

In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash Study Guide

**In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash by Jean
Shepherd**

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Chapter 1, Meet Flick the Friendly Bartender

Chapter 1, Meet Flick the Friendly Bartender Summary

The first chapter opens with a description of Ralph Parker's cab ride as he returns to his hometown of Hohman, Indiana. He describes the Midwestern town as a simple city filled with mills, plants and freight yards. According to Ralph, "social life is found in Bowling halls or Union halls or beer halls, not to mention dance halls and pool parlors." He describes Hohman's harsh winters and equally extreme summers. Ralph explains that Hohman is a place people never really come to, "but mostly want to leave." The cab driver immediately and correctly surmises that his passenger is from out of town. Ralph confirms that he now resides in New York, and the ride ends near Flick's Tavern.

The author enters the bar and orders a drink. His childhood friend, Flick, is tending the bar, but does not immediately recognize his new visitor. When asked, "Don't you remember me?" Flick suspiciously inspects his new patron. Once he recognizes his old pal, the two men slap each other on the back and celebrate their reunion. Ralph explains that he is visiting Hohman to write a piece for a magazine about "The Return Of the Native To The Indiana Mill Town." Ralph and Flick grow nostalgic, and begin to reminisce about old acquaintances from years past.

Ralph notices that the bar is decorated for the holidays, and his mind begins to wander. Recalling a Christmas long ago, Ralph suddenly asks Flick about an old BB gun he once owned. Flick confirms that he still has the gun. Ralph then begins to recount a meeting with an odd woman at the Automat in New York. As the woman eats her lunch, he notices that she is wearing a button that reads, 'Disarm the Toy Industry.' Flick is unsure of the button's meaning, but Ralph believes the woman is referring to BB guns. This recollection reminds him of the BB gun of his own childhood, received as a Christmas present.

Chapter 1, Meet Flick the Friendly Bartender Analysis

This chapter is important for several reasons. It introduces two key settings - Hohman, Indiana, and New York. The description of Hohman as a "Northern Indiana mill-town" sets the tone for nearly all of the upcoming stories, in which the Midwestern mindset will play a huge role. Flick is an effective counterpoint as a vehicle for Ralph's storytelling. Shepherd's style is very engaging, as though he really is simply sitting at a bar and preparing to entertain his audience with a great story. The author's use of foreshadowing prepares the reader for what promises to be an entertaining story in the next chapter.



Chapter 2, Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid

Chapter 2, Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid Summary

This story opens with Ralph's recollection of his encounter with the woman at the Automat. He is eating chicken potpie when he encounters the woman with the strange 'Disarm the Toy Industry' button. When he asks her about it, she exclaims, "It's an outrage the way the toymakers are forcing the implements of blasphemous War on the innocent children, the Pure in Spirit, the tiny babes who are helpless and know no better!" She hands Ralph a pamphlet that explains her views, and glares at him when she spies the remnants of his lunch, crying out, "Those who eat meat, the flesh of our fellow creatures, the innocent slaughtered lamb of the field, are doing the work of the Devil!" She then spins on her heel and storms out of the building. Ralph is left to reflect on her words and their meaning. He ponders Man's desire for weapons, and begins to tell a story about the year that he set his sites on an Official Red Ryder Carbine Action Two-Hundred Shot Range Model Air Rifle.

As a child, Ralph is a devoted reader of Open Road for Boys, a popular periodical for boys his age. It is in this very magazine that Ralph first discovers the object of his true heart's desire. Heroic character Red Ryder leaps out of a three-color, full-page back cover ad, extolling the virtues of the Red Ryder BB gun. Red Ryder explains that the rifle pictured is just like the one he uses during range wars when he needs to chase rustlers and other bad guys. Young Ralph becomes obsessed with the gun, and desperately wants his parents to buy him one for Christmas. He fantasizes about vanquishing villains and saving his family from wild animals and other various forms of Evil found lurking in the snow banks in the dead of a Hohman winter.

Ralph explains the treacherous conditions that schoolchildren endure in the freezing Midwest. Parents bundle their little ones in endless layers of clothing in order to protect them during the perilous walk to the Warren G. Harding School. As Ralph explains, it is a hardier time, and no one ever considers staying home. Ralph's teacher, Miss Bodkin, is pretty hardy herself. On his daily journey, Ralph comforts himself that Christmas is coming. He becomes more and more excited as the day draws nearer. He is also distracted by exciting adventures, like his trip to see Santa Claus at Goldblatt's department store.

Decorated to the hilt for the holidays, Goldblatt's is truly a wondrous place for a child. Ralph and his family drink in the sight of the Seven Dwarfs, Snow White, Santa, and Mrs. Claus, all on musical display within the enchanting store. When it is Ralph's turn to tell Santa what he wants for Christmas, Ralph blurts out his secret desire for a Red Ryder BB gun. Santa echoes Ralph's mother's sentiment by admonishing the boy that he will shoot his eye out. Traumatized by the old saint's words, Ralph resigns himself to



the fact that his dreams as a Red Ryder Rescuer may tragically never be realized. When Ralph writes a theme on what he wants for Christmas, Miss Bodkin confirms his fears by repeating the same concerns about his soon-to-be-lost eye.

When Christmas Eve finally arrives, Ralph's family begins opening the presents nestled under the tree. Ralph is determined not to let his disappointment show. Expressing forced delight at the presents he receives, he mourns the loss of the beloved rifle he never had. Then suddenly, his father points out that one final present remains unopened. As soon as Ralph sees the package, he knows exactly what is inside. When he tears open the package, his heart is full. He is finally the proud owner of an Official Red Ryder Carbine Action Two-Hundred Shot Range Model Air Rifle. His life is now complete.

Ralph awakens early on Christmas Day in order to try out his new prized possession. He lines up a target, and pulls the trigger. Nothing happens. Then suddenly, the gun fires, and the ricocheting BB knocks Ralph's glasses off of his nose and tosses them into the deep snow. His face is also injured and bleeding. The BB misses his eye by less than an inch, and Ralph is terrified that his parents will take the revered weapon away from him. He quickly crafts a story about a runaway icicle that hit the gun and caused the stock to glance off of his cheek, breaking his glasses and cutting his face. Gripped with fear and crying, Ralph relays the story to his concerned mother. To Ralph's surprise, she believes him! His gun is safe to fight another day.

Chapter 2, Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid Analysis

By telling the story from a child's perspective, the author achieves a dramatic flair that would otherwise be missing. Most people can easily recall the excitement of Christmases past from their childhood, and Shepherd allows the reader to relive the experience through a child's eyes. This chapter also begins establishing the theme of Parents versus Children, in which Ralph's parents (and Parents in general) seem either oblivious to and/or dismissive of Ralph's feelings, true desires, and vivid imagination. When Ralph ends the story, he is back in the present, finishing his coffee at the Automat. Shepherd's use of flashback storytelling prepares the reader for the next chapter, in which Ralph is once again reminiscing with Flick, the bartender.



Chapters 3-4, Flick Fails to Recall an Old Song and The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again

Chapters 3-4, Flick Fails to Recall an Old Song and The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again Summary

Chapter 3 is comprised of a single page. Ralph and Flick are still at the tavern, drinking beer and eating pretzels. The old friends' nostalgia continues as they recall various characters and places from their childhoods. Flick tries to recall the words to an old song from the TM Bar Ralston radio show. Ralph stops him, announcing that he will now sing "the greatest theme song of them all." He begins to sing, "Who's that little chatterbox...the one with curly golden locks? Who do I see? It's Little Orphan Annie..." Ralph is setting up the next story, in which the character Little Orphan Annie plays a large role.

Chapter Four describes Ralph's fascination with The Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle. Each day, Ralph eagerly awaits the beginning of his favorite Little Orphan Annie radio program. Ralph is captivated by Annie's adventures with her faithful dog Sandy and the mysterious character The Asp. At the end of each program, the announcer relays a secret message that can only be interpreted by loyal members of the Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle. Membership in this special club is limited to those children who are lucky enough to procure the silver inner seal from a can of Ovaltine and exchange it for a special decoder pin. Only with this pin can they decipher the announcer's radio message. Although Ralph's family does not drink Ovaltine, Ralph covertly obtains a seal anyway and sends it in.

Ralph literally squirms with excitement as he awaits the coveted pin. He impatiently awaits the mailman's arrival each day. When the pin finally arrives, Ralph cannot wait for the next Little Orphan Annie radio show. At the end of the next program, Ralph frantically attempts to decode the show's final message. Ralph's excitement and anticipation grow to a fever pitch as he struggles to obtain the secret of the Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle. He spells out each letter carefully. When all of the letters are revealed, Ralph realizes the awful truth. The important secret message is simply an advertisement that reads, 'Be Sure to Drink Ovaltine.'



Chapters 3-4, Flick Fails to Recall an Old Song and The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again Analysis

True to the book's pattern, Chapter 3 teases the reader with a hint about the next story. The author really builds the reader's anticipation in Chapter 4. Its conclusion reinforces a central coming of age theme in the book, in which Ralph struggles to hold onto his childhood fantasies while becoming all too aware of the Real World around him at the same time. His disheartening realization at the end of Chapter 4 is an abrupt introduction to Reality and the commercialism that goes along with it.



Chapters 5-6, I Poke at an Old Wound and The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose

Chapters 5-6, I Poke at an Old Wound and The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose Summary

In Chapter 5, Flick tries to comfort Ralph as he reflects upon his tragic betrayal by the famed Little Orphan Annie and her secret organization. With years of experience as a sympathetic bartender, Flick is used to hearing his patrons tell their tales of woe. He explains, "Chicks come and go. They all want something from you." In a reflective mood, Ralph suddenly remembers another girl from his youthful past. "Flick," he asks, "do you remember a girl named Junie Jo Prewitt?" When Flick's memory fails him, Ralph gets ready to tell another story. He remembers exactly who Junie Jo Prewitt is.

Chapter Six begins with a description of the Official People. Although everyone begins as a "mewling, puking, babe," the Official People grow up to become Prime Ministers, Presidents, Cabinet members, and Stars. The rest of us are just the rest of us. Ralph wonders at exactly which point each child turns the corner and begins to live the life of an Official Person. Ralph explains that there are several moments in a person's life when "the cosmic searchlight of Truth shines upon them." Ralph painfully recalls his first searchlight moment. It happens during the fourteenth summer of his life.

Ralph's best friend, Schwartz, wants to take a girl named Helen out on a date. Unfortunately, Helen's father insists that Schwartz find a date for Helen's girlfriend so that the two couples can go out together. Under the circumstances, Schwartz asks his buddy Ralph to tag along. Although Ralph maintains a strict no-blind-dates policy, he feels especially charitable that day, and agrees to help his friend. He assumes that the girl will be unattractive, but he believes that he is doing a good deed to help his faithful friend. He becomes excited about the impending big day when the date is to take place. He dresses carefully for the date in his best clothing. Ralph is about to meet Junie Jo Prewitt.

Ralph is shocked when he first spots Junie Jo. She is the best looking girl he has ever seen! In Ralph's estimation, Miss Junie Jo Prewitt makes even Cleopatra pale in comparison. The two couples leave Junie Jo's house and board a streetcar on their way to the bowling alley. Giddy over his good fortune, Ralph begins to talk to Junie Jo. Ralph talks incessantly. Junie Jo says nothing. She is clearly uncomfortable, and resists every attempt that Ralph makes to engage her in conversation.



Clearly, Ralph's impressive wit and charm are not impressing Junie Jo for some reason. Ralph is perplexed. Suddenly, he sees it. It is the brilliant blue light of Truth. Ralph realizes with a start that he is not the one being charitable. Ralph himself is the blind date. Junie Jo is with Ralph out of a sense of duty and charity, not the other way around. Ralph realizes that Schwartz is the type of friend that arranges a blind date so that his best buddy will not be alone.

Chapters 5-6, I Poke at an Old Wound and The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose Analysis

In these two chapters, Ralph introduces a universal, time-honored tradition. Bartenders make their living listening to patrons reliving the memory of their first heartbreak. Ralph's explanation of the differences between The Official People and The Rest of Us furthers In God We Trust's strong coming of age theme. When Ralph realizes that his friend Schwartz is trying to do him a favor by setting him up with Junie Jo, Ralph is well on his way to becoming an adult. It also introduces the concept of an Outsider Looking In as Ralph tries to figure out what makes the Official People turn out the way that they do.



Chapters 7-8, Flick Offers Me Hard Liquor and Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies

Chapters 7-8, Flick Offers Me Hard Liquor and Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies Summary

In Chapter 7, Flick offers Ralph some bourbon to comfort him about the tragic loss of Junie Jo. The two men begin to discuss other girls from their past, and the mystical location of Cedar Lake is mentioned. Flick laments that Cedar Lake is now condemned. He knows of no other instance in which a lake has been condemned. Apparently, Cedar Lake is a special place indeed.

Chapter Eight introduces the reader to Ralph's childhood love of fishing. He lives, breathes, and dreams the sport, even though he never gets the chance to actually fish. He describes the mud hole that is Cedar Lake in great detail. Ralph finally joins his father and, according to Ralph, 17,000 other fishermen at the lake for a 2:00 a.m. fishing expedition. Undaunted by brutal heat and an onslaught of vicious mosquitoes, the men remain committed in their quest to hit the mother lode. Barely awake but blissful in his endeavor, Ralph finally senses movement in the water. He has a bite!

Twenty minutes later, the men are surrounded by no less than forty-seven revered fish called crappies. The group is ecstatic in their victory. As a condition of Ralph's inclusion in the trip, he agrees to clean any fish that the group catches. Ralph is physically ill as he goes to work cleaning the dozens of live, still squirming fish, but he is jubilant nonetheless. When the men include him in their après-fishing celebration, he knows that he has finally arrived. As the adults crack open another beer and tell yet another dirty joke, Ralph smiles to himself. Finally, he is now a Man.

Chapters 7-8, Flick Offers Me Hard Liquor and Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies Analysis

A classic tale of Man versus Fish, these two chapters blend seamlessly. From the universal experience of young heartbreak and self-realization to a child's struggle to fit in with the adults that he admires, the lessons contained here should resonate with all readers. The setting of Cedar Lake is unique in its misery, and the Roller Rink and the Evening in Paris Dance Hall are charming if predictable additions to this testosterone-laden environment. Ralph's journey to adulthood further reinforces themes that depict a child's coming of age and feeling of an outsider looking in. The use of irony in depicting the muddy lake as a location of great buried treasure is truly unique.



Chapters 9-10, I Introduce Flick to the Art World and My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art

Chapters 9-10, I Introduce Flick to the Art World and My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art Summary

In Chapter 9, Ralph glimpses the jukebox in the tavern. As it plays, the plastic monstrosity emits a reddish-purple light of bright neon. Waterfalls cascading through the plastic sides of the jukebox complete the picture. As Ralph admires this brilliant wonder of Pop Art, Flick appears confused. "What's Pop Art?" he asks. The discussion reminds Ralph of a trip to the Museum of Modern Art and the fateful day that his family first learned the fine art of Pop Art appreciation.

In Chapter 10, Ralph properly explains his father's fascination with puzzles and contests. In the Depression, most people are unemployed, and there are no television programs to watch. People find their fun where they can, and any opportunity to win a cash award or other valuable prize is simply too much of a temptation for Ralph's father to pass up. One year, Paul's father (referred to simply as The Old Man) enters a contest sponsored by a famous orange soda company that Ralph does not name. Ralph's father struggles on a weekly basis to master each stage of a sports trivia challenge, and finally it appears that he is victorious. The Old Man is notified through the mail that he is the winner of a "major award" in a contest that awards \$50,000 and "hundreds of additional valuable prizes."

The family nervously awaits the arrival of the fateful gift. The Old Man speculates about the best manner in which to spend his hard-earned winnings. Perhaps the family can purchase a second house or open a bowling alley. All of the family's friends and neighbors join in the celebration. When the package finally arrives, the whole family gathers in the kitchen for the big moment when the prize will truly reveal itself. The Old Man, hastily forces the package open and reaches inside. Then he pulls out a woman's leg. Apparently, the symbol of this particular soda company is a woman's stockinged leg, and here it is in all its feminine glory.

It turns out that the leg is actually a lamp. The Old Man hurriedly places the pink-glowing immodest leg in the front window of the house where it can be seen by all. People actually gather around in the street to witness such a display. Ralph's mother (known only as My Mother) appears displeased, but does not protest the placement of the lamp. Over time, Ralph notices that his mother regularly closes the shades around



the lamp. Then, without fail, his father reopens the curtains under the pretense of examining the weather outside. Claiming a perceived chill in the air, Ralph's mother rises to close the drapes yet again. This routine repeats itself on a regular basis.

The Drama of the Lamp finally comes to a head one day when Ralph's mother breaks the lamp while dusting. Perhaps the damage is done by accident, perhaps not. The Old Man is enraged, accusing Ralph's mother of jealousy toward the plastic leg. After trying in vain to reattach the shattered pieces of his Major Award, the Old Man finally acknowledges that the leg is truly gone forever. Ralph's parents do not speak for days - not to the children, and not to each other. Only when they finally declare a truce can Ralph look back at the situation fondly as the time when he truly learned to appreciate Pop Art.

Chapters 9-10, I Introduce Flick to the Art World and My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art Analysis

These chapters provide the reader with a better glimpse into the lives of Ralph's parents and their interaction with each other. In a study of human nature, Ralph subtly examines his father's ability to praise an unsightly, impractical item as a rare treasure, simply because it represents his moment of triumph. The celebration that surrounds the announcement of the award accurately depicts the impact that such an event would likely have on a young family struggling through the Great Depression. Irony is clearly used here in the presentation of such an unappealing lamp as the reward for the Old Man's sleepless nights and bountiful sports knowledge. The setting changes rapidly, from Flick's Tavern of today, to the Museum of Modern Art years ago, and finally the Depression-era world of Ralph's childhood.



Chapters 11-12, Flick Makes an Artistic Judgment and The Magic Mountain

Chapters 11-12, Flick Makes an Artistic Judgment and The Magic Mountain Summary

Following a debate about a piece of modern art in the aforementioned Museum, Ralph and Flick begin to recall the year that the World's Fair was held in Chicago. Although they are merely small children at the time of the historic event, each of the men recalls certain aspects of the fair that they attended. Ralph's memory is quite clear. In Chapter 12, Ralph recounts the magical year in which the marvel of the World's Fair is being constructed. It begins with the appearance of a model of Fort Sheridan that Ralph is sure is being built with Lincoln Logs.

Ralph learns that there is "a special Kid thing" at the fair called Treasure Island. When Ralph and his brother arrive at the fair, they begin climbing the Magic Mountain. The Magic Mountain is several stories high, and no parents are allowed to climb it. Onward, Ralph and his brother climb up a mountain that he believes is at least six or seven and possibly as many as ten stories tall. Unaware of what awaits him, Ralph grows afraid as he approaches the pinnacle. All he knows is that young children are screaming and then disappearing into a dark doorway. They are disappearing into darkness.

When it is Ralph's turn to enter the doorway, he is paralyzed with fear. He refuses, but the attendant pushes him inside anyway. He is tossed around on a wild, crazy ride, and then emerges feet first onto a pad. He arrives back outside in one piece, only to immediately dodge his brother's similar frenzied arrival. The two boys begin the long trip back down the mountain. When they reach the ground, they meet their mother, who is eager to hear the details of their magical experience. Ralph is unable to put his feelings into words.

Chapters 11-12, Flick Makes an Artistic Judgment and The Magic Mountain Analysis

Ralph's character is only five or six in this latest short story about the World's Fair. Through young Ralph's childish eyes, the reader once again senses the joy and wonderment that only a child could experience at such an amazing event. The setting is magical and ornate, and the author brilliantly portrays the stature and importance of the occasion. By describing the language of the Magic Mountain attendants, he also eloquently introduces the author's new mantra about life - "Get in there, kid, you're holding up the line."



Chapters 13-14, Flick Dredges up a Notorious Son of a Bitch and Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil

Chapters 13-14, Flick Dredges up a Notorious Son of a Bitch and Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil Summary

As Flick and Ralph continue to recall their favorite aspects of the World's Fair, an altercation occurs between two of the bar's patrons. Flick intervenes and gently escorts the two gentlemen out of the tavern. As they are leaving, Ralph notices that one of the men looks familiar. He mentions this to Flick, and Flick confirms that the man is a former childhood acquaintance named Grover Dill. This information jolts Ralph's memory about an encounter with Grover Dill that neither he nor Flick is ever likely to forget.

In Chapter 14, Ralph explains a brutal truth about male children. They are trapped in the "impenetrable fetid jungle of Kidhood." Ralph alludes to the fact that in every male child there resides a killer, a Tasmanian Devil that stands ready to explode in a fury of claws and teeth. Ralph describes the childhood phenomenon known as the Bully. Grover Dill is the resident bully in Ralph's neighborhood, and all of the children are afraid of him. Ralph himself is afraid of him, and credits his powers of escape for his own survival. All of that changes one day when Ralph and his brother are walking home from school and have the bad fortune of straying into Dill's miserable path.

Ralph and his brother are playing a makeshift game of baseball as they make their way home, when suddenly Grover Dill appears out of nowhere. As Ralph reaches out to catch a stray ball, Grover's foot mysteriously reaches out and trips him. Ralph lands hard and cuts his lip. Stunned and bleeding, he throws himself at Dill in a blinding moment of rage. Screaming and cursing like a sailor, Ralph pummels the boy with a fury he had not known he had. He morphs into the Tasmanian Devil, and completely screeches out of control like a runaway train. Panicked, Ralph's brother runs home to retrieve their mother. When she arrives, the fight is ending, but she hears the horrible obscenities that her son Ralph is spewing.

Ralph's mother escorts him home and cleans him up. He is hysterical, and she instructs him to lie down in his room. When The Old Man arrives at the house, Ralph is terrified. Dreading his father's wrath and the punishment that is clearly impending, Ralph remains silent at the dinner table, even as his mother recounts the events of the day with surprising calm. Overcome with guilt, shame, and fear, Ralph becomes physically ill and retreats to the bathroom. His mother joins him and assures him that she will not tell his father what really happened. Exhausted, Ralph cries himself to sleep that night, glad that the Tasmanian Devil is now at rest, but certain that it will one day rise again.



Chapters 13-14, Flick Dredges up a Notorious Son of a Bitch and Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil Analysis

In these two chapters, the author uses foreshadowing to build the reader's anticipation. He mentions an encounter with Grover Dill and the secret presence of a Tasmanian Devil within every red-blooded American boy long before he recounts the day of the Devil's actual unleashing on Dill himself. He also introduces the theme of boys living in a jungle as though they are all wild beasts incapable of being tamed. When explaining the specifics of the Bully culture in a little boy's life, the author refers to City Hall as "the Bully himself." He also explains that bullies exist for adults as well, lamenting that "many of us have grown up wearing mental Keds and still ducking behind filing cabinets, water coolers, and into convenient men's rooms when that cold sweat trickles down between the shoulder blades." Grover Dill is symbolized as a "Puff-Adder among garden worms," clearly the most dangerous snake of all. This last chapter contains the best description so far of the ongoing theme of Midwest weather as a driving force in human behavior as well.



Chapters 15-16, Flick Displays a Petty Jealous Streak and Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back

Chapters 15-16, Flick Displays a Petty Jealous Streak and Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back Summary

Ralph continues drinking in celebration of his notorious victory over the treacherous Grover Dill. Breaking the congratulatory mood, Flick recalls a time when Ralph was not quite so ferocious. As Ralph is defending himself, he notices a man outside who appears rather intoxicated. Flick notices as well and comments about a man named Lud Kissel. Ralph recalls that he recently remembered Mr. Kissel on the Fourth of July in New York. The two men begin to discuss the year that Kissel's unique display of fireworks truly brought the house down.

In Chapter 16, Ralph vividly describes the exciting array of fireworks available for July Fourth. Fireworks are a particular passion in the neighborhood of Ralph's childhood. As Ralph explains, "Northern Indiana is full of primeval types who've drifted up from the restless hills of Kentucky and the gulches of Tennessee, bringing with them suitcases filled with dynamite saved over from the time Grandpaw blew up the stumps in the Back Forty." Explosive devices provide a particular brand of joy and anticipation, and Ralph claims that dynamite is widely used. According to Ralph, "dynamite was the milk of life to the average hillbilly of the day."

One year on the Fourth, local town drunk Ludlow Kissel presents the largest "Dago Bomb" that the neighborhood has ever witnessed. It is so enormous and ominous that some passersby believe that is actually not a Dago Bomb of all, but some sort of mortar shell. Kissel's mind not being all that clear, no one ever truly learns of the explosive's true nature of origin. After several weaving attempts to light the monster's tricky fuse, Kissel finally manages to both light and knock over the mammoth weapon, striking panic in the growing crowd of onlookers. After emitting a mighty hiss and rolling under Kissel's front porch, the bomb finally goes off, destroying the neighbor's rose trellis, rocking the porch and literally tilting the home's floor downward. Afterward, the survivors creep out of their hiding places to admire Kissel's handiwork in the fireworks display that would forever be referred to simply as Kissel's Dago Bomb.

Ralph fondly remembers the fireworks available for sale at his father's fireworks stand. As a boy, he works at the stand, and helps his father carry home the surplus fireworks each year so that they can use them in their own special crowd-pleasing show. The store has fireworks of all kinds, from the mighty Roman Candle to the Red Devils and Pinwheels. Ralph's father traditionally caps the neighborhood fireworks show with a



masterful display of explosive skill and talent. A consummate performer, The Old Man ends each year's July Fourth with an admirable use of powerful Roman Candles. One year, however, something goes horribly wrong. At just the climactic moment, one of the candles somehow ignites The Old Man's shirt! A true professional, Ralph's father releases one final charge before racing into his house, shirt ablaze, and apparently plunges himself into a cooling shower as hordes of dazed onlookers look on in stunned wonder. That year is the year, as Ralph explains, that the Roman Candle struck back.

Chapters 15-16, Flick Displays a Petty Jealous Streak and Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back Analysis

Praising the secret delight that people experience at the sound of an explosion, Ralph furthers the community feel of the book, in which all people are bonded tightly together by a common shared experience, a mutual thrill. By using a benign, familiar character like town drunk Ludlow Kissel, Shepherd introduces a personality that all readers can recognize. The author also exposes another theme - that the mighty will always fall. In this chapter, Kissel and The Old Man are truly counterpoints for each other. Kissel is harmless but gets no respect or praise. His remarkable fireworks display, however, lives on in infamy. The Old Man's dangerous experience is much more of an embarrassment than a proud memory. He is humiliated by his mistake even as he is doing his best to show off and even act cool and collected once something terrible and unforeseen occurs.



Chapters 17-18, I Show Off and Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded

Chapters 17-18, I Show Off and Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded Summary

As Ralph recounts his most recent Fourth of July experience in New York, he explains that he regularly consumes a drink called a Bloody Charlie. Flick is unfamiliar with the concoction. Ralph kindly explains the ingredient list to his bartender friend. He requests vodka, tomato juice, Worcestershire sauce, and a bit of salt. Still confused, Flick suggests perhaps he is confusing Bloody Charlies with Bloody Marys. Ralph explains that there is a key difference. Adding no less and no more than two olives to each drink, he delights over the fact that he is now creating a Bloody Mary with balls. It is the more masculine version of the popular drink. Flick, however, may not be completely convinced. When Flick points out that Ralph has always had a dirty mind, Ralph again defends himself by recalling a time when his own innocence (and ignorance) leads him into trouble.

In Chapter 18, Ralph confirms the existence of a Joke Teller in every family. Ralph's family Joke Teller is his Uncle Ben. Old Uncle Ben is apparently quite a drinker, and fond of risqué jokes that are best told when no young children are present. At one particular family gathering, Uncle Ben is preparing to tell yet another bad joke when one of the men warns, "Hey, you know the kids are here." Ben replies, "Ah, they're old enough to hear this. Moreover, if they're not old enough to hear it, it won't make any difference anyway. Ha-haha."

Little Ralph overhears this sensational joke, and in his innocence, repeats it, word for word, to his young pal Casmir. Both boys laugh heartily as they both pretend that they understand the joke and the unfamiliar language used in its telling. Ralph is now a Joke Teller himself, and all is well. That is, until Casmir repeats the joke to his kid brother, and the story gets back to Casmir's mother. Casmir belongs to a very wholesome, Polish Catholic family, and the mother is beyond scandalized when she hears these words literally out of the mouths of babes. She immediately runs crying to Ralph's mother over the horror and shame of it all. When confronted, Ralph is unsure what he has done wrong. When asked if he understands the meaning of an unfamiliar word in the story, Ralph stammers, "Ah...well, it's about a Hockey thing there!" Ralph is now the butt of the joke, and still unsure what exactly has happened, is mortified when his father finds out about it and bursts into laughter himself.



Chapters 17-18, I Show Off and Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded Analysis

Although Flick accuses Ralph of having a dirty mind, Ralph foreshadows the joke-telling incident when he remembers that once it was his innocence that got him into trouble. When Ralph remains confused at the end of the story, his reaction reinforces several themes. As a child in a world run by adults using secret codes to communicate, Ralph is once again an outsider looking in. The story also reminds the reader of Ralph's boyish innocence and naiveté even as he tries to fit in with the adults. This experience becomes another step in the story of Ralph's coming of age.



Chapters 19-20, We Have Two Small Visitors and Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jaw-Breaker Blackmail Caper

Chapters 19-20, We Have Two Small Visitors and Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jaw-Breaker Blackmail Caper Summary

In Chapter 19, two kids enter Flick's Tavern. Flick gives them a hard time, but serves them a glass of water. After the kids leave, Ralph tells Flick that one of the boys looked suspicious. He explains, "I know a Root Beer Barrel Man when I see one. Did you notice that suspicious bulge in his right cheek? I suspect that he was loaded." Ralph points out that he never really understood the appeal of Flick's favorite candy flavor, and that he is a Jawbreaker man himself. He even brags that he has the silver inlays to prove it.

Chapter 20 offers a vivid description of the agony that afflicts all men with a toothache. He bemoans the "sheer, stark, shrill, agonizing, bone-shattering pain," and claims, "Anyone who has ever experienced a first-degree, Big League, card-carrying dedicated toothache in a major molar at 3 A.M. in the quiet solitude of night has stood at the very gates of Hell itself." As Ralph waits his turn in the dentist's waiting area, he recalls the days when he learned to become a true Penny Candy Connoisseur. He also remembers one of his first lessons about Life, Commercialism, and Capitalism. It is all about supply and demand.

Young kids go to Pulaski's store for its popular candy counter. There, they can browse and buy JuJu Babies, licorice cigars, Mary Janes, Jawbreakers, Root Beer Barrels, and so much more. As Ralph explains, a lot can be learned about a man based on the penny candy that he prefers. Ralph prefers black Jawbreakers, also referred to as Bicuspid Busters. Apparently, there is a big difference between fans of the red version and the classic black Jawbreaker devotee. A black Jawbreaker is about to teach Ralph a major lesson about Man's Inhumanity to Man.

One day, when Ralph goes to the store to get his latest Jawbreaker fix, Pulaski's is especially busy. The store is crowded, and Pulaski is not in a charitable mood. When Ralph requests a penny's worth of Jawbreakers, the old storeowner informs him that he has to take one red Jawbreaker for every black Jawbreaker. Apparently, there is a surplus of red Jawbreakers, and Pulaski does not like holding onto excess inventory. Ralph is tortured. He can usually buy two beautiful black Jawbreakers for a penny. He detests the red ones. Finally, he agrees to the deal and resigns himself to giving the demonic red Jawbreaker to his kid brother. His life is forever changed.



Chapters 19-20, We Have Two Small Visitors and Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jaw-Breaker Blackmail Caper Analysis

In Chapters 19 and 20, Ralph uses foreshadowing and flashback sequences in two very interesting ways. The reader is transported from Flick's tavern to the dentist's office to the Pulaski's store of Ralph's childhood, and back again. The book's coming of age theme is furthered yet again. Ralph continues to learn the cruel life lessons that will prepare him for life as an adult. By choosing a specific penny candy, Ralph asserts his individuality, even at a very young age. As Ralph explains, penny candy is usually the first purchase that kids actually make themselves. That very purchase begins their role as consumers.

The type of candy chosen is an indicator of that child's behavior as an adult. According to Ralph, some children have more discriminating tastes than others do. A young JuJu Baby buyer grows up to buy Porsches and fine wines. Ralph is proud of his discriminating palate, and feels that his choice of penny candy corresponds with his affinity for the finer things in life. Ralph says that the weeding-out process of the Slobs versus the Anti-Slobs begins with that most critical initial purchase. This concept reiterates the idea that all children start out the same in life, but even the smallest decisions can shape their life and determine their future as adults.



Chapters 21-22, Enter Friendly Fred and The Perfect Crime

Chapters 21-22, Enter Friendly Fred and The Perfect Crime Summary

A tall, thin man enters Flick's Tavern and downs a quick drink. Flick identifies the gentleman as Friendly Fred, a local used car salesman. Ralph reflects on the value that Midwesterners place on a good automobile. As he sees it, the family car, a weekly paycheck, and a reputable bowling average are really all that is important to the average Midwestern man. Flick recalls an old car that Ralph's family used to own. Beset by guilt, Ralph confesses that he has a secret to tell about the beloved automobile affectionately referred to as simply "the Graham-Paige" or simply "the Graham."

Chapter 22 begins with a great description of the Used-Car Nut. Ralph's father loves cars with a passion. The Old Man spends his Saturdays visiting various used car lots in town, looking for the best deal. Storytelling revolves around the family vehicle, so that people refer to events that occur "the year that we bought the DeSoto." One year, The Old Man selects a midnight blue, four-door car called a Graham-Paige. Ralph is not quite old enough to drive, but occasionally, his father will let him take the wheel for a moment or two. The "new" family car is valued and adored. Its value to the household is immeasurable.

One day, Ralph decides to surprise his family by polishing the chrome on the Graham-Paige. After admiring his handiwork, Ralph suddenly has a brilliant idea. He will move the car out of the garage in order to provide the family with the best view of his expert polishing job. As Ralph begins backing the car out of the garage, he scrapes the left fender on the garage door. He tries to pull slowly forward, but the car fender is now stuck. He finally dislodges the car after several tries, but the damage is done. The fender has a huge visible scrape on it, and the paint is now peeling off in significant curls. Panicking, Ralph decides to leave the car in the garage and pretend that nothing has happened.

An entire day goes by before anyone notices the scraped fender. When The Old Man finally sees it, he is furious. It does not occur to him that Ralph could be responsible. Instead, Ralph's father assumes that the car was damaged as it sat in an innocent parking lot. Enraged when the lot's owner denies responsibility for the accident, The Old Man contacts the Better Business Bureau to lobby a complaint. The company acknowledges defeat and agrees to pay for the repairs. Ralph is saved!



Chapters 21-22, Enter Friendly Fred and The Perfect Crime Analysis

This story contains a lesson in morality. When Ralph damages the family's prized automobile, he fears the certain punishment that he expects to receive. When he escapes the situation unharmed, he rejoices in relief. The stress of his anticipation is punishment in itself. He is so afraid of impending doom that he even considers drinking iodine for a fleeting second, thinking that the family may even think that he deserves such a fate after what he has done. Years later, his guilt remains over the secret he's kept for so long. His guilt alone probably caused him to suffer just as much, if not more, than if he had actually been caught in the act. True to the book's strong coming of age theme, Ralph succumbs to a common temptation when he drives the car without permission at such a young age. Although Ralph may think that he has truly avoiding the consequences of his actions, the experience clearly teaches him a lesson, nevertheless.



Chapters 23-24, Flick Bait the Hook and Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton

Chapters 23-24, Flick Bait the Hook and Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton Summary

Flick receives a phone call from the man who is responsible for working the bar while Flick goes to "The Game." The mention of the high school basketball team reminds Ralph of his own high school days. Ralph remembers his high school band winning the marching band contest, and Flick remembers a time when Ralph's sousaphone malfunctioned. After a good laugh, the men also recall their old classmate Wilbur Duckworth. Ralph complains that he still awakens in the middle of the night to the memory of Duckworth's whistle.

Wilbur Duckworth is the drum major in Ralph's high school band. Egotistical and hated by all, Duckworth is an outrageous performer who spends hours practicing his baton routine since he has no social life. He runs the band with an iron fist and a lightning fast bar of polished chrome. Ralph and Flick are both band members. During Duckworth's senior year, the national championship band participates in the annual Thanksgiving Day parade. Duckworth has created a unique "Capper" to each performance, in which he simultaneously twirls two batons at once at maddening speeds. He then tosses both batons high into the air where they appear to linger for days before plummeting back toward Earth and Duckworth's waiting gloved hands. With masterful skill, Duckworth performs this feat without ever glancing at the batons' wayward path into the heavens.

The day of the parade finally arrives, and the band performs in biting cold weather. Duckworth is even more brilliant than usual. When the band reaches the climactic moment in the final performance, Duckworth executes a Capper to beat all Cappers. Launching the twin batons higher in the air than ever before, he remains steadfast with his eyes forward as one baton connects with high-tension electrical wires overhead. The parade goers are now treated to what Ralph calls "a gigantic, unimaginably immense Fourth of July sparkler that threw a Vesuvius, a screaming shower of flame in a giant pinwheel down to the street and into the sky, over the crowds and onto the band."

Duckworth, however, remains unmoved and emotionless in the wake of the destruction. The crowd screams, and fuses go out all across the county, but Duckworth merely catches the one remaining earthbound baton before marching on as though nothing has happened. The baton's twin companion has apparently disintegrated into the air. The rest of the band members all share one common question. "Did he plan it!?" Was the performance a final sendoff, a final tribute to Duckworth's own mastery and skill? No one knows, and Duckworth isn't saying.



Chapters 23-24, Flick Bait the Hook and Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton Analysis

In this story, Duckworth's character chooses to flaunt what little power he has. As a social outcast, Duckworth is another outsider looking in, but he chooses to react to his troubles by becoming the best drum major he can be. By displaying considerable skill and discipline, he essentially "gets even" with anyone who might doubt him. Whether Duckworth deliberately orchestrates the parade incident remains unclear, but Duckworth wins either way. If it is an accident, he remains unflappable, another demonstration of his power. He proves his superior talent in a very visible way.



Chapters 25-26, I Relate the Strange Tale of the Human Hypodermic Needle and Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold

Chapters 25-26, I Relate the Strange Tale of the Human Hypodermic Needle and Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold Summary

Flick and Ralph continue reminiscing about their high school band days. Ralph confesses that he still feels "an old, dull itch" in his left shoulder when he watches the halftime shows on televised football games. He recalls one particular game in which the band marches in the formation of a hypodermic needle to honor the famous television doctor, Dr. Kildare. As Ralph is describing the spectacle, Flick receives a telephone call from his wife, Janis. Apparently, Janis wants Flick to attend a PTA meeting instead of going to The Big Game. Ralph realizes that Flick must have children in school. Apparently, they attend the same local school that Ralph remembers so fondly - Miss Bryfogel's school.

Ralph is madly in love with his sixth-grade English teacher. Ralph dreamily recalls her soft, heart-shaped face and dark, liquid eyes. He is convinced that Miss Bryfogel shares his feelings of undying love and commitment. When she reads poetry aloud to the class, the other boys become bored and sleepy. Ralph, however, is totally captivated by her words. He decides that the best way to express his true feelings to Miss Bryfogel is to pen a brilliant book report that will truly speak to her heart and demonstrate his attentiveness to his studies.

Not willing to settle for just another school library book, Ralph searches his family reading collection for a suitable subject. With no appropriate choices available, Ralph finally resolves to enter his parents' bedroom to peruse their private collection. Upon finding a large book with fine print and an impressive foreign title, Ralph is convinced that he finally holds the key to Miss Bryfogel's heart in his hands. Ralph cannot understand the words, but that must mean that the book deals with important subject matter that Miss Bryfogel is certain to love! Truly, Ralph admits that this occasion represents one of the very few times that he has ever looked forward to writing a book report.

When Miss Bryfogel asks to see Ralph about the report, Ralph is triumphant. Surely, his message has hit its mark! Unfortunately, Ralph is unaware that he has just submitted a book report on a pornographic book. Miss Bryfogel is not amused. She demands to



know where Ralph found the book, and whether he completely read the large volume. Ralph pleads innocence, but when Miss Bryfogel threatens him with a dreaded note to his mother, he tells the truth. The teacher realizes that Ralph does not understand what he has read, and she makes him promise never to steal books from his parents' bedroom again.

Chapters 25-26, I Relate the Strange Tale of the Human Hypodermic Needle and Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold Analysis

The author uses some significant foreshadowing here to give the reader a good idea as to what young Ralph is about to do. By opening Chapter 26 with a vivid description of pornography, he paints a picture that the reader cannot miss. Shepherd also uses two different flashback sequences to tell the story. In modern times, he is reading the newspaper and suddenly troubled by something he sees in the Sunday Times Book Review Supplement. His memory of Miss Bryfogel's haunting question launches the story about the infamous book report, and again the reader is transported to Ralph's childhood days.

Again, Ralph struggles to understand the secret language of the adults. Tragically, he remains an Outsider Looking In. His laughable mistake and adorable crush on his teacher expose his true age and immaturity. Shepherd also capitalizes on the irony of the situation. Although Ralph is clearly exposed to pornography, he remains innocent, since he really does not understand what the words mean. When Ralph lies and claims to have read the entire book, he is trying to appear studious and obedient to his teacher. Miss Bryfogel, on the other hand, wants some reassurance that Ralph has not really been exposed to such adult concepts at his tender age. She does not want to be told that he has read the book in his entirety. It is also ironic that Ralph does not obtain the book through any nefarious means. The book simply belongs to his parents, the people who should be most alarmed that he is reading it.



Chapters 27-28, Polka Time and Nevermore,' Quoth the Assessor, 'Nevermore...

Chapters 27-28, Polka Time and Nevermore,' Quoth the Assessor, 'Nevermore... Summary

As Ralph tries to explain the meaning of the word "cuckold" to his friend Flick, three mill workers enter the bar and start playing a polka on the jukebox. Watching the men, Ralph shudders at the memory of his days working in the mill. Flick explains that the work is good, and the men are earning a good living. They are hard workers. Suddenly reflective, Ralph asks, "Flick, do you ever get nervous when you look at cash? Like you figure it's going to all of a sudden disappear?" Flick confirms that he has the same fear. The two men begin remembering the Kissel family and what happened to them all those years ago.

Ralph recalls a time when the mere mention of a tax assessor strikes fear in the hearts of all Indiana residents. One day, the assessor visits Ralph's home. Ralph's mother orders him to hide the family radio, and begins the unfortunate task of downplaying every item that the family owns in order to avoid paying additional taxes. Shortly after the assessor's visit, Ralph and his friends spot a sign announcing an auction of all of the Kissel family's personal property by order of the sheriff's office. Ludlow Kissel and his family live next door to Ralph. Ralph goes to school and plays with Junior Kissel. The boys are not even sure what an auction really is. Some speculate that an auction is some kind of card game. They do not understand what is about to happen.

When Ralph arrives home that day, he asks his mother what the word 'auction' means. Realizing that something is seriously wrong, she insists that he explain his question. When Ralph describes the sign announcing the auction at the neighbors' house, Ralph's mother immediately goes next door to investigate. The mystery of the auction hangs over the household until the next morning. Ralph watches through the window as nearly all of the Kissel's possessions are sold to the highest bidder. For the first time, Ralph learns about Auction Followers, whom he describes as Human Vultures who thrive from the disaster and defeat of others by picking the bones clean. Ralph watches sadly as all of the family's modest heirlooms are sold, one by one.

Although Ralph does not fully realize the significance of the event, his neighborhood is forever changed. Before the auction begins, the Kissel family leaves their home, never to be seen or heard again. The house is rented by new neighbors, and Ralph does not even have a chance to say goodbye to his friend. The experience teaches Ralph a hard, painful lesson. Ralph learns that auctions are not at all the same as friendly card games.



Chapters 27-28, 'Polka Time and Nevermore,' Quoth the Assessor, 'Nevermore... Analysis

In one of the few sad stories in the book, Shepherd powerfully depicts the pain of the Great Depression through the eyes of a child. Ralph's experience as a witness to the auction is part of his coming of age experience. He is too young to comprehend the seriousness of the situation until much later, but it clearly had a significant impact on him. Even now, he and Flick still fear that they will lose everything. Earlier in the book, Ludlow Kissel is described as the town drunk. Lazy but harmless, Ludlow truly faces the consequences of a poor work ethic and failure to pay property taxes when all of his family's possessions are taken from them. In this story, the author furthers the theme that Life is Not Fair.

The setting used is also important. The boys are in a jovial mood when they spot the auction sign. As the kids throw rocks at ridiculed political posters, the glaring red poster with black lettering literally stuns them into shocked silence. Their carefree, childish game is presented in stark contrast with the fear and anxiety that his parents experience because of the assessor's visit. The auction next door presents an even bleaker picture. Once again, Ralph's inability to understand the language of the adults keeps him from understanding the severity of the scenes as they unfold before him.



Chapters 29-31, The Posse Rides Again and Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot and The Day Shift Drops By for a Belt

Chapters 29-31, The Posse Rides Again and Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot and The Day Shift Drops By for a Belt Summary

Ralph looks at his watch and realizes that it will soon be time for a shift change in the mill town of Hohman. A Western is playing on the television, and both Ralph and Flick realize that they have seen it before. Eventually, they realize that they actually saw the film together as children. That memory makes Ralph think about Leopold Doppler and the old movie theater called the Orpheum.

The story now moves to New England. Ralph is eating breakfast at a motel when his mind begins to wander. Troubled by odd fantasies, Ralph struggles to determine what is suddenly making him think about people from his past. Finally, he realizes what is wrong. The bowl containing his cereal is a vintage Movie Dish Night Premium Gift Bowl. These bowls remind Ralph of the infamous Gravy Boat Riot at the Orpheum movie theater.

As a child, Ralph spends Saturday afternoons at the Orpheum, watching the adventures of heroic range-roving cowboys interspersed with regular episodes of Flash Gordon, Superman, and Mighty Mouse. Kids fill their stomachs with candy bars, popcorn, and gallons of soda. They also eagerly await the moment when the Orpheum's manager, Leopold Doppler, will take the stage and award prizes to certain lucky ticket holders. It seems that the Orpheum features a different contest for each night of the week.

For Indiana residents desperate for work during the Great Depression, these contests are a godsend. For the price of a movie ticket, patrons can win cash and valuable prizes. On Screeno night, for instance, moviegoers can win a year's supply of bread from the grocery store. The value of such a seemingly modest grand prize is immeasurable during this period in history. On Bank Night, the winnings are much more serious. Grand Prizewinners can collect seventeen hundred dollars, representing an absolute fortune to most Hohmanites.

Mr. Doppler eventually launches a new marketing campaign designed to fill the theater seats. He begins offering a free piece of dinnerware to each woman attending the show. The announcement of such generosity creates a tornado of activity at the theater as women line up for their beautiful gifts. Most women in the area do not have any formal



dinnerware, and the value of the new pieces seems enormous to them. As the weeks go by, every aunt and grandmother is coerced into the theater in order to collect free gifts for their families.

The townsfolk are deliriously happy with their good fortune, and Doppler could not be more pleased with the great turnout at the Orpheum. One day, however, the women receive a duplicate piece of china, a gravy boat that is identical to the piece distributed the previous week. Doppler explains that there is an error with the shipment, but the ladies should come back next week and exchange their redundant gravy boats for a dinner plate. Disappointed, but apparently satisfied with Doppler's explanation, the women faithfully return the next week, excited about the impending new addition to their modest collections. The following week, the women return, carrying their gravy boats in a torrential downpour, only to be met by Doppler and employees handing out still more gravy boats. Promises to correct the situation the following week are made, but the women are not easily pacified.

When the next week rolls around, the Hohman ladies again arrive at the Orpheum, carrying an abundance of exchangeable gravy boats in shopping bags and hatboxes. The women remain silent when they receive yet another gravy boat at the entrance. When Mr. Doppler takes the stage and attempts to placate the angry mob with more empty promises, violence breaks out! Gravy boat after gravy boat begins to crash upon the stage, and the riot police have to be called to escort the women out. The Orpheum closes forever, and Doppler is never seen again. Ralph confirms that the Dish Night Fever is finally over.

Suddenly, the server at the lunch counter interrupts Ralph's reverie. He is back at the New England motel, and the counterman is offering to warm up his coffee. Gazing at the revered cereal bowl, Ralph waits until the man turns away before scooping up the bowl and taking it with him. Only Ralph can understand the dish's true value and its importance in Hohman history.

Back at the tavern, Flick shows his genuine Fibber McGee and Molly salt-and-pepper shaker set. Flick says that the pieces were purchased at the World's Fair in Chicago. As they are talking, the next set of shift workers enters the bar. The day shift is ending, and the next shift at the mill is just beginning. Ralph dons his topcoat and prepares to leave, promising to see Flick again before he returns to New York. As Ralph leaves, he sees a sign outside the tavern that he had not noticed before. The sign reads, "IN GOD WE TRUST - ALL OTHERS PAY CASH."

Chapters 29-31, The Posse Rides Again and Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot and The Day Shift Drops By for a Belt Analysis

Shepherds wraps up the book with a classic tale of burgeoning hope and eventual disillusionment. The Orpheum gift dishes are symbolic of the hope that is missing in the



Midwestern Depression town. The excitement among the moviegoers is palpable, and it is easy to understand their glee upon receiving an unexpected bonus for their patronage. Unfortunately, Ralph learns a sad lesson from his mother's experience at the Orpheum. Nothing in Life Is Free. Ralph's description of each movie's theme night provides a subtle change of setting as Leopold Doppler changes the theatre dynamics for each individual audience. The various flashbacks transport the reader from Flick's Tavern to the New England motel, and then into the Orpheum Theater and back again.



Characters

Ralph Wesley Parker - Narrator appears in collection

Ralph Parker is the main character in this collection of humorous short stories. Known simply as Ralph, he appears in every story. As the narrator, he allows the reader to experience Ralph's life as both an adult, a child of various ages, and a teenage boy. He explains his own thoughts and introduces the town of Hohman. As a Midwestern boy growing up in the Depression era, Ralph enjoys a simple, ordinary life (although his stories and his imagination might imply otherwise.)

Ralph is fairly close to his family, even though the family operates based upon the traditional patriarchal family dynamic of the time that does not encourage him to express his feelings or individuality. Maturing in an age without television, computers, or video games, Ralph is drawn to the simpler pleasures in life. Fishing, playing ball, and participating in the marching band are all important to him. He maintains close friendships with several other boys, including Schwartz, Flick, and Junior Kissel, among others. Ralph clearly has no ill feelings toward his younger brother, but their apparently significant age difference appears to prevent them from becoming best friends.

As a child, Ralph does not understand the outside world of Adulthood. He struggles through the jungle he calls Kidhood while desperately longing to "break in." In "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies," Ralph feels that maybe he has finally made it. His childhood innocence and immaturity often get the better of him, but that only enhances his charm for the reader.

Flick the Friendly Bartender appears in Every other chapter

Flick is Ralph's childhood friend. As a character in many of Ralph's stories, Flick bears witness to Ralph's truthful accounting of the events. Unlike Ralph, Flick does not leave Hohman. He stays in the area, marries a girl from the high school that he attends with Ralph, serves in the military, and raises children. He inherits the tavern owned by his late father. A friendly sort, he seems good-natured and fair, although he will not tolerate any misbehavior in the establishment in which he earns his living.

Flick clings to the simple pleasures that Ralph appears to have discarded since he moved to New York. He lives for bowling, The Game, and an honest wage. He still holds onto the BB gun from his youth, telling Ralph, "It comes in handy sometimes." Flick does not ponder the meaning of life or indulge his imagination in the way that Ralph does, but appears to have a good head on his shoulders that has served him well. Flick is the sort of friend that every child should have. Although he protests to Ralph that he is, indeed, "With It," both the reader and Ralph can clearly observe that he is not. Flick



appreciates hard work and defends the mill workers that come into his bar at the end of a hard day.

The matter-of-fact manner in which Flick lives his life is apparent from his choice of signs at the tavern. One reads simply "Booze," another "Beer." The title of the book is also derived from one of Flick's humorous signs, the one that says, "In God We Trust - All Others Pay Cash."

Ralph's Mother appears in collection

Ralph's mother is never identified by name. Ralph seems to be especially fond of her, and she in fact comes to his aid in many of his stories. When Ralph's Tasmanian Devil escapes in "Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil," she conceals the details of the fight from Ralph's father in order to protect her son. She comforts Ralph when he is ill or upset, and withholds punishment when his innocence in a world of adults leads him astray, as in "Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded."

In "Duel in the Snow or "Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid," Ralph's mother appears concerned that he will, of course, shoot his eye out, but ultimately his beloved Red Ryder BB gun still materializes underneath the Christmas tree. When Ralph is injured in the story, she comforts and nurses his wound in tried-and-true motherly fashion. Ralph's mother is a true pacifist. In "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art," Ralph's mother "accidentally" destroys her husband's prized lamp. Although she probably does not regret her actions, she is more than willing to make up when her husband breaks the silence that followed the lamp's tragic demise.

The final story, in which the Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot is so vividly described, appears to truly represent an homage to Ralph's mother. One can assume that the promise of new formal dinnerware does not truly hold any real value for Ralph outside of his mother's anticipated happiness with the prospect. She handles each piece lovingly and appears enraptured by the whole idea of an entire dinnerware collection. Ralph's mother is a true lady of her time. Her life revolves around her family's needs, not her own.

The Old Man appears in collection

Ralph's father is identified in the book as either "my father," "my old man," or most often, "The Old Man." A real man's man, The Old Man works hard to provide for his family, and is the undisputed head of the household. Ralph subtly displays his fondness and admiration for his father in his stories. It is The Old Man who welcomes young Ralph into The Club after their victorious fishing trip in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies." He is also the one who points out Ralph's revered Red Ryder BB Gun under the Christmas tree.



The Old Man is a strict disciplinarian, but he does not punish Ralph unless it is truly necessary. When Ralph innocently repeats Uncle Ben's adult joke in "Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded," his father does not punish him. In contrast to young Casimir's harsh punishment for simply retelling the joke, The Old Man simply laughs with his wife over the incident. When Ralph becomes ill in "Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil," The Old Man grows concerned for his son and recommends summoning the family physician. He takes young Ralph with him on an all-male fishing trip, and includes him in the group during their victorious celebration. When Ralph scrapes the fender on the family's prized Graham-Paige, The Old Man does not accuse Ralph at all. He apparently trusts that his son would not be driving the family car without permission.

Although Ralph's father appears content with his simple lot in life, some stories do portray him as a man who yearns to prove himself. He struggles mightily to win a major award in "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art." He prides himself in his annual fireworks performance for the neighbors, so much so that he continues performing even after his shirt catches fire in "Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb That Struck Back." Ralph brags about his father's baseball prowess in "Nevermore, Quoth the Assessor, Nevermore..." and his legacy as one of the most feared Furnace Fighters in Northern Indiana in "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid."

The Woman at the Automat appears in Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid

The elderly woman at the Automat is unnamed. She appears in "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid." She eats lunch at Ralph's table at the H & H, and gives him a pamphlet detailing her opposition to war-type children's clothing and toys. She is also a vegetarian, as she believes that meat-eaters are doing the work of the Devil. She wears a button that reads, "Disarm the Toy Industry."

Red Ryder appears in Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid

Red Ryder is a fictional heroic figure who vanquishes assorted bad guys and villains, especially rustlers. The BB gun that Ralph wants for Christmas is named after Red Ryder. The character is described in "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid."



Miss Iona Pearl Bodkin appears in Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Ki

Miss Bodkin is Ralph's elementary school teacher at the Warren G. Harding School in "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid." According to Ralph, Miss Bodkin "was a hardier teacher than the present breed." Kids in her class do not consider missing class, even in deplorable weather conditions.

When Miss Bodkin asks Ralph to write a theme about what he wants for Christmas, he writes of the coveted Red Ryder BB gun. When Ralph receives the graded theme from his teacher, she writes on the page, "You'll shoot your eye out. Merry Christmas."

Santa Claus appears in Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Ki

Ralph meets Santa Claus at Goldblatt's department store in "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid." Ralph explains that in Northern Indiana, Santa Claus is a very big man, and the Santa at Goldblatt's is officially recognized among the kids as THE Santa Claus. When Ralph accidentally confesses to Santa that he wants a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas, the old saint of course declines, saying, "You'll shoot your eye out, kid."

Little Orphan Annie appears in The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or Th

The apparent founder of the Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle, Little Orphan Annie appears via her radio show in "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again." Ralph joins Annie's club only to be felled by Annie's friend, The Asp, another character in her show. Little Orphan Annie lives in Tompkins Corners with her faithful dog, Sandy. She spends most of her time chasing pirates or trapping smugglers.

The Asp appears in The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or Th

The Asp is another character in Little Orphan Annie's radio show. Described simply as a friend of Annie's who would just show up if she were really in a tight spot, The Asp apparently regularly cuts everybody's heads off in the show. According to Ralph, The Asp wears a towel around his head. The Asp appears in "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again."



Sandy appears in The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or Th

Sandy is Little Orphan Annie's dog in "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again." Ralph describes Sandy as Little Orphan Annie's Airedale sidekick. Ralph's favorite line in the Little Orphan Annie theme song is "Arf goes Sandy." He points out that Sandy is one of the main reasons that he listens to the Little Orphan Annie radio program.

Pierre André appears in The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or Th

Pierre André is the definitive radio announcer Ralph mentions in "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again." Pierre is the one who announces the code for each radio show's secret message at the end of the program.

Junie Jo Prewitt appears in The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil N

Junie Jo Prewitt is Ralph's blind date in "The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose." According to Ralph, Junie Jo is the greatest-looking girl he has ever seen. She makes even Cleopatra look like a Girl Scout. Junie Jo does not speak during Ralph's repeated attempts to engage her in conversation, however, and eventually Ralph realizes that he is Junie Jo's blind date, not the other way around. His friend Schwartz is trying to help him out by finding a girl for him to date. Ralph refers to his moment of realization as one of those moments in a person's life when the searchlight of Truth shines full upon him, and he is forever changed.

The Official People appears in The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil N

In "The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose," Ralph ponders the fact that everyone is born as a "mewling, puking babe," yet some people go on to become Official People, while the rest do not. Official People are Prime Ministers, Presidents, Cabinet members, Stars, and Dynamic molders of the Universe. Ralph explains that even Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler possess some mysterious quality that makes them powerful, famous, and successful.

Ralph explains that there are about four times in people's lives when the cosmic searchlight of Truth unexpectedly shines upon them. One's reaction to those moments is what seals one's Fate as either an Official Person or simply another face in the crowd.



One group simply ignores the light and moves on, while others see the limits of their own abilities illuminated by the light and are forever changed.

The Roller Rink Nut appears in Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies

Ralph describes the Roller Rink Nut in detail in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies." Depicted as an earlier incarnation of the Drive-In Movie Nut, the Roller Rink Nut is especially drawn to "chicks with purple eyelids." He can be identified by his tendency to don a distinctive black satin jacket with the words SOUTH SIDE A. C. printed in white letters and a white-winged roller-skated foot on the back.

The Roller Rink Nut's car is truly a sight to behold. Usually a '53 Mercury, it must include at least one of the following items as part of a required display in the car's back window: a huge pair of foam rubber dice, a skull and crossbones, hula-hula dolls, bobble-headed professional football figures. The Nut may also place ball fringe around the car windows, and phony Venetian blinds in the back. Some Nuts even choose to line their cars with plastic imitation mink fur.

Hairy Gertz appears in Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies

Hairy Gertz is the title character and a key member of the fishing party in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies." Hairy's value is apparently determined by his possession of a Coleman lamp and ability to tell jokes.

Marcia appears in My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded th

Ralph meets Marcia at the Museum in "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art." Marcia is the target of Ralph's favorite late afternoon time-killer, Girl Tracking. Marcia appears to be one of the complaisant, rebellious, burlap-skirted, sandal-wearing CCNY undergraduates that Ralph finds easiest to snare. She is later abducted rather unceremoniously by Stevie.

Stevie appears in My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded th

Stevie is the friend of Marcia's who comes to collect her in "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art."



Grover Dill appears in Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil

Grover Dill is the town bully. When Grover Dill trips Ralph in "Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil," Ralph unleashes the Tasmanian Devil.

Ludlow Kissel appears in Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back and Nevermo

Ludlow Kissel is the town drunk in Hohman. He is a key character in "Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back." Kissel's family falls victim to the Indiana Personal Property Tax Assessor in "Nevermore," Quoth the Assessor, 'Nevermore...'

Uncle Ben appears in Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words

Uncle Ben is Ralph's family Joke Teller in "Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded." When Ralph recounts Uncle Ben's latest dirty joke to his friend Casmir, trouble ensues.

Casmir appears in Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words

Casmir has the misfortune of repeating Uncle Ben's joke in "Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded." Casmir is a young friend of Ralph's and part of a wholesome, "wonderful," Polish Catholic family.

Old Man Pulaski appears in Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper

Old Man Pulaski is the grouchy proprietor of Pulaski's, the place where Ralph and his friends buy Penny Candy. When Old Man Pulaski insists that Ralph purchase red Jawbreakers along with black ones, he teaches young Ralph his first lesson about Man's Inhumanity to Man.



Miss Shields appears in Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper

Miss Shields is Ralph's second-grade teacher. She appears in "Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper" when she demands that the boys in the class surrender their wax false teeth.

Friendly Fred appears in Enter Friendly Fred

In "Enter Friendly Fred," Fred is introduced as the proprietor of the used car lot across the street from Flick's Tavern. His presence reminds Ralph of the day that he tried to back the Graham-Paige out of the garage.

The Used-Car Nut appears in The Perfect Crime

Described in "The Perfect Crime," the Used-Car Nut is much more dedicated than the ordinary car worshiper, according to Ralph. The Old Man is a Used-Car Nut. He spends his Saturday afternoons visiting local used car lots in search of the next best deal.

Wilbur Duckworth appears in Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton

Wilbur Duckworth is the drum major of the high school band in which both Ralph and Flick play. Duckworth is egotistical, and every member of the all-male band both hates and fears him. Duckworth is the title character in "Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton." When he tosses his batons high into the air, one of the batons makes contact with a high-tension wire, causing fire and smoke to streak through the air and frighten the parade watchers.

Miss Bryfogel appears in Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throat

Miss Bryfogel is Ralph's sixth-grade English teacher in "Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold." Ralph is madly, deeply in love with Miss Bryfogel, and decides to write a special Book Report to demonstrate his true feelings for her. Even now, Ralph remembers Miss Bryfogel's "soft heart-shaped face and dark, liquid eyes." Flick remembers as well, in "I Relate the Strange Tale of the Human Hypodermic Needle." He says, "I don't see her around any more. She really was something..."



Miss Easter appears in Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throat

Miss Easter is Ralph's school librarian in "Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-throated Cuckold." Ralph describes Miss Easter as a kindly, thin, ancient lady who had been born wearing a pair of gold-rimmed bifocals and with a head of blue-gray hair. Miss Easter is a true dedicated librarian and an alert protector of the morals of the young.

The Assessor appears in Nevermore,

The Assessor is the villain in "Nevermore," Quoth the Assessor, "Nevermore..." When the Assessor visits Ralph's home, Ralph's parents are terrified. After the Assessor's visit, Ralph and his friends see the sign announcing the auction of all of the Kissel family's belongings.

The Auction Followers appears in Nevermore,

In "Nevermore," Quoth the Assessor, "Nevermore..." the Auction Followers are described as Human Vultures who live off the disaster and defeat of others, picking the bones clean. The Followers appear at the auction of the Kissel family's personal possessions.

Leopold Doppler appears in Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot

Leopold Doppler is the proprietor of the Orpheum Movie Theater and resident showman in "Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot." Doppler starts the Great Dish Fever when he promises brand new pieces of dinnerware to all adult women attending the theater. When Doppler's hands out too many gravy boats, the women revolt with devastating consequences. The Orpheum closes its doors forever, and Doppler is never heard from again.



Objects/Places

Hohman, Indiana appears in collection

Hohman is a quaint Midwestern mill town located in the extreme Northwestern corner of the state of Indiana. Ralph, Flick, and the majority of the characters are from Hohman. Many of the stories take place there.

Flick's Tavern appears in collection

Flick's Tavern is run by Flick the Friendly Bartender, Ralph's childhood friend. As an adult, Ralph goes to the tavern to visit Flick, and the two men wax nostalgic about old times. Several humorous signs adorn the quaint old building, including the sign from which the book's title is derived. Ralph also admires the old-fashioned jukebox as an example of true Pop Art. Flick's Tavern is a common setting throughout the book.

Red Ryder BB Gun appears in collection

In Chapter 2, "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid," the Red Ryder BB gun is Ralph's true heart's desire. He receives the gun as a Christmas gift, and of course, nearly shoots out his own eye with it.

The Warren G. Harding School appears in collection

Ralph attends the Warren G. Harding School as a young child. The school is first mentioned in Chapter 2, "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid."

Goldblatt's Department Store appears in collection

Goldblatt's department store is the scene of Ralph's visit with Santa in Chapter 2, "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid."

The Furnace appears in collection

The Furnace is The Old Man's nemesis, as explained in Chapter 2, "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid." As one of the most feared Furnace Fighters in Northern Indiana, The Old Man considers The Furnace to be his mortal enemy.



Ovaltine appears in collection

Ovaltine is simply "that rich chocolate flavored drink that all the kids love." Introduced in Chapter 4, "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again," the silver inner seal of an Ovaltine can is required for membership in the Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle. Ralph's experience with the Ovaltine message teaches the young consumer one of his first lessons about commercialism.

Cedar Lake appears in collection

Cedar Lake is the site of Ralph's great fishing triumph in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies." Described as a large, foul-smelling mud hole, Cedar Lake is apparently now condemned, according to Flick.

The Adult World appears in collection

The Adult world is a secret society with its own passwords, handclasps, and countersigns, according to Ralph. In "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies," Ralph details his struggle to gain access to the Adult world, and his eventual victory at the end of the story.

The Roller Rink appears in collection

The Roller Rink at the other end of Cedar Lake is the origin of the Roller Rink Nut. The Roller Rink is mentioned in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies."

The Cedar Lake Evening in Paris Dance Hall appears in collection

Located about 150 yards away from the Roller Rink, the Dance Hall is described in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies" as "festering and steamy and thronged with yeasty refugees from the Roller Rink. The Dance Hall is the place to be for the guys who cannot roller skate.

Crappies appears in collection

Famously captured in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies," crappies are a special breed of Midwestern fish that Ralph says are created by god for the express purpose of surviving in waters that would kill a bubonic-plague bacillus.



Cane Poles appears in collection

Cane Poles are long bamboo poles measuring approximately twelve or fifteen feet in length. According to Ralph, each cane pole weighs a ton, and has about thirty feet of thick green line, roughly half the weight of the average clothesline, three big lead sinkers, a couple of crappie hooks, and a bobber tied onto the end of it. Ralph and the other fishermen use the poles in "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies."

The Museum of Modern Art appears in collection

The Museum of Modern Art is the original setting in "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art." Ralph meets Marcia and Stevie there while Girl-Tracking.

The Major Award Leg Lamp appears in collection

The lamp in the shape of a woman's stockinged leg appears in "My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art." The Old Man receives the lamp as a major award in a sports trivia contest, and Ralph's mother "accidentally" breaks it.

The World's Fair appears in collection

The World's Fair fairgrounds in Chicago are described in detail as the setting for the story, "The Magic Mountain."

The Dago Bomb appears in collection

One of a diverse group of fireworks available at The Old Man's fireworks stand, the Dago Bomb is described in detail in "Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back."

The Roman Candle appears in collection

Described by Ralph as a "truly noble and inspired piece of the pyrotechnician's art," the Roman candle fights back in "Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back." While performing a fireworks show, The Old Man accidentally sets his shirt ablaze with a Roman Candle.



The Old Man's Fireworks Stand appears in collection

The Old Man's Fireworks Stand is introduced in "Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back." Ralph works there during the summer days leading up to July Fourth.

Pulaski's Store appears in collection

Pulaski's store is the setting for "Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper." It is here that Ralph learns his first lesson about Man's Inhumanity to Man.

Penny Candy appears in collection

Penny Candy is an addictive substance that Ralph and his friends purchase at Pulaski's store in "Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper." Popular candy types include Root Beer Barrels, Jawbreakers, Licorice, and JuJu Babies.

The Sousaphone appears in collection

According to Ralph, the sousaphone is a far superior alternative to the tuba. Ralph plays the sousaphone in his high school marching band in "Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton."

The Decameron of Boccaccio appears in collection

Ralph unfortunately selects this book as the subject for his fateful book report in "Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold."

The New England Motel Lunch Counter appears in collection

In "Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot," Ralph opens the story by describing a familiar-looking cereal bowl at a New England motel lunch counter.

The Cereal Bowl appears in collection

In "Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot," Ralph ends the chapter by stealing his cereal bowl at the New England motel lunch counter. Ralph describes the bowl as "a mint-condition, vintage Movie Dish Night Premium Gift Bowl."



The Orpheum Theater appears in collection

The Orpheum Theater is the site of the Gravy Boat Riot in "Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot."

The Gravy Boat appears in collection

In "Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot," the gravy boat is the object that leads to Doppler's demise.



Themes

Coming of Age

Throughout the book, young Ralph learns valuable lessons about life that will serve him well as an adult. In "We Meet Flick, the Friendly Bartender," the reader learns that Ralph is visiting Hohman for the first time in many years. Admitting that he feels like a spy, Ralph sees the familiar sights and characters of his childhood through adult eyes. In "Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid," Ralph unfortunately learns that sometimes parents really do know what they are talking about. After receiving several discouraging warnings about the Red Ryder BB Gun and the probability that he will shoot his eye out, Ralph nearly does exactly that the first time that he fires the prized rifle. Clearly, he learns from the experience, as evidenced by its inclusion in the book.

In "The Counterfeit Secret Circle Members Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again," Ralph is devastated when he realizes that the secret message he receives from Little Orphan Annie is nothing more than an Ovaltine advertisement. Ralph learns another lesson about commercialism, as well as a painful truth about the laws of supply and demand, in "Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper," when Pulaski forces him to purchase the dreaded red Jawbreaker in order to reduce his surplus. As Ralph explains, the Black Jawbreaker teaches him a major lesson of Man's Inhumanity to Man. Ralph also says that Penny Candy is the first purchase of all young boys on their journey to becoming consumers.

In "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies," Ralph struggles mightily to join the Adult world. He fancies himself a fishing expert even though he never actually goes fishing. When the opportunity finally presents itself, it is clear that The Old Man is trying to recognize his son's growing maturity. Not only is Ralph invited to join the fishermen, but he is also given the grown-up responsibility of cleaning the catch. At the end of the story, as Ralph revels in the manly atmosphere of dirty jokes and beer drinking, he realizes that he is truly In.

The Secret Adult World

Ralph spends much of his childhood trying to understand exactly what the adults are doing. In "Hairy Gertz and the Forty-Seven Crappies," Ralph explains his frustration as he attempts to infiltrate the Adult world. According to Ralph, when you are a Male kid, life is what the Grownups are doing. The adult world is a mysterious, secretive place, and Ralph cannot determine what he needs to do in order to be granted entry.

In the same story, Ralph complains about the invisible, impenetrable wall that separates the kids from the adults. Ralph explains that the boys have to claw their way into Life as best they can, never knowing when they will be "Admitted." When Ralph is included in



the triumphant fishing trip that results in the bagging of forty-seven crappies, he knows that he has finally arrived.

In "Uncle Ben and the Side-Splitting Knee-Slapper, or Some Words Are Loaded," Ralph unwittingly repeats the lurid details of an inappropriate joke to a young friend. When Ralph's mother asks him if he understands the meaning of one of the words in the joke, he declares, "Yeah, yeah, I know...ah..." She then demands, "What does it mean?" Defensive, Ralph hilariously answers, "Ah...well, it's about a Hockey thing there!" Understanding her son's mistake, Ralph's mother now explains to the boy's mother, "I don't think either of them knows what it means." Still confused about the joke's meaning, Ralph is mortified when her parents share an all-knowing laugh about the incident later that evening. The adults are speaking in code yet again, and Ralph is unable to crack it.

In "Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold," Ralph is again foiled by his ignorance of adult concepts. In an attempt to prove his undying love to his teacher, Ralph unknowingly bases his book report on a pornographic book belonging to his parents. Ralph assumes that the book is a masterpiece because of its large size and small print. When Miss Bryfogel asks to see him privately, Ralph is triumphant, convinced that Miss Bryfogel is about to confess her true feelings to him. Instead, she confronts him about the origin of the book, and he is again confused. His childish innocence ends the romance before it is even begun.

The Moment of Truth

In "Grover Dill and the Tasmanian Devil," Ralph faces down resident bully Grover Dill as he walks home from school. Ralph explains that all children face an inevitable moment of truth when they must decide whether to turn and run or stand and fight. In Ralph's big moment, the decision seems to be made for him. He actually loses control and to his utter dismay, unleashes his inner Tasmanian Devil.

Ralph also refers to the moment of truth in "The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose." He believes that all people face about four times in their lives when "the cosmic searchlight of Truth shines full upon them." When he agrees to the blind date with Junie Jo Prewitt, he thinks that he is doing his friend Schwartz a favor. Little does he know that Junie Jo is actually the charitable one. When Ralph finally realizes the truth, he describes the moment: "With no warning, from up near the front of the car where the motorman is steering, I see this thing coming down the aisle directly toward me. It's coming closer and closer. I can't escape it. It's this blinding, fantastic, brilliant, screaming blue light. I cam spread-eagled in it. There's a pin sticking through my thorax. I see it all now. I AM THE BLIND DATE!" Ralph believes that these moments of truth, and one's reaction to them, determine the course of their lives from that point on.



Style

Point of View

Ralph is the consistent narrator, the teller of all of the stories in the book. Since he is describing events from his own life, the reader is often brought directly into Ralph's mind as he describes his innermost thoughts, dreams, and feelings. Ralph occasionally acknowledges the reader's presence and his own role as storyteller more directly, as in the first chapter when he reunites with Flick and then says, "I will now lightly pass over the ensuing sickening scene of boyhood companions meeting after years of elapsed time. Back-slappings, hollerings, and other classical maneuvers were performed. I told him why I had come back..."

Although most of the stories are written in the first person, occasionally Ralph uses the second person form to refer to "the rest of us," especially when discussing themes such as the four requisite moments of Truth in a person's life. This writing style is very informal and intimate, and it brings the audience in as though Ralph were speaking to a friend at a party whom he is trying to entertain. Nearly all of the stories are told from a child's perspective, and the language of the book reflects the richness of a wide-eyed, childish imagination.

Interestingly enough, Ralph never switches perspective to anyone other than himself. When he watches Flick toil at the bar, Ralph informs the reader what Flick may be thinking. Only through Ralph's opinions do readers learn what makes each character tick. Ralph's parents and kid brother are never named in the book, presumably because Ralph (or the author) either wants to keep their names a mystery, or simply does not feel it important to identify them in that manner.

Setting

All of the stories generally take place in one of two areas. Through flashback sequences, the author rapidly yet smoothly changes the setting from Hohman and the surrounding area, including Chicago as the site of the World's Fair, and Cedar Lake as the backdrop for the fishing trip, back to New York where Ralph lives as an adult. The final story also briefly includes scenes at a lunch counter located at a motel somewhere in New England.

Each location is described in vivid, adjective-laced detail. Cedar Lake is a mud hole filled with smelly, muddy, crappies with rubbery skins. The World's Fair buildings are not like normal buildings, but more like fantastic buildings that are constructed for a single, unique purpose and then deconstructed one year later.

All of the stories remain much grounded in the weather and rough terrain of the Midwest. Ralph laboriously describes the hazards that young Hohman children simply making their way to school as they are bundled so deeply in winter clothing that they



resemble "bowling balls with feet." In the story about Grover Dill, Ralph explains that the rugged terrain shapes the personalities of the children. When they play ball, they field ground balls on the icy tundra that remains frozen until June. They are cursed with stickers that are driven deep into their fingers as they play. The setting enriches the story and portrays the characters as true survivors of the elements in an inconvenient, no-frills world.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in the informal style of a classic storyteller. Settings and characters are described in exquisite, elaborate detail. The language in the book often reflects Ralph's introspective nature and vivid imagination. When Ralph is seen as a child, his thoughts are dramatic and childlike.

The author also capitalizes many ordinary words in a way that adds emphasis and value to the child's storytelling. The final story describes the "Great Dish Fever" as though it were a famous historical event with which all Midwesterners are familiar. The Old Man is a title in itself. Ralph's father is not a furnace fighter. He is instead, a Furnace Fighter.

Ralph's description of the candy counter at Pulaski's store is seen through the eyes of a child. Every minute detail is covered, and the complicated nature of making such a critical correct first purchase is thoroughly examined. The drama infused into each word and paragraph really drives the story and engages the audience in each event as it unfolds.

Structure

The book is comprised of thirty-one chapters of varying lengths. Each story is introduced by a short chapter that helps the reader make the transition between Ralph's lives in the past and present. Flashbacks are used throughout. The book begins with Ralph's return to Hohman as an adult. Once he visits Flick's Tavern, however, the flashback sequences begin.

Although the extensive use of flashback sequences could conceivably make the book difficult to follow, the author masterfully uses the technique in a non-distracting way. Although it is not always clear in which year each individual story occurs, there is never a question as to whether Ralph is still an adult or has morphed into a child again. Many details, including Ralph's grade level in school and his level of comprehension at the time, act as clues to facilitate the reader's understanding of the story.



Quotes

"BOYS! AT LAST YOU CAN OWN AN OFFICIAL RED RYDER CARBINE ACTION TWO-HUNDRED SHOT RANGE MODEL AIR RIFLE!"

Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid, page 24

"Oh no. You'll shoot out one of your eyes."

Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid, page 30

"Motorists wise, Simoniz."

Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid, page 32

"HO-HO-HO! YOU'LL SHOOT OUR EYE OUT, KID. HO-HO-HO! MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

Duel in the Snow, or Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid, page 38

"Everything comes to he who waits"

The Counterfeit Secret Circle Member Gets the Message, or The Asp Strikes Again, page 54

"The air was as soft as the finest of spun silk."

The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose, page 61

"I am sitting next to the most fantastic creation in the Feminine department known to Western man."

The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night, and the Tinfoil Noose, page 63

"But to the faithful and the persevering and to he who waits awards will come."

My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art, page 87

"There was no problem of Identity, just a gigantic clash of two opposing physical presences: the Immovable Body and the Force That Is Not To Be Denied."

My Old Man and the Lascivious Special Award that Heralded the Birth of Pop Art, page 95



"Get in there, kid, you're holding up the line."
The Magic Mountain, page 109

"I sure got one!"
Ludlow Kissel and the Dago Bomb that Struck Back, page 134

"In the throes of a toothache, all men are one. It is the one affliction known to Man that is truly the Great Leveler."
Old Man Pulaski and the Infamous Jawbreaker Blackmail Caper," page 158

"Sometimes, in a high wind a sousaphone will start playing you."
Wilbur Duckworth and His Magic Baton, page 185

"Where did you get that book?"
Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold, page 201

"I rarely went into my parents' bedroom, because it was somehow off my main beat. Nothing Freudian or Victorian; it just wasn't where my action was."
Miss Bryfogel and the Frightening Case of the Speckle-Throated Cuckold, page 209

"All that stuff about a cuckold. Isn't that one of them yellow birds they put in clocks?"
Polka Time, page 218

"Original my foot! Original Woolworth."
"Nevermore," Quoth the Assessor, "Nevermore....," page 223

"Shut up in the balcony!"
Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot, page 241



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the difference between the sources of entertainment in Ralph's childhood days in Midwestern Indiana in the Depression era and the electronic entertainment that is available to modern children. Do you think that children were happier then or today? Why?

Who do you think is more content with their adult life - Flick or Ralph? Why?

What lessons can be learned from the story of the Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot? What was Doppler's fatal mistake? How do you think that modern women would react in the same situation?

Ralph doesn't understand that the book he finds in his parent's room is pornographic. Do you think that a child could make the same mistake today?

Discuss Schwartz's motivation for setting Ralph up on the blind date. Do you think he was trying to help Ralph? Was it a joke? How do you think you would react in the same situation?

Have you ever experienced one of the moments of Truth that Ralph talks about? Describe it.

What do you think determines whether children become Official People? Are children more influenced by genetics or their environment?

Ralph discusses the existence of a Tasmanian Devil in all males. Do you agree with his theory? Why or why not?

Do you believe that Duckworth deliberately orchestrated the baton incident at the parade? Why or why not? What was his motivation?