

IQ: A Novel Study Guide

IQ: A Novel by Joe Ide

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Ide, Joe. *IQ*. New York: Mulholland Books, 2016. Print.

The novel starts in 2013. Boyd, a minor character, is sitting in his car and watching a school. We learn that Boyd is a pedophile, and that he is planning on kidnapping a girl. The omniscient narrator leaves Boyd and introduces us to the protagonist, Isaiah "IQ" Quintabe. Deronda, an old friend, comes over looking for a favor, but Isaiah is busy searching for a new case on his email.

Isaiah takes Deronda home, and on the way he gets a phone call about a case from his old friend Dodson, but Isaiah is not interested in reigniting their friendship. Isaiah stops to get a present for his friend Flaco. By chance, he witnesses Boyd kidnap a young girl. Isaiah chases after Boyd, who takes the girl onto his boat and heads down the river to the open sea. Isaiah takes a grenade launcher out of his trunk, blows up the boat, saves the girl, and leaves Boyd for the police. Isaiah goes to visit Flaco, who is mentally-impaired and on the verge of turning eighteen, and Isaiah decides that he wants to buy a condo for the boy. He goes home and calls Dodson back.

In 2006, Isaiah's older brother and caretaker, Marcus, was hit by a car and killed. In order to keep the apartment, Isaiah asked Dodson, a practical stranger from school who happened to be homeless, to move in. Dodson agreed, and the boys started living together.

Back in 2013, Isaiah meets up with Dodson and they go to the rapper Calvin Wright's mansion where they meet Calvin, his personal assistant Anthony, his bodyguards Bug and Charles, and his record producer Bobby Grimes. A hitman sent an oversized pit bull into Calvin's house to kill him, and now the rapper wants proof that his ex-wife, Noelle, was behind the attack, so that he can go outside and record his new album. The omniscient narrator jumps back a month and shows the reader how Skip, a sociopath, was hired to kill Calvin, but the narrator does not inform the reader of who hired Skip.

Back in 2005, we learn that Dodson was a member of a gang, the Crip Violators, and he sold crack to make money. As the boys started to get to know one another, Dodson began to think that he could use Isaiah, who was smart and clever, in a scheme to make more money and quit selling crack.

In 2013, the narrator switches to Calvin's perspective, and we learn that the rapper had fallen into a spiral of depression long before the dog was sent to kill him. Isaiah and Dodson search for clues in the backyard, and then Isaiah decides to visit his old boss, Harry Haldeman, at the animal shelter. Harry loves pit bulls, and he says that the dog that attacked Calvin must have been bred to be twice the size of a normal pit bull on purpose.



Back in 2005, Isaiah became obsessed with finding the person who killed Marcus. He quit school and his job, and focused on the hunt, but was unable to find the person. Dodson covered the rent, and suggested that Isaiah start thinking of other, nontraditional ways of making money.

In 2013, Harry makes a few calls and directs Isaiah to Blue Hills Pit Bulls, where Skip works and lives. Isaiah and Dodson go to the ranch in the desert and meet Skip. Isaiah discovers that Skip is the hitman, and then confronts Skip so as to provoke him into making a mistake before leaving. When they leave, Isaiah tells Dodson that either Bobby, Anthony, Bug, or Charles hired Skip.

Back in 2005, Isaiah and Dodson robbed Pet City together and get away with it. The next chapter is dedicated to Skip's background and history, and the omniscient narrator shows us that Skip is furious with Isaiah for having discovered his secret, and so intends to murder him.

In 2013, Calvin burns his possessions in a bonfire on his patio. Bobby attempts to get Isaiah to tell Calvin everything is fine, but Isaiah refuses. Isaiah goes over his list of suspects and determines that Bug and Charles need Calvin financially, and Bobby needs Calvin to make a new record, so the obvious culprit is Anthony. But Isaiah believes he is missing something.

In 2005, Dodson and Isaiah continued to successfully rob a variety of businesses. But the two began to fight and argue over how to do things, and Dodson's girlfriend, Deronda, moved into the apartment and added more tension. One night, Dodson took out a gun during a robbery, Isaiah threatened to quit if there was any violence, and Dodson threatened to shoot Isaiah if he quit.

In 2013, Skip sneaks into Isaiah's house and tries to assassinate him. Isaiah escapes and goes to meet an old client, Blasé, with Dodson. Blasé explains that Calvin used to be part of a trio, along with Bug and Charles. Isaiah and Dodson break into their house, and discover that Charles is attempting to make a comeback album. Isaiah begins to suspect that Charles is behind the assassination attempt.

In 2006, Dodson and Isaiah had a huge falling-out when Dodson went behind Isaiah's back and sold a bunch of their merchandise, along with some of Marcus's much-loved tools. Isaiah moved out of the apartment, and when he went back to collect his things, Deronda told him that Dodson was going to rob Junior, the drug dealer he bought his drugs from, during a reup.

In 2013, Bobby tries again to get Isaiah to tell Calvin things are fine, and this time he offers him 20,000\$. Isaiah refuses, and he and Dodson trick Skip into leaving his house so that they can kidnap his dog, Goliath, and use him as blackmail to find out who hired Skip. The plan falls apart, though, and Isaiah just barely saves Dodson from Goliath before Skip returns and the two must run away.



In 2006, Dodson robbed Junior dressed as a member of a rival gang. He was almost killed, but Isaiah came and saved him. A gang war started between the Crip Violators and the Locos, and in the process Flaco was shot and his parents were killed.

In 2013, Skip tricked Calvin into meeting him in a garage, but Isaiah figured out the plan and showed up to save Calvin. Skip almost shot Isaiah, but Dodson came and knocked Skip out from behind, saving Isaiah.

In 2006, Isaiah felt guilty about Flaco, so he started spending all his time with the orphan. He took a series of jobs that made him a good detective, and got his first case by chance. His first client spread the word about his abilities, and his career took flight.

In 2013, Skip is arrested and Calvin goes to rehab. Dodson cracks the case and realizes that Bobby Grimes tried to have Calvin killed so that he could sell his unreleased records and make a fortune, just like Tupac's producer had done. Bug and Charles beat Bobby up and put him in the hospital. Dodson buys Flaco the condo and then gives Isaiah the money from robbing Junior. In the epilogue, Isaiah goes to the wreck-yard and finds the car that killed Marcus.



Prologue, Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

The novel starts with a prologue in which a minor character, Boyd, was inside his truck across the street from a school, sweating profusely. The narration is third-person omniscient and is written in the past tense. The reader learns that Boyd had lost a tooth while making chloroform at home. He considered going to the dentist, but “the need was a giant tapeworm twisting in his gut, frustrated hungry, and blind “ (3-4).

The school-bell rang and kids started coming out of the building. At first, “None of the girls fit the bill. They were too old or too big or too grown-up looking” (4). But then he saw a girl that the other kids called Carmela. Boyd went back to his apartment, took a bath, and fantasized about kidnapping the girl.

Chapter 1, “Unlicensed and Underground,” is set in July 2013. We are introduced to Isaiah “IQ” Quintabe. Before we are introduced to the man, however, the narrator describes his house, which had the best lawn and freshest paint of all the houses on the block. The house also had lots of security: “The front door was covered with a thin walnut veneer but underneath was a twenty-gauge steel core set in a cold steel frame with a pick-proof bump-proof, drill-proof Medeco Double Cylinder High Security Maxum Deadbolt” (7). Some, the narrator informs us, believed that the house was also “booby-trapped”(7).

In his house, Isaiah was on his MacBook, reading emails and drinking espresso. He heard his car alarm go off, so he went outside with his collapsible baton to inspect the situation. Outside, “Deronda was leaning her world-class badonk against the hood”(8). Isaiah turned off the alarm and told Deronda that he was not planning on ever calling her again. He accused her of being on the lookout “for a baby daddy” (8). Deronda denied this, but the narrator slips into her head and we learn that she “was shopping around for somebody who could pay a few bills, and Isaiah would do just fine” (8).

Deronda told Isaiah that she walked all the way over to his house, but Isaiah accused her of lying: “Your mama lives on the other side of Magnolia. Are you telling me you walked seven miles in the heat of the day in flip-flops with all those bunions on your feet? Teesha dropped you off ... Your mama’s at work. Nona’s at work, Ira still has a cast on his leg, and DeShawn lost this license behind that DUI. I saw his car in the impound yard, the white Nissan with the front stoved in. There’s nobody else but Teesha” (9).

Deronda admitted that Isaiah was right: “Damn Isaiah! ... Why you always gotta fuck with people? I came over here to be sociable, aight? What’s the damn difference how I got here?” (9). Isaiah invited her in, and he continued reading his emails. We learn that he was looking for a “payday case” (9). He read two emails, one from a man who



needed help because his coworker was blackmailing him, and another from a woman who suspected someone was assaulting her during the night.

The narrator explains that Isaiah is a detective: “His priority was local cases where the police could not or would not get involved. He had more work that he could handle but many of his clients paid for his services with a sweet potato pie or cleaning his yard or one brand new radial tire if they paid him at all” (10). Isaiah was currently looking for someone to pay enough money to support himself and Flaco, an important character who is introduced later in the novel.

Isaiah sensed that Deronda was there to ask him something, and she finally asked if he could “hook her up” (13) with Blasé. The narrator tells us that an article entitled “IQ: Isaiah Quintabe is Unlicensed and Undaground,” recently appeared in “The Scene” magazine. The article “recounted a number of neighborhood cases” (13), but the biggest one involved Blasé, an R&B singer. Blasé asked Isaiah for help when someone stole his phone, which had a homosexual sex tape on it, and used it to blackmail Blasé. Isaiah discovered that the singer’s mother, a religious fundamentalist, had been the blackmailer.

Deronda wanted Isaiah to introduce her to Blasé so that the singer could help her achieve some level of fame. Isaiah asked “For what?” (14). Deronda replied: “What do you mean for what? That Kardashian girl’s booty could fit inside my booty and you talking about for what. You know she made thirty million last year?” (14).

Alejandra, a chicken that Isaiah received as payment for a case, then came into the room. Isaiah felt bad about keeping the chicken locked up, so he let him roam around. Isaiah said that he could not help Deronda, and then he tells her he is going to take her home. There is a chapter break, and then the narrator switches over to Boyd, who was sitting in front of the school again. We learn that his boss at the marine supplies store kicked Boyd off the bowling team, and that Boyd bashed his boss’s head with an anchor in return. He spotted Carmela and waited for her to walk away from her friends.

The narrator switches back to Isaiah and Deronda, who were in Isaiah’s car. Deronda, we learn, won a Miss Big Meaty Burger pageant when she was eighteen. She thought that was her “launching pad” (18) moment, but it resulted in nothing besides an interview and a few advertisement photos.

While they drove by a group belonging to the East Side Sureños Locos 13, Isaiah’s phone rang. It was his old friend, Dodson. Isaiah did not want to answer, but he felt he had no choice. Dodson told Isaiah that he had a case for him, but Isaiah said he did not have time for any case.

Another chapter break signals another jump to Boyd. A police officer approached the truck and asked why Boyd was there. The officer took Boyd’s license and went to his car. We learn that Boyd is a registered sex-offender and that he had a history of sexual assault and attempted rape. The narrator goes back to Isaiah and Deronda. Isaiah made a stop at a corner store to pick up a cardboard cutout of Margaret Cho, which he



had ordered for Flaco. After another text break, we learn that the officer was called away because of a shooting. Boyd left the school and found another girl walking down the street.

Isaiah left the store and saw a middle-school girl walking down the street and a truck creeping by. He put the Margaret Cho cutout in his car and stopped moving because he smelled “something that made him freeze in place” (27). The smell was chloroform. He looked up and saw the truck speeding around a corner. The girl had disappeared, but her phone was on the sidewalk.

Isaiah got into his Audi and started chasing the truck. The truck disappeared from sight, but he remembered that the truck had a trailer hitch on its rear, so he predicted that the man would take the girl to a boat in the nearby LA River. He told Deronda to call 911, and he drove towards the river.

Boyd, we learn, was indeed on a boat. He steered it out toward the Queensway Bridge, which opened up to the harbor and the ocean. A car appeared on the bike path, and Boyd recognized the driver as the guy coming out of the store with the Margaret Cho cutout.

Isaiah parked his car on the bridge, opened the trunk, produced a box of weapons, and waited for Boyd. Boyd saw Isaiah on the bridge and thought he was holding a caulking gun, but it was actually a grenade launcher. Isaiah shot the boat with a grenade, Boyd fell into the sea, and Isaiah rescued the girl, Teresa.

Isaiah disappeared before the police showed up, and then he dropped off Deronda and went to take the Margaret Cho cutout to Flaco. Flaco lived in a group home because of brain damage from a bullet, which the reader learns about later. Isaiah felt responsible for Flaco, who would have to leave the group home on his eighteenth birthday, and Isaiah wanted to buy him a condo.

Chapter 2, “Everything,” is set in May 2005. Isaiah was on his couch, unable and unwilling to move. His cellphone was ringing, and he suspected it was his friend Dante calling about the academic decathlon team meeting. Isaiah was thinking about his brother, Marcus, singing old Motown songs.

The day before, the brothers had left a two-on-two basketball game and walked home. Marcus told Isaiah that he was going to go to the store and get dinner so that Isaiah could go home and study: “You only got a ninety-six on that calculus test ... Those Korean kids get a ninety-six with one hand and play the violin with the other. You want to get into Harvard you’re gonna have to do better than that” (44). As Marcus backed into the crosswalk, asking Isaiah what he wanted for dinner, a car hit him and he died.

Isaiah stayed alone in their apartment, isolating himself from the rest of the world, until he had to return to school so that a social worker would not get involved. Isaiah got a couple of part-time jobs to pay the rent, but he needed more.



He met a kid Dodson in the school office. He was waiting for the guidance counselor, and Dodson was waiting to see the vice principal. Dodson was on his phone, looking for a place to stay because his aunt had kicked him out.

Later, Isaiah approaches Dodson and offers him the couch for \$250. Dodson agrees and the boys become roommates.

Chapter 3, "Where's My Samitch, Bitch?" is set in July 2013. Isaiah went to go see Dodson. Dodson was a speaker at a career fair at a junior high school. Instead of talking about his career to the kids, he tried to get them to enroll in his rent-to-own jewelry scam.

After the vice principal kicked Dodson off the stage, Isaiah asked him about the case that Dodson had mentioned. Dodson pretended not to have time: "Dodson was messing with him. After the assembly he did not say anything about the case, making Isaiah ask and giving him a vague answer. Then he had made a call and said they had to go meet the client right away, not telling him who the client was"(60).

They drove to the client's house, and Isaiah remembered when Dodson was a record producer who wrote the song "Where's My Samitch, Bitch?" for one of his clients. Isaiah asked Dodson to turn off the Tupac Shakur music playing on the car's speakers. Dodson says no: "This album right here, Don Kulluminati? It's a classic, didn't come out 'til after Tupac was dead and gone" (61). This, later, becomes key to solving the case that the two are on their way to learn about.

Dodson explained that his second cousin, Anthony, worked for the rapper Black the Knife, whose real name was Calvin Wright. Calvin had locked himself inside his house for three weeks. One weekend, somebody tried to kill Calvin in his house, and now the rapper was too afraid to go outside to record his new album. Dodson said that he had negotiated a \$50,000 bonus for them if they solved the case. Isaiah said he worked alone and did not need a partner. Dodson said it was the only way they would get hired, and he deserved 50%. Isaiah talked him down to 25% by the time they reached the mansion.

A chapter break signals another switch in perspective, this time to a man we later learn is Skip. He was spying on the mansion with binoculars and walking his pit bull Goliath. He knew who Isaiah was, and he had been warned by an anonymous informer about him.

Back at the mansion, Isaiah and Dodson met Anthony, who was Calvin's assistant and who was bored and annoyed with the whole case. They also met Calvin's bodyguards, Bug and Charles, who were brothers. The brothers were angry and confrontational because they felt like Isaiah had been called to do their jobs.

Calvin came into the room and they all sat down to watch the surveillance video that showed Calvin being attacked. Charles had been at a club, Bug was with a girlfriend, and Anthony had gone to see a "mystery girl" (73). Calvin was alone at home when a giant pit bull came through the backyard and into the house. The dog chased Calvin



through the house and out into the pool. Sirens started to sound and a man—Skip—came out from the backyard, jumped into the pool, and pushed the dog out. They escaped and the police came to pull Calvin, who could not swim, out of the pool.

Calvin was certain that his ex-wife, Noelle, was behind the attack. He refused to answer any questions, and he told Isaiah to ask Anthony anything he wanted while Calvin went to take a nap. Isaiah explained to the group that Skip was using whistles, “giving the dog directions like those shepherders do with their dogs. Like a high-low for going left and low-high for going right. The dog’s ears went up every time he made a turn” (80). Isaiah believed that Skip was a hitman who hadn’t expected Calvin to be inside his house for three weeks: “The alternative was shooting him through a window but the drapes were always closed. The hitman’s only option at that point was to get inside the house but he couldn’t because there’s an alarm and cameras and people with guns. So now what does he do? ... He sends in his killer dog” (81).

Chapter 4, “Hatchet Man” is set in June of 2013, and it recounts how Skip was hired to kill Calvin. Kurt, a professional cage fighter who was recently injured, was working for a client of a man called DStar Kurt’s boss asked him to kill Calvin Wright, but Kurt refused. Kurt’s boss then told him to call DStar and find a hitman. DStar sent him to meet Skip, who was going by Fluke, at the Santa Monica pier. Kurt tells Skip/Fluke that it needs to be a drive-by, but “Fluke was disappointed. Drive-bys were boring. He liked to be creative, do new things, surprise his clients; get that holy shit reaction” (87-88).

Analysis

The prologue marks the beginning of an extended metaphor. The narrator compares Boyd’s incessant lust for young girls to a “giant tapeworm twisting in his gut,” and indeed, almost every time the narrator transfers to Boyd’s perspective, the tapeworm is brought up. It represents his twisted sexual desires and characterizes him as foul, disgusting and predatory.

Boyd is a minor character who enters and exits the story quickly, but the author takes great care to characterize the man. Instead of just being a foul, disgusting, subhuman monster infested with a dark desire, Ide shows us that he has had a hard childhood, a history of abuse, and a bad time in a prison system that did nothing to reform or heal him.

Isaiah is a modern-day Sherlock Holmes, and the similarities are present from the very beginning. He shows off his skills during his first interaction with Deronda. She tells him that she walked to his house, and using a bit of deductive reasoning, he proves that she is lying. Deronda admits that he makes her uneasy: “he made everybody uneasy, checking you out like he knew you were fronting and wanting to know why” (8). Isaiah describes himself as a “low-key brother who was so smart people said he was scary” (9).



When Isaiah goes after Boyd, however, he becomes more of an action-star than an intellectual detective. He races his car through the streets, pulls out a grenade launcher, and blows up a boat. The whole scene is ludicrous, but a close reading of the novel as a whole shows that this is not just a superfluous episode in the larger novel. Isaiah is only able to save the girl, Teresa, because he stops to pick up the Margaret Cho cutout for Flaco, and he only gets the Margaret Cho cutout for Flaco because he feels guilty for inadvertently causing Flaco's brain damage and killing his whole family. Isaiah is on a permanent quest for redemption because of his dark past, and saving Teresa is just one instance of good that is made possible by way of all the bad in the past. It is grand and cinematic and silly at first glance, but, by the end of the novel, we can see that it is an important element of Isaiah's character.

The treatment of animals becomes a large issue later in the novel, and Isaiah's goodness is characterized by his treatment of Alejandro, the chicken. The chicken is given to Isaiah with "a recipe for arroz con pollo" for one of his cases, but Isaiah does not kill, cook, and eat the chicken. He does not even lock him in a cage in the garage. He allows him to roam the house free: "The other morning he forgot to close the bedroom door and Alejandro roosted on the closet bar and crapped all over his clothes" (15). Contrast this with the treatment of the dog Goliath, who is used as an assassin (77), and we see Isaiah's goodness contrasted with Skip's evilness.

The relationship between Isaiah and Dodson is perhaps the most complicated and thematically significant relationship in the entire novel. They share a dark past, but they deal with it very differently. Dodson believes that he has "paid his debt" (37) to society by spending time in jail: "that was what angered [Isaiah] most about Dodson. The way he could hustle himself out of his own conscience and his simple-minded equation for all the wrong they had done. Do some time, see your probation officer once a month, and it was over, it was done. Your debt was paid" (37). Isaiah, on the other hand, feels as if he can never do enough good to make up for his past.

Isaiah and Dodson's relationship is fraught with power-struggles from the moment they meet. They are both orphans, but they do not come together out of affection. They come together because they both need one another financially. Their first interaction is a power struggle over how much money Dodson will pay for rent, and, when they meet back up eight years later, they are still having the same fight in regards to what percentage Dodson will take of the payment for the case. Money is not the real issue, however. The two characters struggle to stay in control of everything, including communication and information. Isaiah refuses to talk to Dodson on the phone when he first calls, and later, Dodson refuses to tell Isaiah details about the case until he asks. Both characters are threatened by the other, Dodson because of Isaiah's intellect, and Isaiah because of Dodson's unique power to affect his own ordered, structured life.

Despite all of their issues, Dodson and Isaiah are meant to represent the equivalent of Watson and Sherlock. The rhyme (Dodson and Watson) is a bit of a joke by the author, and their tense relationship is meant to mirror the one between the original Sherlock and Watson. Watson was always inferior to Sherlock, and Dodson's inferiority is not just



mental. It is characterized by his short stature (he is described as 5'4, whereas Isaiah is over six feet tall).

The novel is packed full of pop-culture references, from Chunky Monkey ice cream to MacBooks, and that is because pop culture is an important aspect of the characters' lives. Most of them (with the exception of Isaiah) live in a media-saturated environment, where life is filtered through the television, and advertisements are consumed as often and with as much gusto as food.

The character of Anthony is a red herring throughout most of the novel. The first time we meet Anthony, he talks about Calvin and "Isaiah saw anger and exasperation in Anthony's eyes like he'd been forced to work overtime too many nights in a row" (67). He is described as "good-looking in a collegiate, white boy kind of way. Soft features, nerd glasses, a close-fitting sweater with different-colored triangles on it, and peg-leg pants" (67). This is a sharp contrast to the rest of the house-members, who all dress, talk, and look like gangsters. Anthony is with a "mystery girl" (73) on the night of the attack. And, although Anthony seems bored and resentful of Calvin, Calvin trusts him and gives him lots of power: "You need to know something, ask Anthony" (79). All of this is intended to make the reader suspicious of Anthony, who is not guilty of hiring anyone to kill Calvin (although he is guilty of something, which we will learn about later).

The book examines the culture of rap music through the lens of misogyny. Isaiah remembers a song Dodson wrote for one of his clients when he was a record producer. The lyrics are representative of rap music's rampant sexism: "I be at the strip club, getting' me some hot rub,/ token' on a big dub, hungry for some big grub./ Split to the crib, nuttin' in the fridge, 'ho was doin' sack time, woke her up double time./ Where's my samitch, bitch? I said!/ Where's my samitch, bitch? I said!/ Where's my samitch, bitch? I'm hongreee!/ Where's my samitch, bitch?" (60-61). The lyrics serve to characterize Dodson as having dubious morals, as he wrote the song, but it also serves as an example of the extreme sexism in rap culture, and it is no accident that the chapter in which we are introduced to the rapper Calvin and his "crew," is entitled "Where's My Samitch, Bitch?" Calvin and his friends enact many examples of sexism, including Bug saying that he was with a "PAWG" (72) or "Phat Ass White Girl" (72) whose "name is bitch" (72) on the night of Calvin's attack, and Calvin calling his ex-wife an "evil bitch" (79).

Although this is a detective story, the mystery is not "who tried to kill Calvin" but rather "who hired Skip to kill Calvin?" In this way, Ide is able to introduce Skip as the central villain, allow the narrator into his head, and explore his insanity throughout almost all of the novel while still preserving the overall mystery for the reader, and while still giving the detective, Isaiah, something to search for long after he runs into and has confrontations with Skip. Because we get to look inside Skip's head, we know that he is insane and someone to be frightened of: he "used a tactical crossbow on a whistle-blowing bureaucrat. Put a titanium hunting bolt through the guy's neck while he was washing his minivan. He set a bear trap for a gourmet lawyer who liked to go mushroom hunting in the woods. When the jaws of the trap snapped shut on the lawyer's leg he went into shock, blacked out, and bled to death. Another one of [Skip's] targets was an



elderly Japanese woman. Her son was into the yakuza loan sharks and he needed his inheritance a little early. [Skip] backed her into her koi pond with a samurai sword and she drowned” (88).

Discussion Question 1

The novel has been described as a modern Sherlock Holmes. In what ways is Isaiah similar to the original Sherlock? How is he different?

Discussion Question 2

Isaiah stops Boyd from kidnapping and raping Teresa early in the novel, and then Boyd and Teresa disappear from the story completely. What function do these two minor characters play in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Now that the primary case has been introduced, who do you think hired Skip to kill Calvin? Why? Is there more than one possibility?

Vocabulary

bureaucrat, titanium, gourmet, yakuza, Sureño, recoup, auditorium, roasted, chloroform, iniquity, horsepower, deadbolt, grenade, collapsible, submerging, ostracized, undernourished, idolize, mortgage, macho



Chapters 5 - 8

Summary

Chapter 5, "That's Where the Best Dreams Are," takes place in May of 2005. Dodson officially moved in with Isaiah, and Isaiah began to regret the arrangement immediately. When he left for work, leaving Dodson alone in the apartment, he was sure that he would come back to find the place ruined. However, Dodson was clean and careful. He made breakfast the way his ex-girlfriend, Lupita, had taught him and he thought about calling his friends over. However, he decided against it believing that they would just ruin the place.

We learn that Dodson sold drugs out of an apartment with a bunch of other guys from his gang, the Crip Violators. They all had guns, and a member called Junior was "top of the food chain" (91). Junior bought cocaine straight from drug cartels and sold it to Kinkee, the block captain. Kinkee cooked it into crack before selling it to Dodson and other dealers, who sold it to drug users. Dodson, always a good salesman, made a decent amount of money, but he hated the environment and was bored: "He needed a new hustle, something more worthy of his talents; something that wouldn't get him arrested, shot, or killed by asphyxiation" (93).

At the apartment, the relationship between the two boys was still developing: "They were self-conscious and careful, like there were hidden rules and neither of them knew what they were" (93). Dodson had figured out that the apartment belonged to Isaiah's dead brother, but he did not say anything about it. One day Dodson found Isaiah in the kitchen, fixing the refrigerator with a condenser he took out of an empty apartment next door. Dodson got the idea to use Isaiah as someone to be "profited from" (94).

We learn that Isaiah was ten when his mother died from an operation. His father then killed himself. Marcus was smart and capable, but he skipped college and became a "jack of all trades" (97) to take care of Isaiah. He believed Isaiah could do and be anything he wanted to. Isaiah decided that he wanted to find the person who killed Marcus.

Chapter 6, "Burnout," takes place in July of 2013. Isaiah and Dodson went to Calvin's backyard and looked for clues. Isaiah found out that Skip was wearing crocs, and that he had brought a beach chair to sit and watch the house from.

Bobby Grimes, Calvin's record producer, arrived at the house. He, Bug, Charles, and Anthony discussed the case with Isaiah. Bug suggested that Kwaylud, a rival rapper, might have been behind the attack. Anthony was adamant that Noelle, Calvin's ex-wife, did not do anything. Bobby said that Calvin had life insurance and the money would go to Noelle. Then, Bobby asked Isaiah to tell Calvin that "it's perfectly safe for him to go back to work and make my record" (102). Isaiah refused because he believed Skip was a dangerous professional. Bobby asked Calvin to "reassure Calvin as a personal favor"



(104), and Isaiah again refused. He left and told Dodson that he planned to find the pit bull, as the dog was the only link to the man.

The narrator switches over to Noelle's perspective for the first time. An anonymous person called her and told her that Calvin hired a detective. We learn that before she married Calvin, she was a singer. Once they got married, they had massive fights. She told the caller that they had "to do something about this" (108), and then she went out shopping with her bodyguard Rodion because she was about to be on The Shonda Simmons Show.

The narrator switches over to Calvin, who was on the couch reminiscing about how he used to be the front man of a trio. His song "Up From Nothin" went multiplatinum and "life as a rap star had begun" (109). He made 13 more albums, and things were good for awhile, but then conditions started to worsen: "He slept twelve, fourteen hours a day or had insomnia and wandered around the house until five in the morning. He got paranoid. Said some of his jewelry was missing and somebody was tampering with his food. He stopped showering and shaving. He lived on Krispy Kremes and spicy V8. He complained about allergies, headaches, and backaches but Dr. Macklin couldn't find anything wrong. He adopted a stray cat" (110).

Bobby did not know about Calvin's new condition until Calvin came into the studio a week ago and started rapping a sad song about how insane he felt. Calvin went into the bathroom and started hearing a voice that described his symptoms. He thought he was finally going insane, but the voice turned out to be Dr. Freeman on the radio. He was reading a passage from his book about "burnout" (116) from overwork.

Chapter 7, "Kill on Sight," is also set in July 2013. Isaiah and Dodson went to the Hurston Animal Shelter to see Harry Haldeman, who Dodson used to work for when he was a teenager. Harry had "an encyclopedic knowledge of dogs" (120) and he loved pit bulls. They showed Harry the surveillance video and Harry explained that the average pit bull is 60 pounds, but Goliath was at least 130, which is "unheard of" (122). He also said that the dog had been trained to "attack on sight" (122). He suspected someone had bred the dog to be large, perhaps with a breed called a Presa Canario: "They call it a pit bull on steroids, It's got an unpredictable temperament and it's human aggressive. Mix that together with a pit's fearlessness and determination and train it to attack on sight and I don't know what you've got ... Whoever the fella is that bred this dog is one crazy son of a bitch" (124).

Chapter 8, "Jiffy Lube," is once again set in May of 2005. Isaiah started looking for Marcus's killer. He could not remember anything about the car that hit Marcus. He called the police and found out there was a witness at the bus stop. He went back to the intersection where it happened and thought about his geometry teacher, who taught him about inductive reasoning. He went to the bus stop and looked for someone who took the bus at the same time Marcus was killed. He found a guy who worked at Jiffy Lube and asked him about the accident. The guy could not remember anything except that it was a silver Accord with a Lakers sticker on the back. Isaiah went home and searched



demographics for the car and concluded that it was an older white man and, based on the direction and time he had been driving, he must live in East Long Beach.

Isaiah went to the intersection and waited for the car, assuming that the man was driving home from work and that he had been taking the quickest route, and that he would go back to the old route after some time had passed. Isaiah did not see the car, however. He went home and practiced identifying the makes and models of car, and details about their drivers.

Obsessed with finding the car, he quit school and stopped going to work and walked around all day looking for the car, but he had no luck. One day, Dodson confronted Isaiah about not having any money, told him he would cover the rent for now, and then suggested that they start thinking about their “criminal options” (134).

Analysis

Early in Chapter 5, the narrative foreshadows the event that forever alters Dodson's life and ultimately turns him into a detective. When the crack-house where Dodson works is being described, the narrator states: “Get bold enough to try a robbery and you'd be hard-pressed to get out alive” (91). This, of course, introduces the idea that the drug dealers could be robbed. And, soon after this, Dodson is shown to be bored, restless, and unhappy with his low place on the ladder. This foreshadows the moment that Dodson does grow bold enough to attempt a robbery.

Dodson is a complex character that acts as a literary foil for Isaiah. Isaiah is the protagonist of the novel, and his dislike of Dodson trickles out to the reader's own idea of Dodson. Dodson is a bit of a scoundrel, and we've already seen him try to hustle poor children out of what little money they have for gold chains, and write the lyrics to an incredibly offensive and sexist rap song. Nonetheless, there is something likable and charming about Dodson, and when we learn about his tough past, he becomes even more likable.

The novel illustrates and emphasizes a large economic gap between Dodson and Isaiah's backgrounds. This contrasts with the fact that, by the time they become friends, the two share the same apartment and have just about the same amount of money. Isaiah grew up with two parents, and when his parents died his brother took over for them and worked hard to provide for Isaiah. He was intent on making sure Isaiah got into Harvard, and giving him the best future possible. Dodson, on the other hand, was raised by an alcoholic father with PTSD who left with the whole family to go to Oakland, leaving Dodson behind with an aunt who kicked him out. No one seems to care what Dodson does or how he does it, and the description of the crack-house where he worked is pitiful: “Some of the customers lit up right in front of you, the crack fumes smelling like burnt rubber, clouds of it swirling into an atmosphere already thick with weed smoke, Thunderbird, and body funk. It was a wonder you didn't get cancer just being there” (92).



While Isaiah is the protagonist, and a good man, he is also flawed, whereas his brother, Marcus, is the embodiment of goodness. Marcus sacrificed his own life to make Isaiah's better than his, and he never complained or resented it: "Marcus smiled that big sunny smile and saw the future in Isaiah's eyes. 'God gave you wings so you could fly up that pathway to the very top,' he said, 'That's where the best dreams are'" (97). Isaiah's detective work serves the hope of fulfilling Marcus's dreams to do good for the world.

Isaiah's obsession with doing good things for the world contrasts greatly with his past outlook on life. In grieving over his brother's death, he becomes a nihilist: "It was luck how things turned out so why even try if you were going to get hit by a car? Why not coast if your fate wasn't in your hands? Why do anything at all if Marcus wasn't there?" (97). Moreover, he becomes angry and thirsts for revenge against the person who killed Marcus: "He'd go after Marcus's killer. Find him. Hunt him down, tell him he didn't kill just anyone, he killed Marcus, the best person in the world — and then make that murdering piece of shit pay (98).

Earlier in the book, we see how Deronda desperately desires fame and this theme is continued with the character of Noelle. In Chapter 6, we meet Noelle, who has fame. The two characters are foils, and through Noelle we see that fame is not as glorious as Deronda imagines it might be. Noelle is happy with her lifestyle at first, but she feels stifled: "Her mental development got put on hold, There was no need to read anything but tabloids and fashion magazines and no reason to challenge herself or create anything more worthwhile than a line of handbags to sell on HSN" (106). Her marriage to Calvin is a disaster, and their fights are continually put in the tabloids.

Noelle also serves as another red herring. Her fights with Calvin are "legendary" (107). She has destroyed his belongings, locked him out of the house, hit him with a "pimp cup" (108) on stage, slapped him with a piece of turkey on Thanksgiving, bit his finger, sent his dog to his rival, Kwaylud, posted pictures of him masturbating online, and given an interview about the size of his genitalia. In return, he slept with another singer in their bed, grabbed her hair, threw her off a stage, put her purse in the microwave, threw waffles at her face, threw her hairdresser out of a window, put her shoes in concrete, and wrote a hate-filled song about her. She is in contact with someone about Isaiah, and she is upset that Calvin has hired a detective, which leads the reader to believe that she hired Skip.

A pit bull, Goliath, is used as a weapon in the novel, but Ide takes great care not to vilify the dogs' owners rather than the dogs themselves. Through the character of Harry, the reader is treated to a lecture in which we learn that aggressiveness was bred out of the breed in the 1800s, but the aggressiveness is back due to modern breeders: "It's Murphy's other law. Anything that involves a teenager will be a goddamn horror show. Little brain-dead creeps breed aggressive dogs to aggressive dogs and then train them to be vicious. Sick, if you ask me. You treat a pit like a member of the family, socialize it, train it, and you'll never get a better pet. But most people are stupid and lazy and why they find out how much work that is they throw up their hands and chain the dog to a tree like it's the dog's fault" (121).



Discussion Question 1

Why did Ide elect to have a pit bull as the villain's weapon? Is there a larger message? What does it say about the culture of the novel? What effect does it have on the book?

Discussion Question 2

Deronda and Noelle are foils for one another. Are there any other characters who have opposing matches in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Foreshadowing is used to alert the reader to a possible robbery in the near future. Are there any other instances of foreshadowing being used in the text? What effect does this device have on the novel?

Vocabulary

slathered, chauffeured, magnanimous, substantiated, cartel, kilos, doubling, fiends, discriminating, scattered, condenser, perspective, investigation, precautions, circumvent, depleting, intervention, obligations, denominator, prolonged



Chapters 9 - 12

Summary

Chapter 9, "Game Bred," takes place in July 2013. Harry called his contacts in the dog breeder world and asked around for information on a guy breeding large pit bulls. After going through a dozen contacts, he found a guy who knew about a man named Skip who "trained dogs for the military" (136) at Blue Hills Pit Bulls in the middle of the desert.

Isaiah and Dodson drove to the desert, and we learn that Dodson was afraid of dogs because he had been bitten by his friend's dogs when he was a child. Nevertheless, they went to the desert and met Skip. Isaiah noted that he "was the same height and weight as the man on the video. He moved the same way too" (138). But Isaiah did not confront him. He pretended to be interested in a dog. Skip gave them a tour, and Isaiah noticed that there are archery targets on the property.

The narration switches over to Skip, and goes back to before Isaiah arrived. He saw the car through his binoculars and immediately knew who it was. He took Goliath and hid him in the living room where he could whistle for him if he needed him. Someone named Bonnie called him and yelled at him for using a dog instead of just shooting Calvin. Skip said he would handle it.

Back in the present, Skip told them that his father had a Purple Heart from Iraq and that his gun club met at the property, which was why there were bullets all over the ground. He took them into the barn where the dogs were kept and said that they were all game bred: "It's like your mom and dad are Mike Tyson and Ronda Rousey. A game dog has a really high pain tolerance and won't back down no matter what. Like it'll keep fighting even if it's losing, even if it's getting torn apart and dying. You should see my dogs. They won't quit even if they're winning. Seriously? If the other dog was dead and buried my dog would dig it up and kill it all over again" (144).

Skip told them about how one of his dogs escaped and killed his neighbor's herd of goats. Isaiah, finally fed up with the charade and disgusted with Skip, started calling Skip out on all of his lies. He proved that the dog did not escape and eat the goats, but that Skip let him out to kill the goats as part of its training. Isaiah asked him where the dog that tried to kill Calvin was. He accused him of killing all of the puppies that were not big enough. He accused him of using a cattle prod on the dogs. He accused him of lying about his father being in the army, and about having a gun club.

Skip kicked them out and they went to McDonalds. Isaiah explained that Skip already knew who they were, and that by making him angry Isaiah hoped to provoke him into doing something stupid. He hypothesized that Bobby, Anthony, Bug, or Charles hired Skip.



Chapter 10, “Pet City,” is set back in 2005. Isaiah and Dodson decided that if they wanted to make money, they ought to rob some place. Isaiah made Dodson promise there would be no guns. Isaiah researched the average response-time to burglaries and discovered they would have six minutes. They went to Pet City and looked around for small, expensive items. Isaiah spent weeks calculating all of the risks and making a plan, but when it got time for the robbery he was panicked and Dodson was calm. When they got back to the apartment, Isaiah realized a change had begun inside him.

Chapter 11, “Lucky,” is set in 2013, and it concentrates on Skip. Skip was furious that Isaiah “had made him feel small and stupid and ashamed like he had all his life” (160). We learn that in high school he was a “fringe kid that walked the hallways pretending he had somewhere to go and laughing while he talked on his cell phone to an imaginary homie” (161). His real name was Magnus Vestergard, the other kids called him Maggot, and he had never met his father.

One day, he watched a YouTube video in which “a dork just like him stuck a Roman candle between his butt cheeks and galloped around his driveway” (161). He started his own YouTube account, found a dead homeless man, and did a fake interview with him for his channel. He made more videos and “went from being anonymous to that crazy dude who makes the videos” (162). He was arrested, did not graduate, and could not find a job. His uncle, Hugo, hired him to work at his gun store. He worked there for awhile, but then started selling guns on the side. He traded one for his first pit bull, Lucky. When his uncle found out about the guns, he turned him in and Skip went to jail. He boarded Lucky with Al Gunderson at Sentinel Pit Bulls, and when he got out he had to work off the boarding fees. When Al died of a brain tumor, his wife wanted to get rid of the place because she hated dogs, so she quit-claimed the property to Skip, who took over for Al. Skip got a gun and shot his uncle, his uncle’s bookkeeper, and a prison guard who’d beat him up. When Skip’s old cellmate, Jimmy Bonifant, heard the news, he hired Skip to kill someone for him, and Skip started doing jobs for Jimmy and his friends. He got the idea to make a big pit bull from watching Godzilla. At the end of the chapter, he decided to kill Isaiah.

Chapter 12, “Goodbye Goodbye Goodbye” is also set in 2013. Calvin took a laundry basket, loaded it up with his possessions, and tossed it outside with a growing pile of his things. He poured alcohol onto the pile, “a nod to Chapter 4 of Dr. Freeman’s Book, ‘Avoiding Drugs and Alcohol’” (171), even though he had been “popping Focalins to keep the energy up and Ativan to keep his nervous system from vibrating into dust” (170).

Isaiah and Dodson met with Bobby, Bug, Charles, and Anthony in the front driveway. Isaiah told them about Skip, but Charles did not believe that Isaiah had any real leads, and he again wanted Isaiah to call the hunt off.

Calvin was burning his things because of a chapter about letting go of possessions in Dr. Freeman’s book. Calvin wanted to be free: “From what, he wasn’t exactly sure, but he knew he had to get away from it or be lost forever” (176). Everyone went into the backyard to see what was burning. Isaiah noticed that there were unopened bottles in



the fire, and told everyone to run, but only Dodson listened. There was an explosion, and Calvin fell in the pool and the police were called. Bobby left before the police arrived, but he told Bug that he had to take the charge so Calvin would not go to jail.

The narration switches over to Bobby, and we learn that Calvin was his first big client. His record label had swelled after that, but then the music economy crashed. Now, a big entertainment conglomerate was interested in buying his company out, which would save him financially, but they would not buy if they knew Calvin was in the state he was in.

At the end of the chapter, Isaiah reviewed his main suspects. He believed Bobby truly wanted Calvin to make the album, and he thought that, though Charles and Bug resented Calvin, “their livelihood depended on him” (182-183). He suspected that “The question mark was Anthony, He was the only one who defended Noelle and he didn’t seem to care about his job, the album, or Cal for that matter” (183). Despite this, Isaiah thought that he was on the wrong track and that he was missing “the case breaker” (183).

Analysis

Dodson and Isaiah’s relationship is further complicated in Chapter 10. For the first time in the novel, Dodson is shown as superior to Isaiah. When the two boys decide to rob Pet City, Isaiah takes the lead and makes all of the fool-proof plans. But, when they arrive, he panics, while Dodson remains cool: “Dodson was more hyped than afraid. He was used to high-pressure situations, crack dealing was a high-pressure business. He shot Lil Genius, who was shooting at him. He was robbed at gunpoint twice, got busted twice, did a stretch at YA camp, and had a fight with a Cambodian or a Mexican every day. Some Locos chased him into a marsh near the Dominguez Channel and he hid in the nasty smelling reeds for an house and got chewed up by the mosquitos. He glanced at Isaiah. Yeah, uh-huh, Mr. Eliminate Mistakes looked like he was about to jump off a cliff, sweating a taking deep breaths, Yeah, I bet you wish you had some gangsta in you now” (155). This complicates their Sherlock/Watson, Hero/Sidekick relationship, and allows Dodson a moment to shine, which adds to his character, as well as Isaiah’s.

Their relationship gains depth in Chapter 12, when Isaiah warns everyone about the liquor bottles. “Run,’ he said. He took off. Dodson hesitated a moment and then ran after him” (177). None of the other men listen to Isaiah, Charles even asks: “What the fuck’s wrong with them?” (177), and they almost die in the explosion. But in this scene we see that Dodson trusts Isaiah completely. For the first time in the novel, they are not at odds with one another, but on the same side.

But, back in the past their relationship is not going so smoothly. While they have come to a fragile peace and have teamed up to rob the pet store together, Ide foreshadows the dramatic events that soon follow when the boys are discussing robberies. “But you know what gets niggas busted more than anything else?’ Dodson said. ‘They partners’” (150).



Isaiah's character begins to shift after the first robbery at Pet City. "A tidal change was rolling over him. His heartache, pain, and sorrow were ebbing away and in their place, the roar of adrenaline, the thrilling shock of fear, and the cool clear ecstasy of getting away" (159). For the first time since his introduction, he is not a victim of fate who has tragically lost his loved brother, or a heroic detective. He is a criminal, enjoying crime, and it is this that he later feels he must atone for.

If Noelle is a foil for Deronda, then Skip is a twisted mirror image of Deronda, whose goal is to become the next Kim Kardashian. In high school, where all his problems seem to have begun, he is described as "anonymous" (161). This anonymity is so painful for him to bear in a culture in which fame is praised, desired, and sought after above all else that he begins a career as a sort of twisted Jackass YouTube star that ultimately ruins his education and career prospects, and gets him sent to juvenile hall.

Like Deronda, Skip's obsession with fame is a result of the culture in which he lives in. Skip, however, is not attracted to reality shows, and instead of fantasizing about fame, he turns into a hitman and kills people. The fame he seeks is more of an infamy, and is inspired by more male-targeted media. Isaiah accuses him of thinking his job is "cool because he saw Tom Cruise play a hit man in a movie" (145). He gets the idea to create Goliath "watching the new Godzilla movie. The humongous lizard was stomping around, crushing buildings, collapsing bridges, and causing tidal waves" (167).

Calvin is a foil for the teenage Skip. Calvin has fame, friends, women, and massive amounts of money. And yet he is shown to be every bit as unhappy as the young Skip was. Calvin looks to a self-help book that advises: "If you're suffering from burnout then you know it's a constant struggle keeping up with what's in, what's new, what's hot; always desperate to acquire that next meaningless possession, And then next, And the next, This obsession with things holds us back, keeps is in burnout mode, perpetuation the feeling f futility because going forward only means accumulating more meaningless possessions" (175). When Calvin burns his things on his patio, Ide shows that, although fame and money are desirable, they offer no true salvation.

Animal rights and cruelty are a large theme that runs throughout the book. When Calvin burns his things, his "last basket had an animal theme: a white ermine Cossack hat, a python-skin bomber jacket, eel-skin gloves, sharkskin cowboy boots, ostrich-skin messenger bag, chinchilla pillows, and a full-length overcoat made from six endangered cheetah hides" (174). This is a comment not only on the gluttonous wealth of Calvin's lifestyle, but of the cruelty to animals. Just like Skip, who breeds pit bulls as weapons, Calvin has no compassion for animals, and uses them as accessories.

In the last part of Chapter 12, Isaiah goes over his suspects, which gives the reader a chance to do the same. Reflecting that he is missing the key to solving the case, he notes: "And it was something he already knew" (183). A rule of detective fiction is that the reader must be given all the clues to solve the mystery—to keep things fair—and this is Ide's way of letting the reader know that all of the cards are now on the table.



Discussion Question 1

Dr. Freeman's book suggests that ridding oneself of personal property will create happiness. Calvin tries to get rid of his things in a bonfire, but he cannot get rid of them all. Would he be happy without any of his things? What other characters might benefit from a bonfire?

Discussion Question 2

Many of Skip's behaviors and choices are indirectly tied to the media by Ide. Can the media truly shape and mold someone into a sociopath? Or can it only help the sociopath along his path?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Isaiah, who is always cool, calm and collected, panic when he is at Pet City? Why does Dodson remain calm? What does the difference suggest about their characters? About their relationship?

Vocabulary

Frustration, yacht, Buddhist, Botox, qualms, downloading, promotional, constellation, conglomerate, voracious, cashmere, crucifix, illustrious, enthusiast, futility, absinthe, incisors, meteorite, breeder, arsenal.



Chapters 13 - 16

Summary

Chapter 13, "Is That You?" takes place in 2005. Dodson and Isaiah robbed another place. Isaiah did not give Dodson any details about the robbery until they were on the way. When Dodson finally asked him, he told him that they were going to rob a beauty shop and steal hair extensions that they could resell for hundreds of dollars. The robbery went much better than the first. Isaiah was happy and Dodson was hopeful about the possibility that he could "quit the crack business" (186).

Over the next two weeks, the pair robbed a sunglass store, a fishing store, and a shoe store. But, because Isaiah insisted on selling the merchandise on Marcus's eBay account, they did not yet have any money, and Dodson had to continue selling crack, which he resented. Isaiah and Dodson stored the merchandise in Marcus's storage locker, where he kept his tools.

One day, Dodson went behind Isaiah's back and sold the hair extensions to a beauty parlor. He gave Isaiah half the money, and used his to buy expensive new clothes, despite Isaiah's warnings about drawing too much attention. Dodson stopped cleaning up after himself in the apartment, and started bringing his girlfriend, Deronda, over: "Deronda went out of her way to mess with Isaiah. Dropping his toothbrush in the toilet, leaving her thongs to dry on the bedroom doorknob" (192).

One night, there was a news report about the robberies, and Deronda figured out that the report was about Isaiah and Dodson. They continued the robberies, and soon Isaiah was able to quit selling crack. He and Deronda went out every night, partied, and spent a ton of money: "It was like being a celebrity, living your life instead of chasing it" (194).

Isaiah began to want them both out of his apartment. Dodson spent all of his money, and wanted to do another robbery. After making him wait a week, Isaiah takes Dodson to a bike shop. The robbery goes fine until a cop shows up. They hid and Dodson took out a gun. Isaiah told him to put it away, but he would not. Isaiah said he would quit if Dodson did not put it away, and Dodson said "Then I'll shoot you too" (196). They managed to escape without the cop seeing them, and the two argued about the gun. Isaiah threatened to quit again, but Dodson said that Isaiah would not quit because he needed it just as much as Dodson did.

Chapter 14, "You Can Make Anything Run," is set in 2013. Skip drove a repair van to Isaiah's house and parked it in front of his neighbor's house. He broke into Isaiah's bedroom through the window and heard Isaiah's car pull up just as someone texted him "on his way" (202). He did not have time to get ready, so he waited in the bedroom.

The perspective shifts to Isaiah. Isaiah got out of his car and noticed the repair van. He asked the neighbor kids who were playing football if they had seen anyone outside his



house, but they said no. He went inside and relaxed when he saw his door was not broken.

The perspective changes to Skip. He heard Isaiah walk down the hall and then stop. The perspective changes again and Isaiah saw that there was chicken droppings in the hall. He called out for the chicken, “Alejandro?” he said. ‘Are you in there?’” (204).

Back with Skip, he heard Isaiah and then he heard something moving in the closet. Thinking someone was in there, he shot at the chicken. Back with Isaiah, he heard the gun and ran out of the house. Isaiah thought about calling the police, but Skip was the only lead in his case.

He and Dodson go to meet Blasé, who tells them about Calvin’s past. Black The Knife was a rap trio formed of Calvin, Charles, and Bug. Charles was the lead star, but he was not very talented. Calvin threatened to “leave and go solo if he wasn’t the front man” (208). Calvin got to be the front man, and he started calling himself Black The Knife, and then Bobby Grimes gave him a record deal. “From then on they worked for Calvin’s LLC and lived in his crib like house niggas until Noelle threw them out” (208).

Dodson and Isaiah went to Charles and Bug’s house. Charles was in jail for Calvin’s bonfire, and when Bug left the duo broke in. Isaiah stole Charles’s phone, and Isaiah found recording equipment and a bunch of CDs labeled “Grandyose Is Taking Over” (210). They went to Dodson’s house and listened to the CD, which was Charles’s poor attempt at a comeback. He had a diss-track about Calvin on the CD, and Isaiah discovered that Noelle was singing in the background of the song.

Dodson made gumbo, like he did before, and Isaiah hypothesized that Noelle and Charles were in a relationship and needed insurance money from Calvin’s death, and so had Noelle’s bodyguard, Rodion, hire a hitman.

Chapter 15, “When We Ride On Our Enemies,” is set in 2006. Dodson and Isaiah robbed a kitchen store, and Dodson took longer than the arranged time on purpose, to scare Isaiah. Dodson went to the storage shed without Isaiah, took some merchandise and Marcus’s tools, and had a garage sale with Deronda. Isaiah was furious, so he changed the lock to the shed and moved into a motel.

Dodson ran out of money and tried to get Isaiah to do another job. They met at the storage locker and Isaiah said he would not do any more robberies until Dodson was out of the apartment. Dodson almost shot him, but instead he hit him with his gun.

When Isaiah woke up he decided to move out of the apartment and be done with Dodson. He went back to get Marcus’s ashes and ran into Deronda, who said Dodson was in trouble. Deronda had convinced him it would be a good idea to rob Junior. She had told him to ask himself “what would Isaiah do?” (229), and Dodson thought he had a good plan. Isaiah was worried that if Dodson got arrested so would he, so he asked where Junior lived.



Chapter 16, “I’m Not Doing It,” is set in 2013. Isaiah, Dodson, Anthony, Charles, Bug, and Bobby had a meeting in front of Calvin’s house. Bobby suggested that they tell Calvin Noelle is behind the assassination attempt, so the “impasse” (235) can be broken. He offered Isaiah and Dodson 20,000\$. Isaiah declined, and said that he was meeting a lead who knew Skip later that night. This is not true, though, but one of them calls Skip and tells him. Skip leaves his house to go to and see who Isaiah is meeting, and Isaiah and Dodson break into his house to steal Goliath and use him as blackmail to get Skip to talk. Goliath almost kills Dodson, who is terrified of dogs, but Isaiah saves his life. Skip figures the scheme out, though, and gets back just in time to stop them from taking Goliath.

Analysis

In Chapter 13 there is more foreshadowing about the robbery that changes Dodson and Isaiah’s lives. When Dodson is angry that Isaiah is making him ask about their next robbery, to gain leverage, he thinks that he is acting like Kinkee, who “played that game too, knowing you were down to kibbles and bits and making you ask when the reup was happening. Then he got to tell you: ‘That’s some classified shit, nigga, above your lowly-ass pay grade, you feel me? I’ll let you know when I let you know’” (184). When Dodson does get information about how and when the reups happen, he decides to intervene. There is more foreshadowing when Isaiah tells Dodson that they have to sell their stolen merchandise on eBay because it “can’t roll over on us. The only ones who can do that are you and me” (188).

Dodson and Isaiah’s relationship is a constant struggle. Both boys are constantly trying to outmaneuver one another so that they can feel secure in the dominant, alpha-male position. After Isaiah panicked during the Pet City robbery, Dodson felt that he was finally on top, but Isaiah does not let Dodson remain dominant for long: “It was irritating, Isaiah making him guess what the job was. No doubt the boy was feeling foolish about the Pet City score and was trying to get some leverage back” (184). He does get the leverage back, but when Dodson goes behind his back and sells the hair extensions, Dodson regains dominance and begins to take control of the apartment. And Isaiah takes back the position when he starts withholding plans for a new job, but Dodson takes it back when he pulls out the gun and threatens to shoot Isaiah.

In the present, the relationship between Dodson and Isaiah is less complicated by matters of power, but there is still resentment between the two. When Isaiah is almost killed by Skip, Dodson cooks dinner for him. He makes gumbo, like he did when they were younger. Isaiah remembers, but he does not say anything, and so Dodson was upset. But instead of allowing himself to feel sad, he turns the emotion into anger: “Dodson was disappointed Isaiah didn’t remember about the gumbo but what really pissed him off was not catching the thing about Noelle and what pissed him off even more was that he hadn’t made Isaiah stumble once” (213). Dodson, in his hurt, asks Isaiah a series of questions he hopes Isaiah will not be able to answer, so that he can humiliate him and discredit his intelligence, which he has always secretly been intimidated by. The questions push Isaiah places he would not have gone on his own,



and allow him to form a solid (although, ultimately, wrong) hypothesis about who wants Calvin dead. Thus, we see that although the relationship is complex and tense and full of struggle, it is a relationship that, in the end, makes both men stronger and better.

The hypothesis Isaiah forms is indicative of his own mental state. He believes that Charles has hired a hitman to murder his friend Calvin because he wants Calvin's money, but, more importantly, because Charles has been humiliated by Calvin and wants to reinstate his own dominance. This mirrors the relationship between Isaiah and Dodson almost perfectly, and it is clear that Isaiah (with the help of Dodson) comes to this conclusion because of the conflict in his own life and in his own relationships.

The change in Isaiah progresses as he continues to rob places of business. After robbing the beauty parlor, he is pleased that he was able to steal the hair extensions without panicking and that they were able to rob the place in only four minutes: "Dodson could feel the boy's head swelling, probably thinking he was a man now" (186). And, when they argue about the gun, and Isaiah threatens to quit, Dodson tells him that he will not quit because he needs it more than Dodson does: "I need the money. You just need it" (200). This implies that Isaiah has become attached to crime not because of necessity and finances, but because he is addicted to the rush of it, because the rush allows him to push Marcus's death out of his head.

When Isaiah gets older he feels as if he must repent for his past indiscretions for many reasons, but a big reason is that he feels as if he has let down his brother

Marcus. Marcus is a good man, through and through, and his wish was that Isaiah make something of himself and do good in the world. Once Marcus dies, however, Isaiah becomes a thief, and he uses Marcus's eBay account to sell the stolen merchandise with. He also uses Marcus's storage shed, where he kept the tools he loved so much, to keep the merchandise in. In this moment, Isaiah exhibits the hubris of a Greek hero testing his fate by poking a sleeping bear, and so the reader knows that Isaiah will have to, eventually, pay for his crimes.

In Chapter 15, Deronda becomes a sort of femme fatale. Although she later regrets her actions, she tells Dodson that they need money: "Deronda needed him relaxed and open-minded. She reached for his package. 'Come here, baby,' she said. 'Let me release your tension.' After they had sex and Dodson was almost asleep, Deronda made her move. 'Where does Kinkee get his dope from?' she said, trying to sound casual. Deronda is also accused, by Isaiah, of being the root of the two boys' problems. When she begins to spend all of her time at the apartment, Isaiah starts wanting to kick both of them out: "She'd also transformed Dodson into a complete asshole and had gotten it into his head that he was in charge" (194).

Ultimately, though, Deronda is more of a tragic figure than a femme fatale, and her obsession with pop culture is indicative of the media-saturated climate she lives in. She is, as previously discussed, obsessed with pop culture and the idea of celebrity. She tells Isaiah that her plan was "like crazy dangerous ... But it seemed like a movie, you know? Like it was a game or somethin'" (232). Like Skip, who is accused of becoming a



hitman because of Tom Cruise movies, Deronda concocts a drug-heist because she had seen it done in movies.

Discussion Question 1

Isaiah's history with Dodson influences the way he thinks about the case he is working. In what other ways does the past affect the present in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Deronda becomes a femme fatale for part of Chapter 15. What other archetypes exist in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Why are Dodson and Isaiah always at odds? Are the two ever content to just be friends with one another, or must they strive to be the alpha-male at all times? What does this relationship suggest about masculinity? What does it suggest about the culture they live in?

Vocabulary

extensions, criminalizing, busywork, victorious, lightweight, chemically, professional, connections, merchandise, commission, butcher, bygone, aggravated, recourse, impasse, colleagues, evidence, manufacture, scruples, judgement



Chapters 17 - 20

Summary

Chapter 17, "Die Bitch," is set in 2006. Booze was on his way to Junior's apartment when Dodson, completely covered, wearing a red bandana, and talking with a Mexican accent, approached him with a gun. He forced Booze to knock on the door, and Junior opened it. The three men got into a fight, and Dodson lost his gun. He was about to be shot, when Isaiah came in and saved him.

The two separated, and Dodson got a text from the Crip Violators, calling an emergency meeting about the attempted robbery on Junior. The gang believed that the Locos were behind the attack, and so went out for revenge and killed three Locos at the Big Meaty Burger. The Locos retaliated and a group of them attacked Dodson and the Crip Violators at Hot Dog Heaven. Dodson ran into a taqueria to escape his chasers. The owners were shot dead and their son, Flaco, had a traumatic brain injury.

Isaiah saw the story on the news. First he blamed Dodson, but once he started to think about the whole situation, he began to feel as if he were personally responsible for the deaths and destruction of the boy's life, and he hears Marcus telling him that he needs to make things right.

Chapter 18, "The Inside Man," is set in 2013. Skip called Calvin, pretending to be Dr. Freeman's assistant, and told him that Dr. Freeman wanted to meet Calvin. Dodson and Isaiah watched Noelle on a talk show, and then had a fight about Flaco, and Isaiah was furious that Dodson did not seem to feel as guilty as Isaiah did. Isaiah realized that Noelle and Anthony were dating, because Noelle had dished gossip about Calvin only Anthony knew on the talk show. Anthony admitted that he was dating Noelle and gathering information for her new tell-all book, but denied having anything to do with the assassination attempt.

Isaiah realized that Calvin had left the house with Bug, and he and Dodson drove off looking for him. He called Calvin, but Calvin dropped his phone and did not hear the warning. Isaiah tracked Calvin down, and got to him just before Skip did. When Skip saw Isaiah, he prepared to kill him, but Dodson snuck up behind Skip and knocked him out, saving Isaiah's life.

Chapter 19, "One Damn Bullet," is the last Chapter set in 2006. Isaiah went to see Flaco in the hospital and told his doctor, Dr. Lopez, the whole story. Once she realized that Flaco had no other family in the world, she allowed Isaiah to become a regular visitor. Isaiah moved close to the hospital and came every day. He took martial arts lessons and had a series of jobs that helped him become an excellent detective. When he was 19, an old lady at the laundromat told him that her daughter's wedding presents had been stolen, and Isaiah helped unveil the culprit. The woman spread the word about Isaiah, and his career flowered.



Chapter 20, “R.I.P.,” is set in 2013. Skip was arrested, and his pit bulls were rescued, but Goliath and some of the other vicious ones were euthanized. Isaiah kept a pit bull for himself. Calvin went to rehab. Isaiah started working on new cases. He and Dodson ran into one another and Dodson started talking about Tupac. Dodson said that Tupac’s manager put out unreleased songs after the rapper’s death and they were huge albums: “Don Killuminati sold five million copies all by itself ... Tupac sold more records dead than he did when he was alive” (311).

They realized that Bobby Grimes was the culprit. He was on the verge of losing everything if the conglomerate did not purchase his record company, and Calvin was going to lose the deal for him. But if Calvin died he could release the leftover songs Calvin had recorded over the years and make a fortune.

Bug and Charles stop Bobby from leaving the country, beat him up, and put him in the hospital, but the truth about the assassination is never made public. Isaiah does not get paid for the job, because Calvin had spent all his money on rehab. He was upset that he cannot buy Flaco a condo, but then Dodson came over and gave him a check for half of the money he’d stolen from Junior, which had been tied up in bonds for the last decade. Dodson said that he used his half to buy the condo for Flaco, and he tells Isaiah that his new girlfriend is pregnant. Dodson left and Isaiah let Marcus’s ashes go on top of his roof.

In the epilogue, Isaiah goes to the wrecking yard where he used to work to find a part for his car, and he finds the car that killed Marcus.

Analysis

Chapter 19 serves as an origin story for Isaiah. In the chapter, we learn that he worked at a gun store, which explains why he knows so much about weapons. He worked as a barista, and started studying smells, which is how he knew the smell of chloroform. He worked as a process server at a law practice and became familiar with laws and cases. He worked at a wrecking yard and learned all about cars and also was taught how to race by his boss, which is how he could drive around chasing people without crashing. Additionally, we get an account of his first several cases, in which he puts his skills to use and becomes the detective we have seen working the main case all throughout the novel.

Once Isaiah realizes that his actions have resulted in the deaths of innocent people, he reaches a breaking point and spirals into a guilt-ridden depression. When he thinks of Marcus, he begins to hear his brother’s voice chastising him for the choices he has made: “This is your fault. Yours. Don’t shake your head. You made the war happen. You tipped the first domino the minute you decided to be a criminal and one after the other the whole chain fell and now here we are. Those innocent people dead and their son without a mother or a father” (263).



This breaking point ultimately leads Isaiah to pursue his career as a detective. The ghost of Marcus tells him that he has to make amends: “Think you can walk away from this? You can walk all the way to Timbuktu but those folks will still be dead and that boy will still be an orphan. What are you going to do about him, Isaiah? Haven’t given that a thought, have you? Well, you better start thinking about it and figure out how to make this right or I will be in our face and in your dreams every day and every night for the rest of your miserable life” (264). This voice which Isaiah hears mirrors the voice that Calvin hears on the radio. Both Isaiah and Calvin hear a voice (in italics) giving them advice on how to solve their problems when they are at their lowest point.

Past and present have a way of mirroring one another in this novel. In Chapter 17, Isaiah saves Dodson from being shot, just as, in 2013, he saves Dodson from getting eaten by a pit bull. The language of the scenes is even replicated. Compare: “He couldn’t die like this, he couldn’t—” (244) with: “Dodson couldn’t believe he was helpless and about to die” (250). But, in the past Isaiah only saved Dodson because he did not want to go to jail. In the present, there is no ulterior motive for saving Dodson. And, when Dodson finally gets the opportunity to return the favor and save Isaiah’s life from Skip, he does so without hesitation.

Isaiah and Dodson’s relationship evolves and deepens in several distinct ways over time. They were never true friends as teenagers, and now that they are older they have years of resentment and guilt between themselves. All of the emotion comes to the foreground when Isaiah confronts Dodson about Flaco: “[Isaiah had] waited a long time to confront Dodson. Unload some of the guilt, make him feel like a scum-of-the-earth lowlife criminal. Dodson was supposed to confess, ask for forgiveness, and offer to make amends but instead he was offended like Isaiah was an asshole for bringing it up. Isaiah was angry but mostly what he felt was an overwhelming sadness. This was what Dodson was life. This was what people were like” (272).

Isaiah and Dodson finally become true friends in the last chapter. After Dodson has saved Isaiah’s life and solved the case, he feels as if he is equal to Isaiah, instead of below him. And, when he gives Isaiah half of the money he stole from Junior, and says that he has used his half to buy a condo for Flaco, Isaiah finally forgives Dodson for what he did years ago. With their issues fixed up, Ide sets the stage for the Sherlock/Watson duo to share future adventures together, which he hints at in the epilogue, where the car that killed Marcus is found by Isaiah.

Discussion Question 1

Isaiah and Dodson’s relationship evolves throughout the novel. Do any other relationships evolve?

Discussion Question 2

Bobby turns out to have been the man behind the assassination attempt, but is he the true antagonist of the novel? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

We learn how Isaiah became the detective he is today at the end of the novel. What does this switch in formula (origins typically happen at the beginning of a novel) do for the story? How does it help build Isaiah's character?

Vocabulary

shattered, route, interior, vanished, unusual, brooding, bonds, prematurely, ignoramus, perilous, clarify, extermination, postulations, consummate, formulate, causality, mendaciously, ascertain, falsehood, factuality



Characters

Isaiah "IQ" Quintabe

Isaiah is the protagonist of our novel. He is a detective with a genius-level IQ—a modern day Sherlock Holmes. Isaiah was ten when his parents died and his brother, Marcus, took over raising him. Isaiah was a straight-A student in high school, and he was even on the debate team. But, when Marcus was tragically killed in a hit-and-run accident, the orphaned Isaiah turned to crime. His actions eventually get an innocent couple killed, and their child is orphaned and mentally handicapped.

In an attempt to make amends for his actions, Isaiah dedicates his life to doing good by helping members of his community solve cases that fly below the radar of the judicial system, and by being a pseudo-father to Flaco, the boy whose life he ruined.

To afford a condo for Flaco to live in once he turns eighteen, Isaiah takes a case involving a famous rapper, and embarks on a quest to discover who hired a deranged hitman with a massive pit bull to kill Calvin Wright. In the course of the case, Isaiah reconnects with his old friend, Dodson, and finds redemption and forgiveness.

Juanell Dodson

Dodson is the Watson to Isaiah's Sherlock. Dodson was raised by a tough, military father, but he joined a gang and started selling crack in high school. When his family left Long Beach for Oakland, the teenage Dodson opts to stay with an aunt in Long Beach. But, when the aunt kicks him out of her house, he becomes homeless.

Dodson finds a home with Isaiah, who has recently lost a brother and is in need of a roommate. Fed up and bored with selling drugs, Dodson compels Isaiah to start robbing businesses. The scheme pays off, and Dodson and his girlfriend Deronda revel in the riches. When he runs out of money, Dodson robs a drug dealer and accidentally starts a gang war that leads to many deaths.

Eight years later, Dodson is still willing to do anything for money. When Isaiah first runs into him, he is trying to sell jewelry to low-income high schoolers, and he forces his way onto the case so that he can get the reward money. But Dodson proves to be an insightful and valuable partner, and he even ends up solving the case. Despite his remorseless personality, he redeems himself by buying Flaco a condo at the end of the novel.



Calvin "Black The Knife" Wright

Calvin is a famous rapper whose best days are behind him. In the '90s, he was part of a trio called Black The Knife. But he was more talented than the other two members, and so ended up becoming a solo artist and making it big.

After his marriage to Noelle, a famous singer, disintegrated, Calvin fell into a deep depression. Despite his emotional state, he agrees to make a new album, but his manager, Bobby Grimes, does not believe that he is capable of making anything that will sell, so he hires a hitman to kill Calvin so that he can sell his unreleased songs on a posthumous album.

After Isaiah solves the case, Calvin goes bankrupt and loses his money. He goes to rehab, and we are left to wonder if his emotional state improved.

Skip Hanson/Magnus Vestergard/ Fluke/ Brian Sterling

Skip is the sociopathic hitman that Bobby Grimes hires to kill Calvin Wright. Skip, whose real name is Magnus Vestergard, was an outcast in high school, but he became pseudo-famous when he made a series of twisted Jackass-type videos for YouTube.

While working at his uncle's gun store, he begins to sell guns on the side, and ends up in jail. When he gets out, he murders his uncle and starts breeding pit bulls. When he is hired to kill Calvin, he decides to use his biggest, most vicious dog, Goliath, as the weapon.

His plan is foiled when the police show up, and further complicated by Isaiah's sleuthing. He attempts to kill Isaiah and Dodson several times, but is eventually out-manuevered and ends up in jail.

Marcus

Marcus is Isaiah's older brother and legal guardian. He is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Marcus is very morally upright, and it is his dying wish for Isaiah to be a positive contributor to society.

Anthony

Anthony is Dodson's second cousin. He works for Calvin Wright and is a prime suspect in the attempted assassination, although he is ultimately innocent.

Bobby Grimes

Bobby Grimes is Calvin's record producer. He hires Skip to kill Calvin.



Junior

Junior is a big-time drug dealer. Dodson robs him and is nearly killed, but Isaiah saves his life.

Deronda

Deronda is Dodson's high-school girlfriend. She convinced him to rob Junior.

Harry Haldeman

Harry Haldeman is Isaiah's old boss. He works at the animal shelter and is an expert in pit bulls.

Blasé

Blasé is a gay rapper who was being blackmailed. Isaiah discovered that his mother was the culprit.

Booze Lewis

Booze Lewis is Junior's bodyguard. Booze Lewis helps Dodson rob Junior.

Flaco

Flaco was a child when his parents were murdered in the gang war that Dodson and Isaiah accidentally started. Flaco was shot and suffered brain damage during the gang war. Out of a sense of obligation, Isaiah regularly visits and helps take care of Flaco.

Dr. Lopez

Dr. Lopez is Flaco's doctor. She allows Isaiah to become a permanent visitor.

Noelle

Noelle is Calvin's ex-wife. She is another prime suspect in the assassination attempt, but she is only guilty of using Anthony for information on Calvin for her upcoming memoir.



Boyd

Boyd is a pedophile and rapist. He kidnaps a girl, but he is caught by Isaiah.

Teresa

Teresa is a high school student who is kidnapped by Boyd. Isaiah rescues her.

Kinkee

Kinkee is a drug dealer. He buys drugs from Junior and sells them to Dodson.

Goliath

Goliath is Skip's favorite pit bull. He is twice the size of a normal pit bull, and has been trained to be vicious and deadly. Skip uses Goliath as an attack dog.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Tapeworm

The tapeworm is a symbol of the lust Boyd feels for young girls. He always feels it twisting around in his stomach when he thinks of kidnapping a girl and bringing her onto his boat. Boyd, in return, is a symbol of evil. His presence in the novel is brief, but it serves to demonstrate that Isaiah's mission is to be a sword of goodness with which evil can be vanquished.

The Bonfire

Calvin burns his possessions in the bonfire because Dr. Freeman's self-help books suggests that to rid oneself of burnout, one must get rid of superficial attachments to objects. Calvin has too many things to burn at once, but he tries to symbolically cleanse himself of his possessions through the bonfire.

The Apartment

The apartment is a symbol of Marcus. After Marcus dies, Isaiah's biggest fear is losing the apartment. All of his memories of his brother are in the apartment, and he feels as if his presence lingers in the air. He lets Dodson move in, against his better judgement, so that he can stay in the apartment. When Dodson moves in and takes over the place with Deronda, Isaiah wants him out not because he is attached to the apartment, but because he is attached to what it represents.

The Gumbo

The gumbo represents Isaiah and Dodson's relationship. The first time Dodson makes gumbo for Isaiah, they are orphaned teenagers and he is trying to get Isaiah to agree to robbing places with him. The second time he makes it for Isaiah, Isaiah has nearly been killed by Skip and he is trying to comfort Isaiah. Isaiah notes to himself that the gumbo is much the same, but there are little, significant changes, and so to has their relationship developed and changed over the years.

Margaret Cho

Margaret Cho is, for Flaco, a symbol of independence. Flaco is obsessed with Margaret Cho because she was a misfit who became a comedian despite her race and gender. Flaco wants to "be his own man" (38) and live on his own once he turns 18, despite his mental handicap, and so he idolizes her as a symbol of freedom and independence.



The Spider

The spider is a symbol of fear. Isaiah is terrified of spiders, and Marcus tells Isaiah that, in order to conquer his fear, he ought to learn everything he can about them, so he can make “them a thing instead of a boogieman” (289).

Kim Kardashian

Kim Kardashian is, for Deronda, a symbol of celebrity and wealth. Deronda is obsessed with pop culture and reality shows in particular. She wants to be famous, although she does not have any true talents or skills, and so she looks up to Kim Kardashian as a symbol of celebrity sans talent.

The Acura With The Lakers Sticker

The Acura that hit Marcus and drove away without stopping, leaving him to die in the street, is a symbol of mystery and evil. Isaiah fixates on the car for months, doing nothing but roam the streets searching for it, because he feels that if he can find it he can fix what happened to his brother. He does not find it, though, until the epilogue, after he has released his brother’s ashes.

The Dragonfly

The dragonfly is a symbol for the “case-breaker” (183), which turns out to be the fact that Tupac sold more albums dead than alive, something Dodson mentions early in the novel. Halfway through the novel, Isaiah reevaluates all that he knows and determines that Anthony is the prime suspect, but he feels as if he is missing something: “there was something else flitting around the edges of his awareness like one of those dragonflies in the backyard. There and gone, there and gone, If only it would stay still. It was the case-breaker, he could feel it. And it was something he already knew” (183).

The Pin

The pin is a symbol of haphazardly put-together theory. Marcus once fixed his car with a pin, and the car ran until the pin broke. Isaiah’s theory that Noelle and Charles are the culprits behind the assassination attempt: it works, but only until pressure is put on it.



Settings

East Long Beach

East Long Beach is where almost all of the action in the novel takes place. Isaiah grows up in Long Beach, and he lives there long after his brother dies and he starts his life as a detective. It is portrayed as a region high in crime and gang activity. It is also a place that is consumed with the idea of celebrity and wealth. The combination combines to create a perfect-storm where almost all of the characters are lured into immorality to gain some financial advantage.

Marcus's Apartment

After Isaiah's parents die, Marcus becomes his legal guardian, and the two brothers share the apartment. Marcus takes good care of Isaiah, and he is always singing in the bathroom. It is a place of love and happiness. After Marcus dies, Isaiah is terrified of losing the apartment because he feels as if it is his only remaining connection to his dead brother. When Dodson and Deronda move in and begin to take over the apartment, Isaiah is hurt and reluctant to give up the apartment, despite his steadily dysfunctional relationship with Dodson.

Isaiah's House

The house Isaiah lives in as an adult is reflective of his personality. It is extremely neat and tidy, and it is as guarded and protected as a maximum security prison. Despite this, it is not a cold place. He lets the chicken, Alejandra, roam free throughout the place, and after Skip is arrested and Alejandro is tragically shot, Isaiah takes one of Skip's pit bull puppies into his home.

Calvin's Mansion.

Calvin's mansion is a place of extreme. excessive wealth. Calvin often walks through his home wondering what possessed him to buy grand pieces of art or random pieces of clothing. He has so many possessions inside of his house that a massive bonfire that gets the police called and Charles arrested does not make even a small dent on the amount of things that he own.

The Pit Bull Farm.

Blue Hills Pit Bulls is reflective of Skip's personality. The farm is out in the middle of the desert, isolated from the rest of the world just as Skip's sociopathic tendencies isolate him from the rest of humanity. The farm is desolate, barren, and soulless, just like Skip.

It is a haunting place full of massive, vicious dogs who have been bred to be weapons. The bodies of dogs and puppies who did not make the cut are buried under the desert soil.



Themes and Motifs

Redemption

Unlike a traditional detective story, where the detective is compelled to solve crimes out of insatiable curiosity, a quest for redemption is the reason Isaiah becomes a detective, and it is the reason he takes the case of the attempted assassination on Calvin Wright.

Isaiah was on the path to success before Marcus was tragically killed in a hit-and-run. Although his parents were both dead, his brother was a wonderful guardian and wanted the best for Isaiah. Right before he dies, he tells Isaiah: “Teacher, doctor, scientist, book writer. I don’t really care as long as you do some good out there. You could make a difference, Isaiah. A big difference. I’m talking about raising people up, easing their suffering, bringing some justice to the world. Money don’t enter into it, you understand what I’m telling you? God didn’t give you a gift so you could be a hedge fund manager. You take that road, disappoint me like that, buy a Bentley or put a golf course in your backyard? I will kick—your—ass” (43).

But, when Marcus dies, Isaiah does the exact opposite of what Marcus wanted. He uses his gifts to become a highly efficient thief. Eventually, his actions lead to numerous deaths, including the parents of a now orphaned boy named Flaco, who suffers a brain injury from a bullet fired during a gang war Isaiah indirectly started. When Isaiah learns about what has happened to Flaco, he hears Isaiah’s voice speaking to him: “Think you can walk away from this? You can walk all the way to Timbuktu but those folks will still be dead and that boy will still be an orphan. What are you going to do about him, Isaiah? Haven’t given that a thought, have you? Well, you better start thinking about it and figure out how to make this right or I will be in our face and in your dreams every day and every night for the rest of your miserable life” (264).

He starts his redemption by visiting Flaco and reading to him, but Marcus’s voice tells him that this is not enough. One day an old lady tells him about how her daughter’s wedding presents were robbed, and Isaiah decides to help her find them. He does, and the old lady spreads the word about his talents. He takes cases without expecting payment. When the novel starts, he is looking for a case that pays, because he wants to buy Flaco, who is about to turn eighteen, a condo.

Animal Cruelty

Through multiple characters, Ide shows that the way one treats animals can be indicative of basic personality type, and that true goodness, within a character, takes more than not being evil.

Isaiah is the protagonist of the novel, and, although he spent a year making bad decisions and robbing a lot of people, he is portrayed as a fundamentally good person. Isaiah keeps a chicken, Alejandro, that was given to him by a client as a pet in his



house. His house is neat and tidy, almost compulsively so, but Isaiah allows the chicken to roam free because he feels bad about locking him up in a cage: “The other morning he forgot to close the bedroom door and Alejandro roosted on the closet bar and crapped all over his clothes” (15). At the end of the novel, after Skip is arrested, Isaiah offers to take in one of his pit bulls and help rehabilitate it.

Skip is the antagonist of the novel, and he is as evil and sociopathic as they come. Skip is a hitman, but even worse, he uses his dog, Goliath, as a weapon of murder. In order to create Goliath, Skip spent years breeding fighting dogs to one another, killing off the runts and sweet-tempered puppies, until he finally had a pit bull that was twice the size of a normal one: “You buried them out there in the desert, didn’t you? Dug a hole and threw dirt on them because they weren’t big enough or game enough or didn’t kill something when you told them to” (146). Ide uses a pit bull as the weapon of his villain in order to shine a light on the horrific practice of dog fighting.

Calvin is the victim of the novel, but he is not a great person. He is not actively vicious like Skip is, but he is passively cruel in a number of ways. And his treatment of animals, which he uses as accessories, reflects this. He does not ever sink as low as Skip does, but he does have a mansion full of fur: “a white ermine Cossack hat, a python-skin bomber jacket, eel-skin gloves, sharkskin cowboy boots, ostrich-skin messenger bag, chinchilla pillows, and a full-length overcoat made from six endangered cheetah hides” (174). Calvin lacks the compassion that Isaiah has, and it is difficult to sympathize with a character who himself lacks the ability to empathize with others.

Celebrity

Through four different characters, Ide explores the double-edged sword of fame, which he sees as something which hurts those who want it as much as it hurts those who have it.

Deronda is obsessed with fame. After winning a Miss Big Meaty Burger Pageant when she was a teenager, she has always believed that she was destined to be famous. Having no discernable talents, she longs to become the next Kim Kardashian, and even goes so far as to offer to sleep with Isaiah in exchange for an introduction to his famous client, Blasé.

Skip is similarly obsessed with fame. He was not bullied or harassed during high school. His biggest problem with his social status was that he was “anonymous” (161). He changes this by creating a series of twisted Jackass-type videos for YouTube. These videos essentially ruin his life and send him down a path that leads to jail, which in turn leads to him meeting the man who offers him a job as a hitman.

On the other side of the mirror, we have two famous characters who are just as unhappy as the two characters who so desperately want to be famous. Noelle is a singer, and is married to a famous rapper, but she feels as if her life is no longer progressing: “her mental development got put on hold, There was no need to read



anything but tabloids and fashion magazines and no reason to challenge herself or create anything more worthwhile than a line of handbags to sell on HSN” (106). Her husband constantly cheats on her, and their fights are explosive, violent, and plastered all over the tabloids.

Calvin is as famous as they get, but he is clinically depressed and completely miserable. After cheating on his wife and going through a series of embarrassing domestic disputes, she leaves him, and Calvin begins to gain weight and increase his drug usage. He is unhappy with himself, his career, and his friends. He is supposed to be creating a new album, but he can only write about his depression, and he shows up in the studio wearing a bath robe and slippers. His manager tries to have him killed, because he thinks he would be of more use dead than alive, and his friends write diss-tracks about him on their secret new albums, get into relationships with his ex-wife, and use him for his money.

Money

Through four different characters who turn to crime, Ide proves that money propels all the crimes (in this novel, at least), but it is not necessarily the cause of all evil. Some characters turn to crime for money, but most of them have underlying issues that compel them to lash out.

The major mystery of the novel is not: Who killed Calvin Wright? Instead, the major mystery is: Who hired Skip to kill Calvin Wright? Bobby Grimes, Calvin’s record producer, turns out to be the culprit, and his motives are purely financial: “If Cal was to prematurely meet his maker, Bobby could release more albums the way Afeni had. Call them the basement tapes or the lost recordings or some other made-up nonsense. Greenleaf would be chomping at the bit when they found out there were over three hundred songs in the date vault. Add in remixes, tribute songs, live recordings, bonus tracks by other artists, and Bobby would have more albums than Cal could make if he was drug-free, ate barbecued tempeh at every meal, and lived to be a hundred” (312).

Isaiah and Dodson begin robbing businesses for the money, but there is more to the story than that. They are a pair of orphaned teenagers with rent due, and in theory they do need money to survive. But Isaiah had a series of regular jobs before he became obsessed with finding Marcus’s killer and quit them all, and Dodson was a crack dealer. But neither boy was happy with the type of work they were doing or the amount of money they were making. They turn to thievery because they need money, but also because they want more money than they need: i.e. they are greedy. Isaiah has a secret motive, too: robbing people makes him forget about Marcus.

The major crime of the novel, the attempted assassination of Calvin, is done for money. Skip is a professional hitman, and he takes money from people and kills other people in exchange: “[He] never asked the reason for killing somebody. Not knowing made it more like a job. Like he was a dentist and a tooth needed pulling” (87). But it is more than just money that makes Skip want to be a hitman—it is a sociopathic desire for



attention: “He liked to be creative, do new things, surprise his clients; get that holy shit reaction” (87). Skip is a hitman because there is something sick and twisted inside of him that likes killing people. Money is an added bonus, but for him it is not the reason he commits crimes.

The Media

Through the stories of three different characters, Ide shows that the media can have a profound effect on a human being.

Deronda is perhaps the most affected by this over-stimulation, and her obsession with fame turns her from a stereotype into a tragic figure. When Deronda first appears at Isaiah’s house, she seems like nothing more than a stereotype: overly sexualized and under-characterized. But when we learn that the highlight of her life was winning a Miss Big Meaty Burger pageant and that she wants nothing more than to be the next Kim Kardashian, we begin to see that she is a very real, three-dimensional character who wants desperately to turn herself into a one-dimensional caricature like the reality stars she sees on television. And this makes her a very interesting character that represents our media and fame obsessed culture as a whole.

Dodson is also affected by the media-culture he lives in, but he is a bit more proactive and aware of how to manipulate the culture to his own advantage. When Isaiah goes to meet him at the junior high, Dodson is marketing his business to a bunch of poor junior high kids: “I don’t see nothing but losers. Bad hair, ashy elbows, prepaid cell phones you ain’t even allowed to use unless you get kidnapped, and sneakers with logos on them nobody’s ever seen outside of Hong Kong and Vietnam. Don’t you wish there was one thing about you that was stylish? That was now? Something your mama didn’t buy at the Kmart after-Christmas sale? ... Oh I know what you’re thinkin’. What could my raggedy self ever possess that would give me the status and attention I may or may not deserve? What vestige of the good life could somebody from my pitiful demographic ever hope to acquire?” (57). And then he offers his business cards so that they can sign up for his rent-to-own gold chains, proving that he is not a victim of the media, like Deronda, but a manipulator of it.

Skip is, like Deronda, shaped by the media. Isaiah believes that Skip became a hitman because “he saw Tom Cruise play a hit man in a movie” (145). Skip himself admits that he decided to make Goliath while “watching the new Godzilla movie. The humongous lizard was stomping around, crushing buildings, collapsing bridges, and causing tidal waves” (167). There is little doubt that Skip’s sociopathic ways are deeply rooted, and in any world he would be a dangerous man, but in this world, where the media is everywhere, he becomes this particular brand of madman.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The narrator is most closely aligned with the protagonist, Isaiah, but often ventures off into the minds of other characters for dramatic effect. It is not uncommon that a scene featuring Isaiah prominently will split off and give the reader an account of a second- or even third-tier character's past history, thoughts, or motivations. The narrator even spends entire chapters with the antagonist, Skip, although the narrator never gives away the mystery of who hired him to kill Calvin. This omniscience is tricky business in a detective novel, especially when the narrator is constantly flipping into the minds of villains and suspects, but Ide gets away with it by using cinematic pacing.

Language and Meaning

The language of IQ is fairly simple and straightforward. Like much hardboiled detective fiction before it, the novel is sparse and unsentimental, and a reader would be hard-pressed to find a reason to take out the dictionary. Ide is aware of his minimalist style, and seemingly proud. He uses the character Junior to mock more pretentious literature: "Junior liked to use big words to make himself sound smart but it usually had the opposite effect. Once Dodson heard him say: 'This female had the most magnanimous titties I have ever substantiated'" (92). When Dodson robs Junior later in the novel, Junior's penchant for formal language is mocked further when he tells Dodson: "'Your mind has been deprecated extensively if you think your objectives will be finalized with this kind of activity'"(248). No one speaks like this, and Junior's dialogue would be painful to read if it were not for the obvious satire taking place.

Ide favors and endorses colloquial language and thrives while writing dialogue for his characters to speak. Dodson is one of the most colorful speakers in the novel, and his speech is used to build his character: "I don't see nothin' but losers. Bad hair, ashy elbows, prepaid cell phones you ain't even allowed to use unless you get kidnapped, and sneakers with logos on the nobody's even seen outside of Hong Kong and Vietnam. Don't you wish there Was one thing about you that was stylish? That was now? Something your mama didn't buy at the Kmart after-Christmas sale?" (57). His words are informal—note that the "g" is dropped off "nothing," "ain't" is used instead of the more formal "aren't," and "mama" is used instead of "mother"—but his colloquial speech makes him feel like a real person, rather than a paper construction. Dodson is a complex character with many horrible traits. He is somehow, almost inexplicably, likable, though. His charm is not to be found in his actions or relationships, but in his words. He is politically incorrect, brash, and unapologetic, but he is also funny, clever, and endearing.

Structure

The novel is made up of 20 chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue. Most of the chapters alternate between 2005 and July 2013, with some notable exceptions, and the chapters are broken apart by time in order to show parallels, or, in some cases, juxtapositions between past and present. The prologue introduces Boyd, a pedophile and a minor character in the novel. The first chapter is set in July 2013 and introduces Isaiah as the detective and protagonist of the novel. In the second chapter, the novel flashes back eight years to 2005 and we learn that Isaiah had an older brother who was killed in a hit-and-run.

The third chapter is set in 2013, but then the fourth, instead of being set in 2005, is set in June 2013 and details how Skip was hired to kill Calvin. The fifth chapter is set in 2005. The sixth chapter is set in 2013 and it focuses on Calvin; The seventh chapter is also set in 2013, but it focuses on Isaiah's hunt for clues. The eighth chapter is set in 2005, and it is all about Isaiah's hunt for the car that killed his brother.

The ninth chapter is set in 2013, and in it Isaiah meets the antagonist, Skip, for the first time. The tenth chapter is set in 2005, and in it Isaiah robs a store for the first time.

Chapter 11 is set in 2013 and it focuses on Skip's history; Chapter 12 is also set in 2013, but it goes back to Isaiah's POV. Chapter 13 is set in 2005, and in it Dodson and Isaiah rob more businesses. Chapter 14 is set in 2013 and focuses on the developing case.

Chapter 15 is set in 2005 and details the falling out between Isaiah and Dodson. Chapter 16 is set in 2013, and in it Isaiah saves Dodson from being killed by Goliath. Chapter 17 is set in 2005, and in it Isaiah saves Dodson from being killed by Junior. Chapter 18 is set in 2013, and in it Dodson saves Isaiah from being killed by Skip.

Chapter 19 is the last chapter set in the past, and it shows how Isaiah took over responsibility for Flaco, and how Isaiah became a detective. Chapter 20 is the last chapter set in the present, and it concludes the case. The epilogue shows Isaiah finding the car that hit his brother, and hints at a sequel.



Quotes

It made no difference at all but he couldn't help seeing what he saw. Things different or things not right or out of place or in place when they shouldn't be or not in sync with the words that came with them.

-- Narrator (Chapter One)

Importance: This quote takes place during the first time Isaiah shows off his detective skills. The narrator informs us that Isaiah has no choice but to view the world as a series of mysteries to be solved. It is the way he is wired and built.

This album right here, Don Kulluminati? It's a classic, didn't come out 'til after Tupac was dead and gone"

-- Dodson (Chapter 3)

Importance: Dodson says this to Isaiah when they are on their way to Calvin's mansion for the first time. It is the case-breaker, although the characters do not realize this until the very end of the novel.

He hated threats. Some asshole like Bug demanding respect as if bullying was a quality to admire like wisdom or kindness."

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

Importance: This quote takes place right after Bug threatens to beat up Isaiah if Isaiah disrespects him. It is an important quote because it shows Isaiah's morals and views are at odds with the gang-mentality Bug and Charles are set in.

I be at the strip club, getting' me some hot rub,/ tokin' on a big dub, hungry for some big grub./ Split to the crib, nuttin' in the fridge,' ho was doin' sack time, woke her up double time./ Where's my samitch, bitch? I said!/ Where's my samitch, bitch? I said!/ Where's my samitch, bitch? I'm hongreee!/ Where's my samitch, bitch?"

-- Dodson (Chapter 3)

Importance: These are the lyrics to the song Dodson wrote for his client when he was a record producer. It shows, comically, the extreme sexism of the rap world.

Fluke was disappointed. Drive-bys were boring. He liked to be creative, do new things, surprise his clients; get that holy shit reaction."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: This quote is one of the first indication that Skip (who goes by Fluke for a chapter) is dangerously sociopathic. We later learn that he had bred a giant pit bull to attack on sight when commanded to do so.

It's Murphy's other law. Anything that involves a teenager will be a goddamn horror show.



-- Harry (Chapter 7)

Importance: Harry says this to Isaiah and Dodson in defense of pit bulls. He believes that breeders and owners are at fault for vicious dogs, and that pit bulls are not inherently bad dogs.

It's like your mom and dad are Mike Tyson and Ronda Rousey. A game dog has a really high pain tolerance and won't back down no matter what. Like it'll keep fighting even if it's losing, even if it's getting torn apart and dying. You should see my dogs. They won't quit even if they're winning. Seriously? If the other dog was dead and buried my dog would dig it up and kill it all over again.

-- Skip (Chapter 9)

Importance: Skip says this to Isaiah and Dodson in explanation of his breeding principles, before he knows that they know who he is. It helps Isaiah discover that Skip is the hitman, and that he is dangerous.

A tidal change was rolling over him. His heartache, pain, and sorrow were ebbing away and in their place, the roar of adrenaline, the thrilling shock of fear, and the cool clear ecstasy of getting away.

-- Narrator (Chapter 10)

Importance: This quote takes place right after Isaiah and Dodson successfully complete their first robbery. The narrator explains that Isaiah is replacing his depression of losing his brother with the excitement of crime. In doing so, Isaiah turns from a good kid into a criminal, something he spends the rest of his life atoning for.

He had a feeling he was on the wrong track but so far there weren't any other tracks to be on. And there was something else flitting around the edges of his awareness like one of those dragonflies in the backyard. There and gone, there and gone. If only it would stay still. It was the case-breaker, he could feel it. And it was something he already knew.

-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: Halfway through the novel, Isaiah reflects on all the information he has gathered on the case. At this point, he believes Anthony is the culprit, but his intuition tells him he is forgetting something important. And he is. He has forgotten that Dodson told him Tupac sold more records dead than alive.

It was like being a celebrity, living your life instead of chasing it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13)

Importance: This quote takes place after Dodson and Deronda begin to live a luxurious life paid for by the robberies. While Isaiah cautions against big spending and quick sales, and opts to save his money away, Dodson is only concerned with immediate gratification.



Dodson was disappointed Isaiah didn't remember about the gumbo but what really pissed him off was not catching the thing about Noelle and what pissed him off even more was that he hadn't made Isaiah stumble once.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14)

Importance: This quote takes place when Isaiah is almost killed by Skip, and so goes over to Dodson's house, and Dodson cooks him gumbo, just like he did when they were both orphaned teenagers. Dodson believes Isaiah has forgotten the gumbo, and instead of allowing himself to be sad, he channels his emotions into anger, and lashes out at Isaiah.

Think you can walk away from this? You can walk all the way to Timbuktu but those folks will still be dead and that boy will still be an orphan. What are you going to do about him, Isaiah? Haven't given that a thought, have you? Well, you better start thinking about it and figure out how to make this right or I will be in our face and in your dreams every day and every night for the rest of your miserable life.

-- Marcus's Ghost (Chapter 17)

Importance: After Isaiah discovers what has happened to Flaco, he begins to hear the voice of Marcus speaking inside his head. Marcus tells him that he must make amends for what he has done, and Isaiah listens to the voice.