

The Instructions Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The Instructions is the pre-adolescent story of Gurion ben-Judah Maccabee, a precocious and prolix Jewish boy of 10 whose supercharged brain seems to function on caffeine and to focus on endless trivia.

The energy in The Instructions is essentially inward-looking rather than expansionist—the dark self-obsession of the adolescent fixated on his own inward emotional struggles rather than those involving other people, as in marriage, politics, war or the arts. The Instructions introduces a number of important and interesting themes, such as the psychology of religion and the struggles of adolescents to find their own values.

Much of the action tends to involve gang fights, adolescent rivalries, the arrival of puberty and dawn of sexual feelings, the search for modern-day answers to spiritual dilemmas within the ancient tradition of Judaism, conflicts with adults and attitudes toward school. Gurion Macabee is convinced he is the messiah, or at least he has a better than 50-50 chance of being the real messiah. Gurion is fiercely intelligent but an apathetic student, a scholar of Judaism who is agnostic and a loner whom other adolescents view as a leader. He has within himself the seeds of potential greatness, as well as seeds of possible destruction. Despite, or perhaps because of his multiple inconsistencies, Gurion is a likeable figure who embodies the struggles of most young people coming into adolescence. His combination of jadedness and inquisitive innocence is charming.

Gurion becomes the leader of a Jewish gang at Aptakisic Junior High School in suburban Chicago known as the Side of Damage. Like most adolescent gangs, this group provides members with a sense of identity and unity in facing rival groups, such as the Shovers. As a focal point for adolescent angst and rebellion, the Side of Damage under Gurion's leadership arms itself for an insurrection against school authorities and other rival gangs. Most of the members of the Side of Damage are kids with behavioral problems who are consigned to the Cage, a locked prison-like area within the school where repeat offenders study and have classes. In instigating and leading this insurrection against their captors, Gurion and the Side of Damage recapitulate the biblical story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Gurion ponders deeply whether he is the modern-day messiah and concludes his odds are about 50/50. His followers have no doubts, however, that he is their savior.

Members of this Jewish (or, Israelite) gang fashion "penny guns" or advanced slingshot devices made from discarded soda bottles. The devices are used to fire coins, wing nuts, writing nibs and other small projectiles; they are powerful and can inflict a lot of pain and sometimes serious injury, as when they strike an eyeball, for example. The Side of Damage stages a rebellion focused in the gymnasium where students, teachers, administrators and even parents become embroiled in a violent donnybrook. The uprising is so severe that police and fire teams are dispatched, as well as plenty of TV live-at-the-scene crews. The rebels take a number of hostages, including a hapless gym instructor named Desormie. As the original Side of Damage awaits the arrival of

hundreds of "scholars" summoned from other schools, they are confronted with police demands to surrender. The scholars arrive but are prevented by police from joining their compatriots. Outnumbered and slipping into battle fatigue, the rebellious students finally surrender to police as they march out of the building.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

After a bout of experimental water boarding and near-drownings during swim break at Aptakisic Junior High School, Gurion Maccabee and other juvenile delinquents start to pick random fights with each other before they are herded back into the Cage—an area of isolation to separate them from the rest of the students. Supervision of these adolescent misfits has devolved upon Ron Desormie, the school's gym teacher, who informs Gurion that he's being taken to the principal's office for discipline because of his chronic fighting. Gurion describes Desormie as "a perv[ert] on the make." Gurion meets Eliza June Watermark, another student, while waiting for Leonard Brodsky, the principal. Meanwhile, Desormie tries to flirt with Miss Pinge, the principal's secretary, who finally tells him to leave. June and Gurion agree that they hate "that perv," Desormie. Before going into the principal's office. Gurion tells June he's in love with her forever. "That's drastic," she says.

Gurion outlines in writing a 23-step process for making a penny gun out of a two-liter soda bottle and a balloon for use by his followers in the Cage to whom he refers as "the Israelites. His instructions for making these clandestine weapons grandiosely predict that 183 Israelite boys will be armed with penny guns within one week, and 402,234 Israelite boys within four weeks. Gurion also refers to his followers as "scholars." One of these was Ben Brodsky, son of the principal, who drowned at summer camp. There is a photo of the principal's deceased son on his desk, and Gurion recalls when they had been pals at Solomon Schechter School before he was expelled. When principal Brodsky asks Gurion why he's always getting into fights, Gurion responds by asking him when he'll get expelled. Brodsky says he doesn't want to expel him. Gurion wants to see his student records from Schechter School, so Brodsky asks him if he'll agree to stop fighting in exchange for seeing his records. Gurion refuses.

Word begins to circulate among the rabbis that Gurion is arming his cadre of followers. "A number of boys at Jewish day schools throughout the Chicago area may be in possession of these [penny gun] weapons," Rabbi Alan Kalisch of Northside Hebrew Day School writes to his colleagues. Kalish connects Gurion to the proliferation of these weapons and to the creation of a scripture-like document called Ulpan. Students seem to blindly follow Gurion and "many call him rabbi," Kalisch says. "In class, they defer to him in all matters, whether secular or Judaic, and on the playground they stand in line to speak to him." When Kalisch confronts Gurion with his armaments program, Gurion—according to the rabbi—says its purpose is help the Israelite youth protect themselves against the "increasingly violent population of Canaanites."

Meanwhile, Gurion entertains himself with perfecting shots from his penny gun; he uses steel rivets to smash out glass-clad letters from a "home" sign in the gymnasium. Gurion sends out a mass email message to his followers telling them not to contact him against their parents' wishes.



Gurion sneaks into the teachers' lounge by rigging the door and buys himself a Coke, since caffeinated soft drinks aren't sold to students. As he sneaks out of the lounge with his drink and a pad of blank hall passes, he runs into his new friend, Eliyahu, who asks directions to science class. Eliyahu asks Gurion how he can get into the Cage, obviously the place for scholars. Gurion tells him to break something when he's told to do something, anything. Gurion tells Eliyahu that in the Cage students sit in a carrel facing forward, and the teachers tutor rather than teach. The Cage is enclosed within a floor-to-ceiling chain link fence with a locked doorway. Gurion tells Eliyahu that the Cage is a "lockdown" that he would not like. Students in the cage establish a social hierarchy by means of ridicule (shame), physical or verbal challenges, and preferential pair bonding. They get into a humorous exchange over the meaning of sex:

Vincie: "Sex is what you do with your wife. Fucking is what you do with your mistress. You don't make your wife wear leather and that's why bondage is a kind of fucking."

The Janitor: "What the fuck? I fucking want a fucking tissue."

Gurion: "Bondage is slavery."

Jenny Mangey: "My mom doesn't fuck."

Gurion: "Bondage is this school, but invisibly."

Jelly: "No one said your mom fucks, Mange."

The Janitor: "Fuck this fucking school."

Chapter 4 consists of a long, rambling letter Gurion wrote to his fourth grade reading teacher, Mrs. Diamond, in which he discusses literature, religion, family, ethnicity. The letter, like Gurion, has an obsessive quality. For example, Gurion writes five pages on nail clipping, three pages on giving a bagel to a homeless man and another three pages on the kosher method of preparing a chicken. In a narrative style reminiscent of the so-called "doubling" found in the Old Testament, Gurion repeats didactic stories several times, with only slight variations.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Faced with the time-honored turmoil of adolescence and rebelliousness born of raging hormones, Gurion Maccabee and his friends form a gang and begin to arm themselves with homemade weapons. From the outset, it is apparent that Gurion is a thoughtful, studious person who very much wants to know the true from the false, the fair from the unfair and to take steps to ensure there is a balance in his school and home lives. There are long passages where Gurion worries himself with the correct interpretation of the Torah; he finally decides to write his own "scripture," or version of the holy book. Gurion loves to engage in existential and/or religious dialogues with rabbis so he can confound them by questioning their beliefs and challenging what he sees as their hypocrisy. In



typical adolescent fashion, Gurion sees the whole world as corrupt and unjust—except for June Watermark, who becomes his girlfriend.

Most of the junior high school students who join Gurion's gang seem to harbor a persecution complex, or a sense that they are somehow singled out for mistreatment because of their religion. This semi-paranoid attitude is also a nearly-universal obstacle of adolescence as young people try to find out who they are and how they fit into the world. Gurion idolizes his civil rights attorney father and fears his mother, a psychotherapist who speaks to him in the irritating, patronizing monotone she uses to address patients. One of the peculiar twists to Gurion's righteous sense of himself is in communicating to his followers that they should not make the penny gun if they think their parents would object. So while plotting for violent revolution, Gurion maintains a respect for his elders regardless of whether they might be harmed in the insurrection he plans. Apparently Gurion has a biblical sense of himself alongside his calculating, rebellious nature. His is the assumed mantle of liberator of the Israelites.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

Gurion describes his fascination with another student, Jelly Rothstein: "A Sephardic beauty in the loudest, sharpest, meanest kind of way." Although most students—especially other girls—do not like Jelly, Gurion is captivated by her facial ticks and unusual appearance which he understands as expressions of "the lithe intelligence at labor behind [her face]." He compares Jelly with the biblical Eve who is scorned because she gave fruit of the tree of knowledge to Adam. Both Eve and Jelly, as Gurion sees it, have been wrongfully shamed by history. Gurion also expresses his compassion for Benji Nakamook, whose mother punishes him by starvation—sending him to school with no lunch. Benji keeps his mother's cruelty a secret, one that warps his personality. "His secrets had made him into a person who was willing to hurt anyone and anything he was not close with that got in his path or in the path of the people he was close with," Gurion explains. This kid of loyalty makes Benji a trusted lieutenant to Gurion as he assembles his followers, known as WE DAMAGE WE. Gurion recalls his brief romance with Esther, daughter of Rabbi Salt, that ended when he wrote her a poem that made her sad, which she said is a clear sign of a bad match.

When Gurion writes on his lunch bag that he loves June Watermark, then shows it to her. Jelly Rothstein is offended and tells him he should love her instead because June draws pictures of violent things in art class. From a writing instructor named Flowers, Gurion learns that there is no excuse for boring writing, even if the subject is boring. Flowers also tells Gurion: "You gotta find the chink in the system and exploit it." Gurion and his followers explore ways to challenge protocol of the Cage. For example, Gurion turns his head and scans the scene despite the "face forward rule," but is not caught in the act. He decides that "the more rules in an arrangement, the more chinks."

Rabbi Avel Salt, principal of Solomon Schechter School, writes a letter to Aptakistic Junior High School Principal Leonard Brodsky providing extensive background information on Gurion, since he started school at the age of five. Rabbi Salt notes Gurion's "peculiar intelligence" and says that, with proper support and guidance, he will become "the foremost Jewish scholar of his generation." Student Wayne Acer starts a 21-member club called The Shovers after seeing *The Gangs of New York* and reading the book. The Shovers' primary enemy is band kids, their emblem a red scarf with white fringes. A mini controversy erupts over whether The Shovers should incorporate an abstract fish drawing called an ichthys into the scarf design.

The principal calls Gurion into his office and accuses him of being responsible for a skyrocketing rate of student detention. Brodsky demands to know who damaged the gym scoreboard, but Gurion remains silent. "Did you wreck the scoreboard," he asks repeatedly, his voice rising to a shout. When Gurion is dismissed from the principal's office, he tries to enter the Cage to see June, but the supervisor tells him to go to the library instead. Gurion slinks into the cafeteria, with access to the Cage, and sees June,



who asks the supervisor to be excused for a moment. June and Gurion press themselves against their lockers; she asks about his visit with the principal, he tells her of a new form of protest devised by Benji Nakamook. June returns to the Cage and Gurion goes to the library, where he is given a detention assignment.

Benji asks Gurion if June is his girlfriend, which leads to a discussion of male-female relationships. With all the wisdom of a middle schooler, Benji says: "The kiss decides the girlfriend part, but that doesn't mean the girl can't decide the girlfriend part, too, without the kiss. There's really not much a girl can't decide about. They don't have rules."

A personality profile of Gurion prepared by the school psychologist describes him as emotionally labile and probably suffering from oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) with "intermittent explosive disorder." She recommends that Gurion remain in the Cage "indefinitely" and be permitted leave only for state-mandated courses, such as physical education. On the school bus one day, Gurion is told some students in the rear want to talk to him. He goes back and sits next to Bryan (BryGuy) Maholtz, "a high-stepping, button-nosed, prettyboy bully [who] suffered from a combination of a stupid accent and cloggy adenoids that added 'ng' and 'nd' sounds to the backs of certain vowels and gunged up some of his consonants, too" is how Gurion describes him. Maholtz wants to talk about girls, and he questions Gurion at length. A friend of Gurion named Bam grabs Maholtz by his forelock and tells him to stop talking about girls because "it makes me want to hide every girl in the world in a castle you can't get to."

Flowers advises Gurion to go slowly on his messiah message, and to work it into the holy scripture he plans to write: "So far, we got rabbis, me, June, Nakamook and Israelites for you niggas. And then the ign'ant niggas the ones on the side of damage don't know what it mean."

Gurion spars verbally with his weary mother one evening as she prepares dinner; she holds her ground and talks him into silence. When his father arrives, the parents discuss a phone call from principal Brodsky about starting fights at school. His mother says fighting is normal for boys his age; his father disagrees and says Gurion fights because he is "surrounded by delinquents and idiots" at school. Gurion's parents get into a fight marked by frequent use of "fuck." The conversation turns to the appropriateness of Gurion taking classes at Northwestern University. He tells his parents he's in love with June which sparks a discussion about whether she is an Israelite. His old girlfriend Esther Salt calls and asks why Gurion has lost touch. He reminds her that she broke up with him. The conversation is stiff, cold.

Gurion says he knows Esther's feelings are hurt, "but I couldn't see how I could be the one who'd hurt them. She hurt them herself. And she was the one who broke up with me."



Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Gurion is cool under pressure, as when he is called to the principal's office and held to account for the rising rate of student detention—which results from bad or negligent behavior that threatens the learning environment. Gurion won't reply when the principal asks him if he's responsible for damaging the scoreboard in the gymnasium. At the Cage, or detention center, Gurion meets Eliza June Watermark with whom he quickly becomes infatuated. Both are highly intelligent youths who spend a lot of time in the Cage. At virtually the same time, Esther Salt, the daughter of a rabbi, breaks up with Gurion for no apparent good reason—leaving him free to court June. The sort of clueless innocence with which boys of Gurion's age approach male-female relationships is capsulized in a statement by Gurion's friend, Benji Nakamook: "There's really not much a girl can't decide about. They don't have rules." Meanwhile, Gurion's romance with June proceeds with furtive visits, touching and kisses in the hall, in the shadows of the cafeteria and in the Cage, where they regularly meet for detention.

Gurion persists in trying to fit his experiences into some kind of biblical context. For example, when a girl called Jelly Rothstein accidentally bumps into another girl named Angie Destra in the cafeteria and is socially snubbed as a result, Gurion tries to understand the incident in terms of the story of Adam and Eve. Eve is not seen as guilty for picking fruit from the tree of knowledge because she was seduced by the serpent, and it was not her will to bring down the wrath of God upon herself and Adam. It, like the spilled milk in the cafeteria, came about through human error to which we are all prone. The awkwardness that Gurion displays in relationships reflects his reliance on holy scripture and ancient Torah tales, rather than upon his nascent understanding of his fellow humans.



Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary

Gurion oversleeps and his mother drives him to school, cigarette in hand. When they approach the building, a student stops them and asks Mrs. Maccabee to extinguish her cigarette, according to school rules. She insults him and continues to smoke until the cigarette is finished. With Gurion in tow, she storms into Principal Brodsky's office and demands that Gurion not be placed in isolation the next day. As Gurion waits outside Brodsky's office, he watches the Shovers coming and going. The Shovers think of themselves as bad-ass gang members, but Gurion sees them differently. In an interesting play on the names Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, Gurion thinks: "So while the main hall Shovers thought themselves defiant, like some paddling gang of finns on the foamy rapids, they were just a bunch of sawyers in school-colored scarves eating candy in a barn before supper."

Eliyahu stops to chat with Gurion, and tells him about an incident on the school bus in which Nakamook stretched his legs across the aisle and wouldn't let students pass until they did something to amuse him, like singing. Tall, muscular Aleph offers Nakamook a dollar bill to pass, as a "toll." Nakamook tells Aleph to put his filthy money away; then Aleph throws his scarf on the floor and slides beneath Nakamook's legs. Eliyahu tells Gurion he questions Nakamook's sanity because of the episode. The gym instructor Ron Desormie comes into the office and releases a tirade against Gurion, accusing him of being a false prophet who only cares about himself. Then he tells the principal that Gurion has become the unquestioned leader of a cadre of students whose names he doesn't know. Gurion goes to the bathroom and when he returns he sees Nakamook, Leevon Ray and Vincie Portite waiting outside Brodsky's office.

Gurion encounters June Watermark in the cafeteria, sits at a table some distance from her, and fantasizes—worries, actually—about how to approach her and to kiss her. He imagines stroking her hair and other stereotypical moves from books and films. Eventually he approaches and sits at her table; he tells her she's beautiful, June cries and Gurion asks her why. She says she can't bear the thought that he might die. Then Gurion wonders and worries the same about her. They jump up onto the set for a play under construction in the cafeteria. Mocking the simple-minded artifacts, Gurion kicks a couple causing damage to the set. Without a kiss, Gurion tells June he loves her and wants to marry her. She says she'd marry him, but Gurion then says they can't marry because she's not an "Israelite." She protests that she is, but would convert if he insisted. Gurion then decides she's an Israelite after all, and they kiss for the first time. Awkwardly, they kiss again and again, then June French kisses Gurion. "I thought: this is exactly what we should be doing right now," Gurion says.

A teacher passes by, and calls to June that someone has destroyed the set. June tells her it was a very bad creation and someone has simply turned it into an installation piece. The teacher says she doesn't think what's happened to the set is "nice." June



answers: "Who cares if it's nice? It's art." Gurion and June get into a loud discussion and the teachers tells them both they will be on detention the next day. Outside they lie on the grass and June does a handstand on Gurion's biceps. He tells her he loves the smell of her hair, then she lets herself down and lies atop Gurion. He tells her he likes the way her body is pressing against his. "I can tell," June says. "Your wang is chung."

For a midterm essay in seventh-grade social studies, Gurion is expected to write on the question, "How did the events of 9/11 change what it means to be an American?" Instead, he writes on his own topic: "911 is a joke, or how we did it at the Solomon Schechter School of Chicago." What follows is an exegesis on the origin, evolution and current practice of "slapslap," the common entertainment involving two players who place their palms together then snap them back just before the other person does the same. He then launches into a tirade against his teachers and principals, past and present.

On a visit to Rabbi Salt's house, Gurion encounters Esther Salt and is invited by Esther's sisters to join in a game of backgammon. One sister asks if Gurion knows about the doubling cube; when they realize he doesn't they offer to show him, but Esther disagrees, saying "there's no time to teach about the doubling cube. Gurion is offended that she doesn't even use the word "him" to acknowledge his presence. Gurion tells Rabbi Salt that he doesn't know how to tell his daughter that he's in love with another girl, on whom he's already performed a conversion. The rabbi laughs heartily at Gurion's presumption. Gurion receives several flowery letters from Esther Salt regretting their breakup and explaining that all she really wanted from him was a kiss. When his mother calls him for dinner, she says: "I am told you have learned to make Jews of Junes." As Gurion tries to subdue a violent fit of hiccups, his parents argue over whether he's delusional or just imaginative.

Judah gives his son, Gurion, a ride to school and when they arrive June appears and jumps in the front seat next to her boyfriend. "June and I are getting married," Gurion says. His father quips that similar tastes in hoodies is a solid foundation for marriage; June says she stole the one she's wearing from Gurion. After his father leaves, Gurion decides he is too happy to go to class, so he ditches it. June and Gurion slip away from the hall monitor and he offers her one of his illicit passes. June refuses, saying she doesn't want to lie again. They both devour the buttery poppyseed cookies his mother baked. June scurries off to class and Gurion ponders the meaning of the Side of Damage—the group of student rebels in the Cage that he leads. Gurion receives a note from a student nicknamed Chunkstyle explaining that he likes the name better than his given name, Remius, that his parents took from the Uncle Remus stories. Principal Brodsky announces over the intercom that he will find the student(s) responsible for vandalism and graffiti and make sure they are punished. He encourages students with any information about these incidents to come forth.

June and Gurion slip away from school and sit on a high hill, where she reads his "scripture" in which he uses Adonai as the name for God.



Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Gurion's fantasy life intrudes on his real life, making it more difficult. His disdain for and dislike of the Shovers gang begins to look a little like the petulance of a rejected suitor when it seems that he would like to be a member of the group. But his heroic persona as a great Israelite warrior won't let him just approach them as another mortal. Gurion seems to cherish his juvenile delinquency because it sets him apart and because—in a twisted sort of way—it supports his image of himself as a messianic figure at war with the world around him. When it comes to June, he at first stands back and watches her in the cafeteria and wonders how to approach her for a first kiss. The only images he has in his mind of romance are the plastic ones derived from movies. When he finally approaches her, it is on a very real level as they both confess their love for each other.

Gurion's 10-year-old fantasy about June is held in check another way: by his presumption that he could not marry her because she is not an "Israelite," although she is Jewish. This preposterous pose gives Gurion space to process his strong feelings of attraction to her while he figures out a way to move their relationship from the fantastic to the real level. The powerful adult feelings no doubt overwhelm Gurion and he retreats temporarily back into his world of fantasy where he can be in control. Eventually, June and Gurion find common ground in their shared status as adolescent outlaws. Their physical connection is nicely sealed when June artfully lowers her body onto his as they lie on the grass during recess and she tells him she can feel his erection. These two very intelligent young people are fascinated with each other and form what is for both of them their first adult-like bond.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

Gurion has individual therapy with someone he calls "Call-Me-Sandy." She tells him she's worried about him. He challenges that statement, saying that she's just a nervous person who worries about everything. They spar verbally for a while, until Gurion interrupts to ask her how long she's known she is a lesbian. The therapist, shocked, tells him his question is "inappropriate." He tells her that she should approach the woman she loves and kiss her. The therapist breaks down and cries, admitting that she does love another woman. Gurion says he'll continue to come to his appointments, but will not talk to her, then hands her a tissue.

"What do you call a cow that's playing with himself?" Eliyahu asks. "Quoydanawnsinz," answers Botha. Gurion and Benji Nakamook engage in a breath-holding contest. At 10 seconds, a large, white blob appears on Benji's forehead; at 30 seconds Benji's eyes roll up and the blob on his head expands; at 60 seconds Gurion feels like he will pass out, and breathes. There is no Benji, although Gurion remembers being approached by an angel that wanted to occupy his body. The other students take Gurion to the nurse's office to have his cuts and bruises from a fall treated. Along the way, he encounters Cory Goldman—another Israelite—being harassed by other students as they toss his scarf back and forth. Before Gurion can intervene, the whole group runs off in another direction. In the nurse's office, four fifth-graders wait for their friend, Schpritzky, to be treated. They tell him they are looking for Gurion, the champion of the oppressed, because they want to form a gang against oppression so girls will admire them and teachers will "stop making faces" at them.

Nakamook opens the door and says, "Gurion?" The boys realize it's Gurion and are dumbstruck. They ask him if he'll lead their gang. He first declines, telling them that they are doing a better job than he could ever do. Nakamook tells the group that Shpritzky is really the violin prodigy Bernard Shpritz. Gurion's Israelite followers form a cowardly crowd that jumps on Shlomo Cohen who is something of an oddball and, in Gurion's reckoning, "a self-hating Jew." Mr. Goldblum intervenes, trying to pull the boys apart. In the scuffle that ensues, Gurion's ribs are violently pushed with the result that he vomits into his mouth, then spits it out. Then the principal comes over the public address system to tell the boys to "break it up." Gurion lies down in the grass field to rest, then sees June's knees before him. "I just got defeated," he says. "I know," June answers. She tells him to get up and return to school for attendance. He says he doesn't care about attendance, but June tells Gurion she cares, because if he's absent it would mean they wouldn't be able to see each other. Then for four pages, Gurion celebrates about all the ins and outs of the fight, all the possible angles, strategies and outcomes. One thought that comes to mind is that his pal, Benji, may have decided to quit the friendship.



Gurion decides that Jews and Gentiles should not marry, then worries that one of his friends might have called June to tell her that Gurion is interested in her because he does not know she is a Gentile. Gurion then muses that "Nakamook, after all, was crazy, a psycho, a bully. After all, just a crazy psycho bully. Nakamook abandoned me. You don't abandon friends. We were no longer friends." Once again, Gurion is summoned to the principal's office; he acts defensively until Brodsky says he just wants to have a conversation. The principal notes that his five closest followers are the main instigators in the wave of vandalism and mischief at school; he asks Gurion to act like the good person he is to help stop the misbehavior. Gurion tells him to shut down the Cage, fire Botha and get a monitor "who isn't a schmuck."

Gurion runs into Call-Me-Sandy, the psychologist, who is teary and afraid that the button on the water fountain is connected to a bomb. Gurion presses the button, water flows and—no bomb. She says she wishes that Gurion would give her a hug. He gives her a one-armed hug, and his hands start to explore her breasts under her sweater. She pushes him away, and he responds with "Hey!" She replies that he should have convinced her first.

During a fit of self-obsession on Israelite vs. Jew, Gurion sees June in the hallway and comes up to give her a kiss on the cheek. She introduces him to her friend, Starla, and other boys who follow Gurion then introduce themselves. Further down the hallway, a fight erupts between boys. There is blood, there is vomit, there are kicks, there are punches, there are heads smashed against lockers and doorways. Once the fighting dies down, Gurion is cornered by Slokum, who offers him a cigarette which he takes. Slokum speaks to Gurion in a condescending, bullying manner; Gurion tells him he's "just filled with shit." Slokum tells Gurion that if he says that again in front of other people, "I'm gonna have to hurt you pretty bad."

As he leaves school, Gurion sees Blake Acer who is president of the rival gang, the Shovers. He shows Gurion the WE DAMAGE WE slogan he's scratched on the side of the dumpster. Enraged, Gurion kicks him in the stomach and then runs his face back and forth across the inscription which he's stolen from Gurion's gang. He finds June and they do some light necking. She confesses that she's kissed another boy but it's "nothing." Gurion gets angry and they fight. June bends Gurion's fingers back until they hurt and tells him that if he ever brings up the kissing episode he can "fuck off."

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

These chapters show how much of the evolution of this story takes place within the head of Gurion Maccabee, rather than in the exterior "real" world. His powerful fantasies and intellectualizations define Gurion as much as his physical acts. He is a day-dreaming boy on the cusp of manhood who tests his ideas in the crucible of reality as part of his maturation. Reality is the sandpaper that gradually shapes him toward adulthood, so that his abandonment of childish ideas becomes prelude to his growth toward adulthood. It is difficult for the reader to know whether Gurion is just a young man who enjoys acting like a brat, or someone who has deep-seated antisocial

tendencies. It is Gurion's moments of brashness, or even rudeness, that impress his schoolmates to the extent that they want to follow him. Gurion is every bit as clueless and puzzled about life as his friends, but he presents with an air of self-confidence and speaks with the voice of wisdom. Demagoguery in junior high school has never looked so appealing.

Organization and arming of the Side of Damage provide a goal for Gurion and cohesion for his followers. They follow their melodramatic vision of the adult world, spiced up with an awareness of biblical precedents. Their anti-authoritarian rumblings are merely signs of the counter-dependence stage of growth toward adulthood. Within the protection of the gang, individual members feel support from their peers as they take the first steps toward autonomy. At this stage of development, interestingly, the spectacle of the "self-hating Jew" is one of derision and devaluation by Gurion and his followers. This disapproval becomes an affirmation of the fact Israelites should be proud of themselves and their culture as distinct from the mainstream culture of society. When school officials try to get to the root of Gurion's maladjustment by sending him to a psychologist, he quickly realizes she harbors paranoid fears and is no model of mental health herself. This further reinforces Gurion's own somewhat delusional sense that he himself may be the messiah and need not pay any attention to adult authority figures merely because they are older.



Chapters 17-22

Chapters 17-22 Summary

Gurion comes home from school and learns that his father is in the hospital, having been knocked off his feet by protestors outside the courtroom where his successful civil rights defense of Patrick Drucker, a neo-Nazi, has just been announced. Gurion turns on the TV to see mostly Jewish protestors, cops and his father streaming past in an endless loop that replays the action. At the hospital, his mother tries to reassure him by saying everything is fine so often that Gurion begins to wonder if everything is, in fact, fine. Gurion's friend, Flowers, gives him a ride home and encourages him to open up and talk about the incident. Gurion says he doesn't want to talk about it. Flowers tells him: "You nothin' like stoic. You a little boy don't shut the fuck up less he hidin' something." When they get to Gurion's house, Flowers gets out of the car and goes inside to turn on some lights. Gurion sees a boy crouched in the bushes and jumps him; believing he is trying to set a bomb near his house, Gurion pummels him with his fists. The boy is Shai Bar-Sholem; then another youth leaning against the house jumps Gurion. He is another schoolmate, Samuel Diamond. Gurion thrashes him, too. Flowers pulls Gurion into a bearhug and says, "Hell you doing?"

Some of Gurion's friends—Emmanuel, Nakamook, Shai and Samuel—show up at his house and Flowers goes out for a pizza. After eating the pizza and hearing Gurion tell of his love for June, the "scholars" thank Gurion and prepare to leave. Emmanuel comes up with a zinger: "Gurion, if love is forever and therefore what it means to be in love is that you stay in love forever, then one can never truly know if he is in love until the moment he dies." Up in his bedroom, Gurion hears his parents approaching in their car and turns off his light. He overhears them talking in the kitchen, his mother asking his father for a cigarette. Then he descends the stairs for the kitchen and sees his parents making out. He slaps his hand against the wall. His mother, her lips still attached to his father, opens her eyes wide and says: "A spy." Gurion and his father get into a heated discussion about the ethics of a Jew providing legal defense to a neo-Nazi.

Gurion learns of the start of the Gurionic Wars through emails from his friends. Gurion sends an email to his followers telling them that he has declared the next day a holiday when they do not need to go to school. He signs the email note, "Rabbi Gurion." A very brief Chapter 18, called "Commentary on Commentaries," is directed toward "academics" and "scholars" who might want to know the real story of Gurion's creation of the Side of Damage (the boys who follow him as a possible messiah).

The day after the verdict in favor of his client, Gurion's father sleeps late because of having taken sleep medication. Gurion and his mother prepare breakfast and she tells him that Patrick Drucker, his father's client, has died during the night. "Good!" Gurion exclaims, but his mother warns him against dancing on someone's grave and suggests he should be grateful that it wasn't his father who died. Riding the El train to school, Gurion is assailed by Moshe Levin's mother who is angry with Gurion's father for



defending the Nazi. "Probably you should forget about my father and concern yourself with Moshe's," Gurion tells her. The grandmother then throws a punch to Gurion's jaw. Gurion runs across Ally Kravitz and Googy Segal, two of his admirers. They tell him they're armed with pennyguns, and ask what Gurion thinks the next step in their confrontation with the Shovers should be. The boys become embroiled in a confusing exchange about who did what first, who is responsible, who is the victim and what the strategy is—very suggestive of contemporary Israel and Middle East politics.

The use of profanity gives the book realism and provides touches of humor, as in this exchange:

"Fuck does that have to do with anything?" Vincie said. "Fuck does Benji have to do with anything?" Main Man said. "No you fucken listen!" Scott said.

Gurion receives a long letter from Benji Nakamook begging his forgiveness for his seeming betrayal of their friendship by his friendship with Slocum, saying "our worth is determined by nothing other than the strength of our loyalties." June jumps out of the bushes, bites Gurion on the shoulder and he pinches her hip. As they go inside school, they are ordered to the principal's office; while they wait they engage in other forms of love play. Principal Brodsky calls Gurion inside his office to tell him that the number of students on detention has skyrocketed to 80, roughly 7 percent of the student population. Gurion and Brodsky get into a semantics debate when the principal says the Cage is really just a microcosm of the real world with all its expectations of responsible citizens. "If the world's in a cage, and most of the world acts decently, then to act decently is to act like you're in a cage," Gurion says. Brodsky refuses Gurion's request to abolish the Cage, but says he will be released from it and placed in regular classes. "We'll no longer damn you with our low expectations," the principal says.

On his last day in the Cage, Gurion spars with Botha about whether the incarcerated students will be allowed to go to that afternoon's pep rally. Finally, Gurion says to Botha: "Unlock that fucking door." Botha hesitates, dangling his keyring. Gurion lunges for the keyring and misses, then falls on the floor. In the scuffle with Botha, Gurion slams one of his hands into Botha's side. Then Botha puts a wrestling hold on Gurion and lifts him into the air. The other Side of Damage kids jump Botha, kicking and punching until he is bloodied and winded. They hog-tie him and take his key chain, then proceed to the teacher's lounge where they attack the soft drink dispenser to get change to use as "ammunition" in their penny guns. They go to work, shouting cries of: "Crippleize!" "Painalize!" and "Crush-a-late!" Salvador says, "We're here to dump the favored beverages of our oppressors on the floor of the tyrannical gymnasium of their palace!"

The mob sorts through their coins, wing butts and writing nibs to be used as projectiles in their penny guns. Fearing a police response, several members phone in phony emergency calls to the police—a fire, a burglary in progress, a weirdo on the loose. Gurion shows the others how to prepare and load their guns. He tells them that "hundreds of soldiers" are on their way as reinforcements. They call the front desk of Stevenson High School and make a bomb threat, telling the secretary they have 21 minutes to evacuate the building. Gurion tells doubters they are free to leave, but



admonishes the others who join the attack that he expects them to stay with him to the bitter end. Historically, Gurion offers a variation of an ancient prayer for Israel before the battle is joined.

Gurionites, Israelites, Shovers, Robots, teachers, students, boys, girls and sissies, administrators and even parents quickly become embroiled in a battle royal. Fists, penny guns, elbows, knees, feet, wing nuts, chairs and mouths are weapons of choice. Their application is supported by an angry frenzy of profanity and name-calling. The scaffolding for a drama set collapses amid this Armageddon. Just as the bloodied combatants run out of ammunition and energy, sirens wail as police cars approach. As fire trucks pull up in front of the school, Gurion orders his group to lock all the doors. He lets a few of the fallen enemy leave the school, "as a goodwill gesture," and ignores the fireman who yells that they will use a battering ram to break down the doors if he doesn't open them. The Gurionites had taken the gym teacher Desormie hostage; he looks badly battered and probably in shock. Gurion releases him with the others.

When the firemen return with their battering ram, they pause to lend assistance to Desormie. Gurion meanwhile directs his key followers to cover different areas of the school, and calculates that he has 80 "soldiers" at hand and ready to fight. He tells his followers that "an army" of scholars is coming to join the struggle. There is a chorus of ringing cell phones as the mothers of the Gurionites call to check on their children. Gurion makes a demand to the gathered officials that they get novelist Phillip Roth on the phone within a half-hour. A crisis negotiator comes on the line to tell Gurion that Roth is probably in the barn behind his Connecticut home, writing, where there is no phone. He says "some good local folks" have been dispatched to reach Roth.

A poet named Fox offers his opinion of the enemy: "Laughing motherfuckers. Atheists in foxholes. Fuck them all to hell in motherfucking fur handbags."

Benji, Gurion and June go to the nurse's office to get bandages and sterile ointments for those injured. Chicago Police Chief O'Malley goes on TV in response to a barrage of media calls, clarifying that the uprising is in the suburbs and not in Chicago: "I, with rapidly blossoming flowers of joy in my old Irish heart, would, on behalf of myself, like to say just one last time, to you, my spindly-legged semi-literate douchebag pantywaist hackish yokel reporter friends: No. Further. Fucken. Comment." Gurion is pleased when TV talking heads report hundreds of scholars from other Israelite schools arriving by rail and car, but they are halted by police roadblocks.

The protestors watch TV as some 400 scholars close in on a line of police cars just two blocks away. One of the policemen barks "Stand down!" over the megaphone, but the scholars advance. Then the cop roars: "Halt! Cease! Halt! Stand down!" with no effect on the crowd. The cops form a tight barricade with their cars. One of the scholars yells that they will simply walk around the cars without damaging them if the police leave them alone. Meanwhile, Gurion gets the long-awaited call from Philip Roth. Most of the three minutes of time allotted for the call is spent in pointless conversation. Gurion tells the novelist that he writes, too: "Scripture. It's different than fiction. You have to read it



different." Finally, Roth urges Gurion to give up and let the police inside. They end the conversation by exchanging "fuck yous."

Gurion hears his mother's voice coming through a megaphone, telling him not to kill any prisoners and apologizing for bad timing in telling him about his parents' divorce. Although still unsure whether he is the messiah, Gurion believes that "what was good for me was good for the Israelites and what was bad for me was bad for the Israelites." Gurion's plan is to lead the group inside the school outside to join forces with the 400 scholars waiting on the hill crest, but exchanges over the bullhorns between police and protestors cause the scholars on the hill to march toward the school, as the police scatter in different directions. Gurion goes to the nurse's office, pulverizes some pills, and snorts them with his friend Benji Nakamook. Benji says he's sad that they will both probably be expelled and sent to different schools, never to see each other again. Then he jams chairs in the main hall as a barricade and walks out of the building. June urges Gurion to surrender, and he leads his followers outside to be arrested, never joining the scholar/soldiers in the nearby valley.

and other "scholars—show up at Gurion's house and Flowers goes out for a pizza.

Chapters 17-22 Analysis

The pent-up frustrations of students with each other, with teachers, with school administrators and with parents becomes an open gas can waiting for a lighted match. That match is thrown after Gurion convinces Brodsky to shut down the Cage. The keeper of the Cage, Botha, torments Gurion by dangling his keyring when asked when the Cage students will be allowed to go to a pep rally in the gym. Gurion lunges for the keys, then all hell breaks loose. Fights explode through the entire school as the long-simmering battle is joined at last. Gurionites use their penny guns to attack Shovers, they hogtie Botha like an animal, they break into the soft drink machine in the teachers' lounge and the armed insurrection blazes out of control. Gurion assumes the role of general/messiah, commanding his force of 80 soldiers in a series of guerrilla maneuvers. Gurion seems at last to be happy and in his element in this combat leadership role.

It is the battle of Armageddon redux, the revenge of the Israelites against their tormentors, a page out of history brought to life. Gurion sees himself in a purely heroic role and doesn't seem to notice or care that people are being injured and hurt. He is carried away by the majestic sweep of history and lifted above the heads of ordinary mortals. Even a phone call to Philip Roth in which the novelist urges Gurion and his followers to surrender does not bring Gurion back to earth. Surrounded by policemen and firemen. Gurion is prepared to fight to the finish, his adolescent ego running at full speed adrenaline. It is a simple request by his girlfriend June to surrender, that takes all the wind out of his sails. At her request, he calls a halt and surrenders.

This mock-epic battle seems to have satisfied something inside Gurion—and probably his followers—that enables him to move another step toward maturity. His greatest

vulnerability, his love for June, becomes his greatest strength as he discovers the real world at last and experiences what it means to be a mensch, a good man, for himself. This rite of passage, accompanied by TV reporters as well as public safety officials, is completed and a kind of history is, after all, made.



Characters

Gurion Maccabee

Gurion Maccabee is the 10-year-old prepubescent central character. The action revolves around his rebellious thought and behavior, fueled by his suspicion that he may be the reincarnation of the Hebrew messiah. Gurion comes across as someone who lives almost entirely in his head and his thoughts, which are often obsessive to the point of madness. Gurion's mother Tamar is a psychotherapist and his father Judah a liberal, civil rights lawyer. A crisis of sorts occurs in his life when he starts to wrestle with strong emotions that are aroused through his relationship with Eliza June Watermark. Gurion seems to be a natural leader, since a large number of school misfits like Gurion who are sentenced to spend their days in the Cage look up to him. The Cage is simply a prison for kids, and an emblem of how the adult educational system in Chicago deals with these maladjusted children—many of whom are extremely bright and questioning. Gurion uses the Cage and the imposition of top-down power and control on the youngsters as fulcrums to ratchet up their naturally-occurring protest hormones into a full-fledged insurrection. The parallels between the persecuted Jews of the Old Testament and the Roman Empire with the school Cage and the mostly-Jewish adolescents confined therein are strikingly evident.

Eliza June Watermark

Eliza June Watermark is Gurion's second girlfriend in this story. She is just as capricious, just as serious, just as loyal as Gurion in their relationship. Their friendship begins in the Cage, where both are sent as punishment for unruly behavior. June quickly becomes Gurion's trusted confidante and best friend. She supports him in the organizing of his Side of Damage, and even the arming of his followers. The surprising depth of their relationship is revealed toward the end, when June advises Gurion to surrender after the big conflagration that starts in the school gym—and he follows her advice.

Judah Maccabee

Gurion's father, Judah, is a mensch who makes his living as a civil rights attorney. Sometimes he represents unsavory people who have the same constitutional rights as everyone else in America. As a case in point, Judah's advocacy for the First Amendment rights of free speech for a neo-Nazi earn him only the scorn of Orthodox Jews in the Chicago area but also a beating that sends him to the hospital. Judah is a much more relaxed personality than Gurion's psychologist mother who fusses over her son constantly. Judah advocates giving his son freedom to learn through his own mistakes, although he also models strong moral and ethical behavior. Gurion worships his father and feels secure in his unwavering love.



Benji Nakamook

Benji Nakamook is probably Gurion's second closest friend, behind June Watermark. Benji is restless, driven and an idealist like Gurion. Their friendship is, however, threatened when Benji betrays Gurion by showing disrespect for his cause to another student. Benji quickly realizes his fault and sends a long and convincing letter to Gurion, asking his forgiveness and acceptance. When the two have patched up their differences, Benji once more becomes Gurion's trusted lieutenant.

Leonard Brodsky

Leonard Brodsky is the hapless principal of Aptakistic Junior High School where Gurion and his friends attend. Although Brodsky is viewed as an out-of-touch fuddy-duddy by students, he is actually a caring and responsible principal who tries his best to get to the bottom of the wave of student misbehavior and detention. He reaches out to Gurion for help, and closes the Cage when Gurion suggests it might help improve student morale.

Glass-Man

Glass-Man is one of the followers of Gurion Maccabee, approximately a third-tier warrior in the Side of Damage.

Mr. Goldblum

Mr. Goldblum is an assistant administrator at Aptakistic Junior High School who, in contrast to Principal Brodsky, takes a hard line against Gurion and his followers, at times threatening to kick the teeth out of anyone who tries to hassle or attack him.

Jelly Rothstein

Jelly Rothstein is Gurion's girlfriend briefly before he meets and falls in love with June Watermark. She breaks up with Gurion, then tries to restart their relationship after he's already joined with June.

The Monitor Botha

Botha is monitor of the Cage, the enforcer who maintains discipline and good behavior among the students and is therefore reviled and hated.

The Janitor

The Janitor is another third-tier Gurion follower in the Side of Damage.



Objects/Places

Northside Hebrew Day School

Northside Hebrew Day School is where Gurion is enrolled before being kicked out and sent to Aptakisic Junior High School. He carries with him the effects of his immersion in Hebrew language, culture and religion and meets other Jewish students who are sympathetic to his concerns and beliefs.

Chicago

The Chicago area is the general setting for the book but the action takes place in a suburb, at the Aptakisic Junior High School.

Side of Damage

The Side of Damage is the wistfully-named insurrectionist group led by Gurion Maccabee. Its targets are established authority as personified in the school system, other students who do not share their beliefs and, sometimes, parents. It is a guerrilla force of boys whose voices may not have deepened yet and some tomboy girls who just want in on the action, to experience the excitement of challenging the adult world.

Aptakisic

Aptakisic Junior High School is where Gurion and the other adolescent characters attend school in the suburbs of Chicago.

Bat mitzvah

The bat mitzvah is the Jewish ritual of passage into adulthood for girls, just as the bar mitzvah is the ritual for young Jewish men.

WE DAMAGE WE

WE DAMAGE WE is the slogan of the Side of Damage, Gurion's self-proclaimed army of Israelites who rise up against other gangs and school officials.

The Cage

The Cage is an inhuman steel mesh enclosure where students who present behavioral problems at Aptakisic Junior High School are housed. It is, in fact, a day prison that—



just like real prisons—seems to harden rather than rehabilitate its inmates. Gurion Maccabee succeeds in convincing Principal Brodsky that he should shut down the Cage for the overall betterment of the students.

Penny Gun

The Penny Gun is a projectile device designed by Gurion that fires coins and other bits of metal somewhat like a slingshot. The penny gun is fashioned out of old pop bottles and at the time of the Gurionic War it's estimated that 80 students in Gurion's "army" have these weapons.

Gymnasium

The gym at Aptakistic Junior High School is where the opening shot of Gurion Maccabee's assault on the status quo takes place, when he uses his penny gun to shoot out the lights in an electric scoreboard. It is also where the climactic battle of the Gurionic Wars takes place as students, gangs, scholars, jocks, teachers, administrators and parents engage in a full-tilt melee.

The hospital

Gurion visits his father, the civil rights attorney, after he is hospitalized because of an attack by fellow Israelites outside the courtroom where he's just won a victory for free speech in a case involving neo-Nazis. It is after he sees his father in the hospital that Gurion launches his final assault in the Gurionic Wars at school.



Themes

Messiah

Throughout the entire novel, the central character Gurion Maccabee shows he's obsessed with the question of whether he is the messiah. He studies Torah and talks with rabbis about the question, then decides if he is the messiah he may never know in his lifetime, and that he could potentially be the messiah along with every other Jewish child in the world. As Gurion assumes a somewhat messianic role among his fellow students confined in the Cage, his doubts about his status as the true messiah grow stronger, although his fellow students are all too happy to accept him as such.

Israelite vs. Jew

Gurion Maccabee makes a distinction in his own mind between Israelite, to designate a member or descendant of one of the original tribes of Israel, and Jew which applies to anyone anywhere in the world who practices Judaism. He uses the term Israelite judiciously and affirmatively, and seems to place a higher value on the Israelites. In a discussion with the rabbi of one of his former schools, Gurion uses the term often prompting the rabbi to challenge Gurion by saying there is no distinction between the two terms. Gurion replies stiffly that, obviously, the rabbi doesn't understand the terms and should study them carefully. Gurion comes across as arrogant and narrow-minded. In his relationship with his girlfriend June, Gurion says he can not marry her because although she is a Jew, she is not an Israelite. June offers to convert, or do whatever is necessary, to win his approval.

This search for some kind of racial purity or indigenous sacredness is disturbingly reminiscent of the Nazis and their worship of the pure "Aryan" ideal. Both state of racial and genetic purity are probably genetically impossible, although in Germany this distinction was the basis for many millions of Jews and other non-Aryans being put to death in gas chambers or through other means. This rigidity in Gurion's perception is a sign that his mental growth is incomplete, which is rather normal for a 10-year-old. However, Gurion has a good role model in his father, a civil rights lawyer who represents many clients in First Amendment cases—even neo-Nazis. Gurion himself is attacked on the train one day by the mother and grandmother of a friend who have just learned that Gurion's father won his case on behalf of the neo-Nazi.

Code of Ethics

Gurion is not the only student at Aptakistic Junior High School who struggles to find a personal ethics code, when confronted with the adult world. For example, the students find it wrong and outrageous that there is a soft drink dispenser in the teachers' lounge that is not available to students. This irritant becomes one of the flashpoints that spark the armed insurrection that Gurion leads with his Side of Damage. Another ethical



travesty, in Gurion's eyes, is the Cage that imprisons students who are unruly or inappropriate. He takes his complaint to the principal who decides to close the Cage on the eve of the student revolution.

Ben Slokum tries to explain to fellow students why he doesn't "fuck up" another unpopular student named Maholtz, as he struggles with his own code of ethics: "Everyone hates Maholtz and so I hate Maholtz. The only reason I don't fuck him up is because he supplies me with a couple of things that no one else in this school can get their hands on, and what he supplies is good for the cause of my self-preservation. The fact that he's on the basketball team excuses me from having to fuck him up—in the eyes of the crowd. See, if I did fuck him up, they would be happy about it but that I don't fuck him up is readily excusable because of how we're teammates and teammates aren't expected to harm each other."

And Benji Nakamook, one of Gurion's closest friends, explains his own ethics in a letter asking forgiveness for a betrayal of his friend:

"For me, if you give your loyalty to someone once, you've given it forever. For me, in order to be truly loyal, you have to be loyal despite preference and hardship—even despite betrayal by the person you've given your loyalty to. Which means you can't let your heart govern your loyalties. Your heart's the first thing you have to lock down."

Adult Authority

Every young person at Aptakistic Junior High School has an issue with adult authority, as is ordinarily the case with kids entering adolescence. To some extent, Gurion manipulates this rebelliousness to form his cadre of followers. But, unlike his followers, Gurion tries to maintain some respect for the adults in his life—especially his parents and the rabbis he knows—even as he prepares to do battle with them. Most of his anger at adults is directed toward those who operate and maintain the Cage, a form of imprisonment for kids who are mostly unruly and not criminal in any respect. Gurion sees this as a real injustice and determines to get the Cage closed permanently.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told from the point of view of Gurion Maccabee, who is also the protagonist. In every scene —whether it involves interactions with other students, his girlfriend June, his parents or school officials— Gurion is present either directly or through his narrative voice as he relates the story. The Instructions is basically Gurion's story of adolescence.

Setting

Primary setting is Northside Hebrew Day School in Chicago, although there are temporary shifts to Gurion's home, the hospital where his father is taken, and the grassy hill behind school where he meets with his followers before, during and after their confrontation with school authorities..

Language and Meaning

One stylistic anomaly, in particular, stands out anywhere there is dialogue. The author puts the words of Gurion in regular type, with no quote marks or italics, but places the words of other characters within the conventional quotation marks. This idiosyncrasy can be confusing, even after multiple encounters with it, and tends to make the reader stop to check on who says what. Compounding this punctuation irregularity is the author's habit of ending a statement by Gurion with "I said," then beginning the next sentence with another "I said." This, too is confusing and tends to slow the reader. An example:

Zipporah, I said. I said, What about Zipporah?

"Different times," said the Rabbi.

That's never the right answer, I said, and you know it. I said, anyway, times weren't so different. (Chapter 11, p. 499)

The repetitious use of "I said" may be the author's way of indicating the self-involvement of the central character and the obsessive nature of his speech. If that is the case, and the author meant to make dialogue reflect the discomfort such a person can inflict on others, then the device is successful.

The novel's language is studded with Yiddishisms and adolescent slang which can render it at times nearly incomprehensible for any reader without a good dictionary, thesaurus or slang exegesis. A good general glossary of Yiddish is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_words_of_Yiddish_origin. The author uses



slang expressions that derive from Yiddish as well as generic slang utterances that would be common to most pre-adolescents anywhere in America—or more particularly, the Chicago area.

Among the neologisms (coined words) and argot (slang), are these:

- **bancer**: a contraction of band and cancer, meaning someone who exerts a negative influence on groups, causing them to disintegrate
- **dentist, dental**: someone or something hopelessly dull, unimaginative and vaguely threatening
- **kenobi**: strange, alien
- **chomsky**: silly, delusional
- **schmuck**: fool, jerk
- **dumont**: absurd
- **keester**: buttocks
- **foog**: a despicable fool
- **bookrocket**: to throw a book at
- **motard**: a term of contempt combining homo and retard
- **snat**: something sticky and unpleasant
- **yossarian**: crazy
- **CYA POV**: cover-your-ass point of view

Stylistically, the author borrows from and at times mimics other writers, as in this passage in Chapter 5, p. 186 where the influence of poet Alan Ginsberg is evident:

"Will you be a shaved Samson in the nosebleed seats, watching from the bleachers while all of our keesters get handed to us red by basketball and pervs and robots and tall people, your ass's jawbone long-gone and unswinging?"

Structure

Unlike most conventional novels—even those that employ such devices as flashbacks and flash-forwards—the narrative line proceeds as much dimensionally as temporally. That is, the story thickens through associations between the central character and other people at a faster pace than it advances through problem-conflict-growth-resolution. The action seems more concentrated in a horizontal, rather than a vertical, plane.



Episodes of conflict within this unusual structure serve primarily to expand rather than accelerate the narrative. The overall effect is to produce a sense of suspended time not unlike that of the Old Testament where events seem to occur outside of time, or in a flattened sense of time where it is always the present. In modern fiction, there are few works that can be compared with this structure other than *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce, where time and events flow in all directions in a type of weirdly interconnected dreamscape.

The text is often broken up to include diagrammatic patterns of words that relate to the story. These may not advance the reader's comprehension of the book beyond, possibly, demonstrating that the central character, Gurion, seems to suffer from graphomania—or the obsession to write or speak excessively as if the brain is seized with a mania for words. This hypomania also is evident in the endless, needless intellectualizing of everything—great or small—that happens in Gurion's life. The reader may wonder whether Gurion suffers from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This disorder is commonly treated with the stimulant Ritalin which has the paradoxical effect of calming the racing thoughts and hypomania that young people with ADHD typically suffer.



Quotes

"No one called her Eliza. They called her June. I'd seen June around, but never close up. She was flat but so pretty. She sat before I did, and not in the middle chair. I didn't know if I should sit next to her or sit so a chair was empty between us, so I tried to read her face, but I couldn't read her face because she wasn't bat-mitzvah yet—the stories wouldn't tell. They weren't available." (Chapter 1, p. 19)

"'I don't want this,' he said. I was chomsky to think he'd appreciate a wingnut. He tossed the wingnut back so it would land in my lap, but before its arc ended, I knocked it sideways with a sudden backhand. It bounced off the wall and landed in a planter that held a fan-shaped tree from Asia. 'This fighting,' said Brodsky. 'What can I do to get you to stop fighting?'" (Chapter 2, p. 42)

"I obviously wasn't the messiah. First of all, if I was the messiah there'd be perfect justice throughout the world and the schmuck across from me [in] whose desk I was sitting wouldn't hold a position of authority over me. Secondly, we'd both be in Israel. Thirdly, all the dead would have begun to rise out of the peak of the Mount of Olives, the most righteous first, and I'd be studying Torah with Moses, who'd want to hear what I thought, and probably Rashi and Maimonides and Samuel and Ruth and Rabi Akiva too." (Chapter 2, p. 45)

"Though no one had ever seen Leevon fight, everyone seemed pretty sure he could fight because he never talked, and not ever talking had to get him in fights because it had to make a lot of kids crazy—it made teachers crazy, which is why he was in the Cage, and teachers get paid to not get crazy." (Chapter 3, p. 87)

"'Whatever. That's not my rule, you schlep. You vildachaya. Schlub. Chainik-hocker.' 'What's a chainik-hocker?' Call-Me-Sandy said. 'It's like hocking me in chainik, which means banging a tea kettle which is what you're doing when you nag your mother and she's Jewish.'" (Chapter 3, p. 105)

"They're not scared of fighting, bullies—that lie only seems true because it describes an irony—but they don't enjoy it much, either. What bullies enjoy is being recognized as dominant. They'd much rather have just won a fight than be fighting one." (Chapter 5, p. 175)

"Will you be a shaved Samson in the nosebleed seats, watching from the bleachers while all of our keesters get handed to us red by basketball and pervs and robots and tall people, your ass's jawbone long-gone and unswinging?" (Chapter 5, p. 186)

"Ashamed is just grateful waiting to happen." (Chapter 5, p. 203)

"I'm calling you a cheesedick, I told him. You're both of you cheesedicks, and all of your friends. You're smegmatic foreskins. Stinking, fungal, sebaceous fleshfolds." (Chapter 6, p. 246)



"As long as Boystar didn't bother June again, I had no reason to go after him, but if I agreed with Maholtz, it would be like saying that I wouldn't go after Boystar because Maholtz told me not to, and plus he was a disgusting person." (Chapter 6, p.315)

"Even after all my logic and my theory, I add a 'motherfucker' so you ig'nant niggas hear me." (Chapter 9, p. 342)

"There were thousands of millions of ways to be a coward, I decided, billions and trillions of googols of ways, and no less than half of the ways were ways to save face or ways to act so you could save face later." (Chapter 10, p. 428)

"A large part of you knows you are not the messiah.' All of me knows I'm not the messiah, I said. I said, And all of me knows I might be. I am a Judite." (Chapter 12, p. 522)

"We're losers.' 'We're not losers, but we don't know how to fight so we suck.' 'We don't suck, but we suck at fighting, so we're sissies.' 'We're not sissies but we're small guys right now and when we try to act brave we get held back and Shpritzzy gets hurt.' 'Ah, Shpritzzy!' 'Schpritzzy's such a good guy' 'We're all good guys' 'We are. There's nothing wrong with us.' 'It's the messed-up people who always want to fight that make us feel like there's something wrong with us.'" (Chapter 13, p. 610)

"Maybe, I thought, there is actual loyalty, and that is measured by the ends to which you'd go; and maybe then there is also potential loyalty—measured by the ends to which you'd hope you'd go." (Chapter 14, p. 649)

"Benji'd quit our friendship and watched me get humiliated, I thought; he had quit because I didn't believe a Gentile should marry an Israelite. Nakamook, after all, was crazy. A psycho, a bully. After all, just a crazy psycho bully. And all crazies cried, all bullies and psychos. Nakamook abandoned me. You don't abandon friends. We were no longer friends." (Chapter 15, p. 660-661)

"Gurion, if love is forever, and therefore what it means to be in love is that you stay in love forever, then one can never truly know if he is in love until the moment he dies. We know for a fact that no two people have ever fallen in love with each other without having met." (Chapter 17, p. 746-747)

"I'll file the papers this afternoon. You'll be out of the Cage on Monday. You won't be going back in, either. And we'll put you on the regular STEP system. We will no longer damn you with our low expectations." (Chapter 19, p. 810)

"This was the trick of it: if Brodsky had offered me the chance to get out of the Cage, I would have refused. I would not have abandoned my friends, yet despite and because of that I was glad he hadn't offered. And despite and because of that I wasn't glad that I was glad. In the end, though, I was more glad than I wasn't, and that wasn't up to me, either." (Chapter 19, p. 815)



Topics for Discussion

What is Gurion's attitude about being the messiah? What are the attitudes of his school mates?

What is different about Gurion's relationship with June Watermark as compared with his previous relationship with Jelly Rothstein?

How does Gurion's relationship with his mother compare and contrast with his relationship to his father?

What is principal Brodsky's attitude toward Gurion and his sycophants?

Is the situation with students at Aptakistic Junior High School unique to Jewish youth or universal to young people of that pre-adolescent age group?

What does Brodsky do to try to co-opt (de-fuse) the growing student rebellion at Aptakistic?

Who is the student with the speech defect characterized by the random insertion of "n" into words, so that he is practically unintelligible?

How does Gurion react to his betrayal by his friend Benji Nakamook? How does Benji respond?

What accounts for Gurion's maintenance of a strong system of ethical beliefs alongside his dark, rebellious nature?

How is June Watermark temperamentally and spiritually different from Jelly Rothstein?