in a nightmare. Finally, he fights his way to a side street and runs back to the truck, startling the man driving it. He demands to know where Cecilia is but he doesn't need the answer. He hears a voice and looking up, he sees her from the balcony above him, yelling "Carlos! It's Cecilia!" and he races to a door, opens it, and sees her at the top of the stairs in the bright light.

Benn says he will always remember Cecilia coming back to life as Carlos had foreseen it. Four years after he finds Cecilia, Carlos, Cecilia and Esme go to a courtroom to hear the fates of the generals. The courtroom is filled with people that he recognizes from the mothers' march and from Carlos's garden. They read the sentences of the generals and yell "Nunca mas!" (never again!) for each of the generals. Guzman looks directly at Carlos and he stands silently beside his wife who is screaming with each repetition. They all return to the Rueda house afterwards and Carlos hands Benn his latest play, *The Wall*. The setting is during Carnival and is a play filled with celebration, which matches the background noise of two boys playing in a playground for Benn as he reads on their patio.

Chapter 33 and 34 Analysis

Finally, the end has come for Carlos and Cecilia. Although he could not envision when they would meet again, Carlos was given enough of the clues to find Cecilia on his own. Fittingly, they are all present in the courtroom when the final sentences are placed upon the generals who are responsible for the destruction and chaos that they caused the Argentinian people. And as the novel began, Carlos continues at the Children's Theater, writing the plays that reflect the times and environment of his city. Fortunately, now the play is one of celebration and joy despite all of the heartache.



Characters

Carlos Rueda

The main character of the novel, Carlos is the head of the Children's Theater in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He has a beautiful wife Cecilia who works for the local newspaper, La Opinion, and a daughter named Teresa. When Cecilia is taken by the government after writing a sharp, critical article in La Opinion, Carlos feels distraught and lost. However, he starts to realize he has an extraordinary gift when he hears one of his actors talk about the sudden disappearance of his father, Raimundo Garcia. Carlos tells Enrico, the actor, what has happened to his father and predicts that he will return shortly to the family.

When Raimundo returns and confirms that his situation was exactly as Carlos had described, Carlos is terrified. He realizes that his ability can help numerous other people, and after some hesitation, he joins mothers of individuals who have also disappeared, marching in the square in front of Casa Rosada (the building of the generals who are responsible for the disappearances.) He makes a sign and marches quietly with them, questioning what has happened to certain individuals who are no longer present in the community. Word spreads about Carlos's gift, and he invites his neighbors to come to his house, stay in his garden and tell the stories about what has happened to their loved ones. For some, he will tell happy endings, while he must predict the death of others, but in the end, more and more people come to the weekly gatherings in order to find out about what has happened to these individuals.

Carlos will directly and indirectly address the generals of this terrible political time in Buenos Aires. He will visit the office of General Guzman, the main general in power. However, he quickly realizes that the words and hope (or answers) that he gives to the people visiting his garden are a powerful strike against the government. His imagination and strength in the face of such terrible actions are a thorn in the side of the government. In addition, he uses his position in the Children's Theater to write a play seen by the community about the disappearance of all the individuals.

Carlos will eventually lose his daughter Teresa to the government and see her death. However, he will also foresee that his wife Cecilia is alive and living in the pampas of Argentina, allowing him to continue on with his fight. As the political situation cools, Carlos goes to Carnival in Buenos Aires and finally sees Cecilia again, a fitting reunion site of celebration and happiness after all of the death and destruction that has occurred.

In the end, Carlos's gift will be the strength and imagination to fight a war against the government responsible for the chaos. He will use vehicles that they cannot understand or comprehend, making his impact and salvation to the community at large all the more powerful and effective.



Martin Benn

The central narrator in the novel, Martin is a close family friend of Carlos and his family. Although the story is wholly about Carlos and his gift to help an ailing community, Martin is the main voice throughout the novel. He tells the story of what Carlos sees and feels throughout his experience, adding his own personal reflections or perspective at certain times. Although Martin speaks throughout the novel, the reader nearly forgets that he or she is reading about events through his eyes. Instead, the novel focuses directly on Carlos himself. It is as though Martin directly translates and conveys to the reader what is happened to Carlos in a filter similar to the filter Carlos is for the people who come to his garden to hear about what has happened to their loved ones. Although Martin is talking, the reader has little interest in what happens with him, instead focusing wholly on Carlos and his family.

Cecilia Rueda

A strong and beautiful woman, Cecilia is married to Carlos Rueda. Martin first meets Cecilia and is immediately taken by her strength and beauty. He then meets Carlos and initially wonders what a woman like her could find in a man like Carlos. As soon as Carlos speaks, however, Martin recognizes the draw and is taken with him as well. Perhaps Martin admits, he even sees reminders of his own lost son Tomas, who drowned. Cecilia and her family will become a surrogate family for Martin and he becomes very close with them.

After a group of schoolchildren are taken from a bus in La Paz, Cecilia writes a scathing, sharp editorial questioning the government's role in such an odd disappearance. Her words are not appreciated by the generals in charge and they take her from her home shortly thereafter. She fights against them at the time of her abduction as well as throughout her detention. Despite the horrific things that they do to her, Cecilia survives. She tries to protect her daughter Teresa when she ends up in the same detention cell, but is powerless against Teresa's fate.

Cecilia will eventually kill a guard and escape from the prison. She will travel all night and make it to the pampas, where she is taken in by a local family, the Souzas. They nurse her back to health and she will be reunited with Carlos during the Carnival celebration at Buenos Aires when Carlos will spot the name Souza and know that Cecilia is there. Together, they will be in the front row when the generals are convicted and Cecilia will scream "¡Nunca Mas!" as the generals are convicted and punished.

Teresa Rueda

The daughter of Carlos and Cecilia, Teresa comforts Carlos when Cecilia disappears. She helps people when they start coming to their garden, setting up the lanterns and being there for her father. After Carlos enacts his play *The Names*, the government will take Teresa rather than Carlos to send him a message, as Carlos himself is deemed too



public to be punished. While in detention, Teresa will see her mother and be victim to sadistic games that the guards play. In the end, she will die in las pampas, but she will not be afraid because she has heard good stories about the farms in las pampas and until the moment of her death, will think she is about to be rescued. Carlos will envision her entire death.

Enrico Garcia

The thirteen-year-old principal actor in Carlos's Children's Theater whose father disappears. Carlos is not sure why, but he can foresee the father's fate and correctly predicts his return as well as the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. It is the first episode that will trigger Carlos's gift to help the families of the disappeared.

Esme

One of Carlos' colleagues at the Children's Theater, she is close with Carlos and will stay near him throughout his visions and situation.

Amos and Sara Sternberg

The owners of Esperanza in the pampas, the Sternbergs have survived through the Holocaust to have an amazing life of peace and tranquility in the wilds of Argentina. Despite their hardships, they consider themselves quite lucky. In the end, Carlos's fortuitous stay with the Sternbergs will help him discover more truths about those who have disappeared and the loss of Cecilia as well.

Gustavo Santos

A traitor who will betray them to the Argentinian government, Gustavo initially presents himself as one of the suffering people who have lost a loved one. He marches with the mothers in the Plaza and will be eventually seen as a traitor by Carlos when he visits the garden, pretending to be one of the suffering.

General Guzman

The most powerful of all the generals and leader of the Argentinian government at the time, General Guzman is the one most responsible for the actions of the government and the disappearance of millions of people without just cause.

Avrom Levy

The young man who loses his family during the Holocaust, Carlos is able to see a vision of what his life has been when his grandfather Solomon comes in to ask him to recall what happened. Avrom lives in Argentina and inadvertently helps Carlos to find the first physical evidence that his wife Cecilia is still alive.



Objects/Places

Las Pampas

The scarcely inhabited wilderness where Cecilia is taken by her captors, las pampas is a countryside that stretches for hundreds of miles. Here, the detention centers where the government takes their victims are located right next to sustainable farmlands and innocent civilians. When Carlos drives here, he finds La Esperanza (the hope) ranch where two former victims of the Holocaust give him more hope to continue on with his search for Cecilia. Teresa will eventually die out in this great, wild countryside although she will feel no fear at the time of her death because she feels her father in the place.

The Garden at Carlos's home

After Carlos discovers his gift to imagine and foresee into the lives of people who have been taken by General Guzman and the rest of the government, he invites his neighbors and individuals from other communities to his garden. Sitting among the flowers and lanterns, he hears the stories about people who have suddenly disappeared and relays their fates to the loved ones. Here is his battleground against the government and their unconscionable actions.

La Plata

The schoolchildren from La Plata suddenly disappear after being taken by the government who does not appreciate their complaints regarding bus fare. This story is the basis for the editorial that Cecilia will write that gets her taken to a detention center and spurs the actions of the novel.

The Raphael

The restaurant where Benn frequents after retiring from journalism and where he and Carlos often meet to discuss events in their lives.

Plaza de Mayo

The plaza in front of Casa Rosada where the mothers march silently, protesting and questioning what has happened to their loved ones.



La Boca

Where Cecilia is detained, she escapes from La Boca and this information is foreseen in Carlos's vision. He will visit La Boca and find her shoe and the old woman who hears her cries, just as he saw in his visions.

Green Falcons

When the generals come to take the individuals away, they are put into green Ford Falcon trucks and driven off. The Falcons become a foreboding symbol of the obvious power of the generals and the sudden disappearance of anyone.

The Children's Theater

The workplace of Carlos, Esme and Silvio, Carlos will hold the play The Names here, and it is one of the most prominent places for Carlos and his visions and his stand against the generals.

Casa Rosada

The office of the generals, especially General Guzman, Casa Rosada overlooks the Plaza de Mayo and becomes the physical symbol of the government, its power and the disappearance of so many individuals

Esperanza

The home of Amos and Sara Sternberg, Esperanza gives Carlos the hope that he will see his wife again and encourages him to tell his stories to the people of Buenos Aires in order to give them the hope or closure that they desperately need.



Themes

Perserverance

When Carlos loses Cecilia, he suffers the grief of a man who mourns the loss of someone whose fate is unknown. When he discovers his gift, he wants to know the fate of Cecilia, but rather than push the situation, he is patient. He recognizes that the right situation must present itself in order for his vision to be successful. He finds it when he finds the mothers marching against the generals. With the mothers' march, their stoic strength demonstrating against the generals provides the right environment for Carlos to present his gift. Although he has patience, he states that he cannot hide behind their skirts.

Even when he uses his gift to help others, Carlos helps others who have lost their loved ones, telling their stories in his garden. He helps others before telling Teresa to describe the situation with Cecilia to attempt to find her. And yet, even as he talks, her story is incomplete and the vision fades. He cannot see her fate and he is patient enough to not try to push the visions just so that he can have the same answers he is able to give the other attendees in his garden.

Carlos loses Teresa to the generals and yet he continues on. Each week, despite the increasingly hostile environment, he hears more and more stories until he finally asks Benn to help him find Teresa as well. When he again tries to see the vision of Cecilia and knows that she has escaped and is living on the Souza farm in the pampas, he stays put. He knows the environment is too hostile for her return and yet does not actively seek her. He applies himself continuously to his community, helping as much as he can until he finally finds Cecilia again in the midst of the Carnival celebration.

Carlos's commitment to his community gives him and strangers he does not even know hope in a time of hopelessness. He is able to tell the stories and silently fight against what is happening in their city with his patience and persistent actions against the generals. Nothing that Carlos does is aggressive or a direct affront to the generals. Despite being the leader of a Theater, Carlos leaves the dramatic behind and instead focuses on the power of his words and actions to fight.

Birds

The presence and symbolic significance of the birds is prevalent in the novel. Throughout the most important events in Carlos's life, there are birds present. In some instances, the birds are in the background or, such as in the case of the Esperanza house, the birds are a more prominent feature.

One of the reasons why Carlos finds himself at Esperanza while driving without purpose in the pampas is due to the presence of exotic birds. These birds are the descendant of the exotic birds that were with the Sternbergs during the Holocaust. They know the



suffering that their relatives endured with the electric fences in the concentration camp and their presence reminds the Sternbergs of where they have been. In addition, the birds themselves are part of the light that stands against the night that was the Holocaust and its terror. For the Sternbergs and for Carlos during his visit, the continual presence of these magnificent birds symbolizes breaking free and flying away from the pain that was that time in their lives and living in the hope and promise of the present and the future. The birds lighten up the landscape.

Carlos will use the symbolism of the birds when he writes the play *The Names*. He uses each bird to represent a person that has disappeared from their city. Each child is dressed up as a bird to float and sit on the branches, calling the names of someone who is now gone. The beautiful birds represent the beauty of the life that was taken from the relatives and loved ones who anxiously await the return of their relative, friend or colleague.

The birds simultaneously express the desire to be freed from the tumultuous political environment that occurs in Argentina during the time of the novel. However, it also symbolizes the beauty of a life that has been taken away. While some of the birds return, others soar away and are never to again return to their community. In addition, they represent how a person cannot be held down by anyone in the government, even these generals, when they have the ability to fly away with their mind using their imagination and creativity to express what is happening to them.

Magical Realism

The first page of the novel sets the tone to let one know that in a normal environment, the citizens of Argentina would not be conducive to hearing someone who believed in the unrealistic. Argentinians are sophisticated individuals who openly laugh at those who bring the fantastic into their world. And yet, when Carlos discovers his gift, there are hundreds of people who believe him and believe in his stories. Why?

When Carlos first discovers his gift of the stories with Enrico, he is terrified. He does not know why he has told the boy such a lie and when the lie turns out to be the truth, Carlos realizes that the supernatural is upon him. He is scared. Even Benn, an intellectual journalist who has built his life on facts and his lifestyle on cynicism, recognizes that he believes in Carlos and questions why this belief came so easily to him.

Carlos recognizes that what he has to offer the community will not be easily accepted. His actions of marching with the mothers is just as important as his stories in order to show them how strong he is and how serious commitment it is. When they see how serious he is, perhaps that helps to set the tone for the mothers and others to accept his stories. In addition, no matter how unrealistic or improbable these stories might be, when facts about the individuals that he predicts comes true, more credibility is given to these stories.



In addition, when Carlos tries to track down Cecilia, he merges the realistic and his visions together. He experiences surrealistic moments when his visions blend with what he is currently experiencing. Simply walking down the street, Carlos will have visions of Cecilia. While marching with the mothers after Teresa's disappearance, he explicitly sees their torture. His life becomes a blur and merging of the real and concrete to the fantastical and surreal.

Would Carlos have been able to find Cecilia if he had not had his visions? Would Teresa have had a sense of calm despite the terror of her situation if Carlos had not told her the stories about the pampas? Would Solomon have been able to find Avrom and any other number of reunited relatives without Carlos's stories? No. The elements of magical realism, blurring the stories and impossible with the daily events in the city play a crucial role for these individuals. Perhaps the stories would never have been believed in a "regular" political environment, but this cynicism is suspended due to the extraordinary political situation and disappearances of everyday individuals. For this reason, Carlos and his elevated sense of the supernatural offer a solution and hope to the individuals suffering under the grief of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones.



Style

Point of View

The overall perspective of the novel changes as different events occur. For most of the novel, Martin Benn serves as the narrator and talks directly to the reader. He relays the events as they happened in the past. However, Benn is a limited narrator. He loses much of his omniscience throughout the novel when certain events occur. When he does not know what Carlos was thinking during a specific moment of the novel, he will admit to not knowing what was going on in Carlos's mind.

However, despite this acknowledgment in a lack of perspective in a specific situation, Benn's lack of knowledge does not limit the reader's experience or understanding of the event in the overall plot. Carlos never speaks to the reader. Instead, Benn fully controls the novel for the most of the plot and tells the reader as much as he knows. In addition, he provides dramatic foreshadowing at certain parts of the novel, such as his statement that one of his biggest regrets is not going to Carnival with Carlos before the reader knows what events transpire for Carlos during the Carnival celebration.

Setting

The setting of the novel is held mainly in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In addition, Carlos will travel to nearby locations like La Boca and the pampas to help solve the mystery as to what has happened to his wife Cecilia.

It is important that the setting of the novel is in the same location as where the generals who are responsible for the chaos and disappearances. Here, Carlos is in the lion's den, and when his gift is discovered, he can physically see the generals who are denying their involvement in the worst atrocities of their citizens. In addition, it's important to note that in a regular situation, this city would never accept the fantastical elements of Carlos's stories, whereas a more rural environment might be more prone to accepting the supernatural elements at face value. However, the horror of the situation has made this city more likely to believe Carlos and what he has to say about their loved ones.

In La Boca, Carlos has a number of revelations. He believes that Cecilia ran away to this location after her first escape, but has no physical proof of the fact until an unlikely encounter with Avrom Levy. Walking back to his home, he sees the shoe and atmosphere that he saw in his visions. In addition, La Boca provides Carlos with another creative outlet (his guitar playing) after he loses his job at the Children's Theater.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is straightforward and clear. During the stories, however, more details and descriptive elements are brought in to give the reader the feeling that



they have left the realistic and entered into a world where the supernatural is more probable.

There are existential elements in the story, and these dream-like situations are best shown through the language used. These magical scenes add to the otherworldly elements of the novel and with Carlos's gifts in general. After all, Carlos is straddling the border between the realistic and the imaginative and these situations are best shown through the language used. Also, during key points of the story, such as when he confronts General Guzman or when he describes Teresa's death, Carlos seems to nearly lose the power of speech. In this way, his imagination takes over and he is left to understand things in a more descriptive, imaginative flair.

Structure

The structure of the novel is linear for the most part. However, Benn serves as the narrator, and throughout the novel he is essentially recalling the events that happened during this unique time in Argentina's history. For this reason, he recalls as much as he can during the important events of the novel, but when he does not have all of the knowledge, he will say that he does not know what Carlos was thinking during specific times.

Carlos's events are told in a linear fashion, but there are moments when the realistic events in his life mingle with the visions of Teresa or Cecilia, which may have happened in the past. In addition, the stories that Carlos tells will walk through the entire life of an individual. In this way, it is as though the linear path of the story bends so that Carlos can see the past, present and future fate of the person at once.



Quotes

"Our city is like a sophisticated dowager whose soul feeds on cynicism, a place where the mere mention of the unknown and unknowable occasions peals of bitter laughter." Chap. 1, p. 1

"Reading it reminded me of a stone sculpture. I could feel the rough texture, see the chisel marks, and I knew it wouldn't be ignored." Chap. 2, p. 20

" 'That's what has become of Argentina,' he said bitterly. 'A house full of tears.'" Chap. 2, p. 21

"Their familiar eyes are translucent, allowing you inside. But with tragedy, it's different. The irises grow darker, become more expressive, the feeling so concentrated that you wonder if it isn't the eyes, after all, which are the true seat of understanding." Chap. 3, p. 25

"Carlos suddenly felt very close to Enrico, as if he'd entered the boy's mind, and it was then, with no warning, no intimation of any kind, that the story began to unfold in his imagination." Chap. 3, p. 28

"I'm surprised by the speed with which both of us — two normal, intelligent men, accepted this deviation from reality." Chap. 5, p. 35

"They came down slowly, some running frantically in the air, and among the screams he recognized Cecilia's voice, and saw her falling slowly, slowly, her clothes coming off, dress, bra and underwear floating like pieces of a torn parachute above the white body that disappeared into the river flowing quietly under the black sky." Chap. 7, p.53

"Only a few hours away from the city, he forgot its modernity and the arrogance of its buildings." Chap. 10, p. 72

" He writes of 'The magnificent cause of being. The imagination, The one reality in this imagined world.' Esperanza is daylight to that night, the proof of the nightmare and our imagination." Chap. 10, p. 79

"The general was a theoretician who devised his plans in the pristine atmosphere of a monk's cell." Chap. 13, p.105

"He realized that all along he had held to a belief in the generals' essential humanity, even when he heard the awful stories from the people in his garden, even when he had to see what happened as he entered those stories and tried to change their direction." Chap. 17, p. 131

"It was better to leave them as they were rather than pretend that Alice retained her innocence, the Wizard his spritely walk." Chap. 29, p. 195



Topics for Discussion

Analyze the consistent dream Carlos has of an ice cave with the disappeared individuals stuck inside. What does this dream signify?

Explain the importance of Carlos's trip to the pampas. Why does he go there and what does he find that is so significant for his future actions?

Why are birds such a prominent feature in the novel? What do they symbolize?

How does Carlos fight against General Guzman and the others? Is he successful?

Why do you think that Carlos's visions of what has happened to the disappeared individuals is so readily accepted by Benn and the others? Do you think they would have been as easily accepted in another political environment?

Why do you think that the generals take Teresa and Silvio after Carlos presents his play *The Names* rather than taking Carlos himself?

What role does Benn play in the novel other than narrator? What significance does his perspective give to the novel?