Johnny Got His Gun Study Guide

Johnny Got His Gun by Dalton Trumbo

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Johnny Got His Gun takes a harrowing look inside the mind of a World War I draftee who is lying helpless without arms, legs, mouth, ears, nose, or eyes, yet over the course of years is determined to reestablish contact with the outside world and tell "little guys" never to allow bellicose politicians to butcher them again.

World War I draftee Joe Bonham is lying in a hospital, bandaged all over and realizing he is at least deaf and has lost both arms. The discovery process is slow, as he weaves in and out of consciousness, remembering the family and girlfriend he reluctantly leaves behind. Bonham knows he has not come to make the world safe for democracy. He remembers saying farewell to beautiful nineteen-year-old Kareen Birkman after making love with her the night before the troop train arrives. She begs him not to report. Their farewell takes place against a mish-mash of patriotic songs, speeches, and prayers, by which point the lovers have no time for prayer.

Through flashbacks, Bonham recalls a failed high school romance and a one-day escape from reality into the Utah desert, contemplates friendship and betrayal and the antics of an amusing fellow in the bakery where he works in Los Angeles. Bonham emerges from his flashback only to realize that they are far more extensive and he is being kept alive against his will, unable to protest. He has one sense left: feeling on the remaining parts of his body. Bonham despises the medical profession, which has profited from the war, learning techniques that culminate in saving him when they should have let him go.

Bonham feels a rat gnawing persistently at an unhealed side wound and only when his nurse is tending him does he realize the rat is a dream. He decides he must be able to discern reality from dream, for that is all he has left. Bonham realizes even if loved ones were beside him, he would not know. This leads him to think about those who enlist "little guys" into fighting wars over ideals. Bonham claims bona fides as the only living dead man in history and the sole right to speak for the dead. All patriots and idealists are liars and frauds.

Trying to keep his mind busy, Bonham laments having wasted his school years. He determines he must conquer time, but his early attempts are too complex. Eventually, he simplifies his methods; they work, and he declares that day New Year's. He resents receiving a medal and but wants the "big guys" to see what they have done for him. Receiving the medal, Bonham realizes that if vibrations can communicate to him, he should be able to communicate by them. He begins continually tapping SOS in Morse code with his head against his pillow, but soon despairs that his day nurse will ever understand. He wants to die, for this alone will give him peace. Bonham feels certain that a doctor will understand his tapping, but instead is merely tranquilized. In a dream, Bonham sees Christ playing cards with draftees soon to be dead, and falls weeping at his feet.

Bonham receives a temporary day nurse who traces "Merry Christmas" on his chest. This communication brings elation and he resumes his SOS, but the doctor whom she summons rejects Bonham's wild ideas of becoming a sideshow freak to earn his own way in the outside world (while demonstrating the hidden horrors of war). Drugged again, he sees himself as a new messiah and formulates a platform: the little guys who, throughout history, have obeyed the big guys, fought, and died, will never again permit this to happen. Every Johnny handed a gun will know where to point it.

Book 1: Chapters 1-3

Book 1: Chapters 1-3 Summary

Joe Bonham wishes someone would pick up the phone. He has a terrible headache and it has been ringing all night. Bonham is ordered "front and center" in the night shipping room, shaking with fear, takes the phone, learns his father has died, and is driven home by Rudy, as ordered by night foreman Jody Simmons. It is raining in a quiet Los Angeles, just before Christmas. Father lies dead in the living room, and Mother is not crying much. Joe's seven-year-old sister is asleep and the thirteen-year-old sister is crumbled in a corner. They retreat to the kitchen as two men efficiently load the fifty-one-year-old dead man into a wicker basket. Joe has a last look and expresses sorrow for all his father's griefs. Mother shakes, declaring that is not Bill Bonham any more. That is all.

Joe Bonham wonders why people are so inconsiderate, and feels more like he is coming out of ether rather than hung over, and is tired of hearing that his father is dead and going home. Father can die only once, so the phone must be part of a dream. Bonham remembers reading The Last Days of Pompeii and thinking a nearby Colorado mountain has blown up, trapping him in lava. Electric pain shakes him hard and throws him back into bed, exhausted. He feels sweat all over beneath bandages that wrap him top to bottom. Knowing he is hurt badly, he feels his heart pounding but cannot hear his pulse. This means he is "stone deaf".

As the pain ebbs, Bonham wonders about the other guys in his foxhole. Being deaf will not be so bad; he can communicate in writing, and there are things he does not want to hear, like machine guns, airplanes, and guys screaming they are hit. Bonham sees a big ditch where he and the guys swim in Colorado before he moves to Los Angeles. He sees Grand Mesa and hears the roaring mountain streams. He sees his father pulling his mother on a sled one Christmas morning and hears the snow crunch. He asks his parents if they remember putting him on gentle Old Frank for a ride, or the party-line telephone while they are courting—how farm families between Shale City and Cole Creek Valley listen in on Macia's piano playing and submit requests and Bill wishes they would realize this is a courtship, not a concert. Joe Bonham wallows in darkness and swirling sounds and wants to die. Piano and telephone compete and he is lonesome.

Bonham's mother is singing in the kitchen, the same wordless tune, absently, repeatedly, as she works. Fall is her busy time. There is a friendly hamburger man at 5th and Main who makes the best burgers ever. Saturdays, Joe Bonham goes at 10:45 pm to his father's store for thirty cents to buy three hamburgers to go. He runs the bag home under his shirt to keep the burgers warm. The girls are already asleep, so Joe feels grown up. It usually snows by Thanksgiving, and first snowfall is wonderful. The kids play on flexible flyer's until they are numb. In the spring, primroses bloom in vacant lots and the kids gather bouquets for May Day presents. Daredevil pilot Lincoln Beechy flies into town one day, making the inhabitants proud of their metropolis. People watch

him fly five loop the loops and hear Superintendent of School Hargraves proclaim the airplane as mankind's greatest step forward in a hundred years. It will draw humankind together, create understanding, and usher in peace and prosperity. Months later, Shale City mourns Beechy's death.

Joe Bonham's birthday falls in December. Friends come for chicken dinner and cake and bring presents. One year, Glen Hogan gives him a pair of handsome brown silk socks, which shows he is growing up. Long pants arrive three months later. All of the guys like Father, who also likes them and treats them to a show after dinner at the Elysium Theatre. In the fall comes the biggest week of the year, the County Fair, with unforgettable smells and rodeo and carnival acts. In the summer, the guys swim in the big ditch north of town, lie on the banks, and talk boy talk—including girls. They begin worrying about their clothes and cars as they come of age. When the guys lack money for a date, they cruise the pavilion, listening, and wondering with whom their girls are dancing. They master the art of smoking cigarettes with style.

In the cool back room of Jim O'Connell's cigar store, old men talk about the war and how "Rooshia" is going to push the "goddam Germans" back to Berlin. Joe Bonham becomes aware of the war only when the family moves to Los Angeles. Romania enters the war the day Los Angeles newspapers tell of two Canadian soldiers crucified by Germans. Bill Bonham dies, and America enters the war. Joe Bonham also has to join, and ends up lying in bed, thinking this is no place for him, no war for him, none of his business. What does he care about making the world safe for democracy? Joe Bonham knows he is hurt worse than he thinks and figures he might be better off dead and buried near Shale City.

Bonham shoots up through cool waters, wondering if he will reach the surface. He has been rising and sinking for months (perhaps) and has not yet drowned. He knows he must hold strength in reserve for the final death struggle. He floats on his back because he is no fool, and feels people working on him, trying to help him. His head is bandaged, so he cannot see. When they remove some bandages, Bonham feels sudden coolness. They work on an arm, pinching, burning, hurting, and itching. When he realizes he cannot actually feel his arm, Bonham freezes and goes rigid. They have cut off his left arm at the shoulder. The dirty bastards have no right to do so without his permission. He needs that arm to work—and to swim, as he feels himself slide beneath the water. It takes a lot of work and money to save a wounded arm, and it is his own fault for being in this war, so off with the thing and be done with it.

Bonham pictures the stump and how he has been born normal. He cannot hear but can write, so he calls for paper. He wonders where his left arm goes when they are done with it. Is it being used for research, thrown on a junk heap, or buried respectfully? He worries about the ring Kareen Birkman gives him. He wants it before he goes under again, because it means life. It is a real moonstone, given to her by her mother. Bonham calls her his "little mick", and she begs him not to go. He says one must go when drafted and many people come back. Suddenly, tough Mike Birkman looms and orders them into her bedroom for what might be their last chance. He tells Bonham to be gentle and to not treat her like a whore.

Kareen stands in the corner of the bedroom and looks at Bonham in a way that makes him want to cry. He holds her gently until she turns away and undresses under the covers. He fetches her robe, but holds it far enough away to glimpse her breast. Bonham undresses and joins her, trying to be nonchalant, but she throws herself on him, begging him not to go. She is afraid and wants him to run away. He lays her head on his left arm like a cushion and they kiss. They sleep little that night, and in the morning, tough Mike serves them breakfast in bed, hurries them to get up and dressed, warning it will not do to have Bonham shot by Americans rather than by Germans. Four trainloads of draftees are departing. Bunting hangs everywhere and women and children wave miniature flags. Three bands play simultaneously as the mayor gives a speech. Amidst patriotic phrases and songs, pious blessings, recitation of Our Father, and a woman wailing about her underage son, Bonham wishes he could stay, make money, have fat, smart, happy kids, and love Kareen. At "All aboard," they are parted after one last embrace. Bonham fades in and out, thinking about both lost arms and about Kareen.

Book 1: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The opening chapters of Book 1, "The Dead", establish that World War I draftee Joe Bonham is lying in a hospital bandaged all over, realizing that he is at least deaf and has lost both arms. The discovery process is slow, as he weaves in and out of consciousness, remembering the family and girlfriend he reluctantly leaves behind. Bonham knows he has not come to make the world safe for democracy, but is too shell shocked to begin serious philosophical reflections. That comes later, in Book 2. The scene at the railroad station is the most vivid, intertwining the lovers' farewell with a mish-mash of snippets from contemporary patriotic songs (including "Johnny Get Your Gun"), the repeated formula "As the great patriot . . . says", presumably followed by lost quotations and finally the Lord's Prayer, by which point the lovers cannot pray, nor do they have time for prayer. The mood is somber even before the full extent of Bonham's injuries is established. Note the woman trying to find her underage son and take him home. It becomes a recurring motif and leads to Bonham's visions of Christ and himself as a new messiah.

Book 1: Chapters 4-6

Book 1: Chapters 4-6 Summary

It is too hot for Bonham to breathe. He gasps, looking at the faraway mountains dancing over the Utah desert where he and Howie are laying track because things at home get out of control. They are part of a section gang, so they cannot stop work until the foreman allows. Bonham and Howie struggle to keep up with the Mexicans. It is 125° in the shade and there is no shade. Bonham feels like he is smothering under a blanket, with his heart beating and his breath shallow. When they stop for lunch, the Mexicans offer to share their spicy egg sandwiches, but the boys pass. They follow them two miles for a swim in a muddy canal surrounded by tumbleweeds. They dislike the hot, alkali water, and then have to run two miles back and resume work. Bonham feels his dry lungs squeaking and his heart swelling. He panics, knowing he cannot keep up, and wants to die. Hallucinating, he tries to excuse Diane for cheating on him with Glen Hogan. It is silly for Bonham to be wasting summer vacation here over a simple date. Bonham considers how all girls are untrue and faithless and guys have to learn forgiveness rather than rush to the desert and let Diane and Hogan be together for three months. He has been a fool.

Someone hollers it is quitting time and the Mexicans begin pumping the handcar, singing. Howie kneels beside Bonham as he lies on his stomach, too weak to take a turn. The hot bunkhouse has a dirt floor, tin roof, and stacked bunks. Bonham hurts uniformly all over and is numb and sleepy. He thinks about tiny, cute Diane and their first kiss just before he falls asleep. It is dark and smoky from the Mexicans cooking dinner when Howie gets Bonham to wake up. He waves a telegram from Onie to Howie, denouncing his impetuous move, begging forgiveness, and swearing he hates Hogan. Howie looks overjoyed that Hogan has thrown her over for Diane and wants to go home; slaving here is ridiculous. There is a gravel train leaving in ten minutes for Shale City. Riding home, Bonham thinks about Harper, whom he had hit the night before in the drug store, calling his best friend a liar about Diane going out with Hogan. Later that night, Bonham sees the couple entering the theater and knows Harper has told the truth. Bonham then meets Howie, who has never been able to keep a girl and whom Bonham does not much like, but they both want to get away. Lying on the gravel car, Bonham remembers camping trips with Harper, their first double date, and how Harper consoles him when his pup Major is run over. Harper is too good a friend to lose, even over Diane.

As the train nears Shale City, Bonham thinks again about Diane, seeing her smiling face clearly, and wanting her not to run around with Hogan, who takes liberties with girls. It is Bonham's duty to warn her. Bonham and Howie drop off the train outside the station so as not to be seen. Howie heads to Onie's house, while Bonham heads home beneath a starry sky. He gets a funny excited/scared feeling as he nears Diane's house and realizes he cannot show up bloody-handed and filthy. Better he come back tomorrow. Suddenly, Bonham stops breathing, seeing Diane and Harper kissing. He says goodbye

to Diane in his mind and walks home, hurting and feeling useless. People will ask why he has nothing to do with Diane or Harper and there will be nothing to say. His dad will ask why he stays just one day on the section gang. Nobody will understand that he has lost the one friend in whom he could confide. Even if they make up, it will never be the same; Diane will always be between them, not even caring. It kills him to think he will never laugh with Diane again or kid her—and Hogan is not to blame.

Going to bed, Bonham wishes they would take him out and shoot him. Everyone else has a best friend—even guys in the penitentiary and Mexicans in the desert. Howie has a girl. Bonham has no reason to hold his head up. He weeps over a girl for the first time. That is a long time ago, before Los Angeles. Bonham wonders about Hogan and Howie. He has heard Harper is killed at Belleau Wood and thinks him lucky to have had Diane and to have died. Bonham does not know where he is or what he is doing, but he is at least cooling down.

Bonham cannot get used to things melting together: white clouds, soft pillows, the Colorado River, and Los Angeles long before Kareen Birkman. He is floating on his back telling her about floating here, asking her to keep her head up so she can breathe, to stay near him and not go away. Bonham cannot turn over and swim, just float on his back. She is gone and he is alone and sinking. Bonham feels unbalanced, like his head is heavier than his feet. Without arms, he cannot swim six to eight feet up to the surface. It is a bad dream, like when someone is chasing and one cannot run. Bonham thinks what a shame to drown close enough to air to simply stand up. Bonham sees shooting lights—rockets, bombs, pinwheels, flares—and hears hissing, explosions, howls, whines, meaningless words, whistles. He hurts all over and wants to die.

Suddenly, everything quiets as though a switch were thrown and his pain is relieved. He is not drowning, he can think, he is deaf and armless, but not in pain. He figures he can get hooks and learn to read lips, so things could be worse. He does wish the nurses would lay him out flat so he will not again feel like he is drowning. When Bonham tries to kick the blankets off his legs, he realizes the have cut his legs off too. He thinks of all the things one cannot do without legs and tries to think of anything, including Birkman, that can take his mind of this reality, but it is true. He throws his head back to yell in fright but realizes he has no mouth. He works his jaws but finds no jaws. He tries to run his tongue around the inside of his mouth but finds no tongue, no teeth, and no palate. He cannot swallow. He begins to smother and pant and realizes he has no nose. He feels his chest rise and fall but feels no air flow. In a wild panic he wants to kill himself by not breathing, but realizes he is breathing through somewhere in his throat.

Bonham knows he is dying but does not want to go until he has figured this all out. One cannot lose this much of oneself and survive, but the dead do not think and he is thinking. Dead men are not curious but he is. He struggles to reach out with the nerves of his face to determine the extent of the hole in his face. His face muscles and nerves crawl like snakes. The hole starts at the base of his throat and widens to include his ears, nose, and eyes. It is like a storekeeper taking inventory. If this is a dream, Bonham must wake up soon or go nuts. No one can live like this. He feels like the bits of cartilage that old Prof. Vogel grows in biology. Bonham has a working mind and nothing

else. He cannot kill himself. He calls out from his nightmare to his mother, but she has forgotten him. He is scared and wants her to do the things he has seen her do with baby Elizabeth and assumes she has done with him. He cannot stand it. Living like this for years is unbearable. This cannot be he. Please, let it not be he.

Bonham walks eleven miles a night at the bakery and hardly tires. He makes $18 a week, which is not bad. Friday nights are the heaviest, as drivers lay in supplies for the weekend, and the bakery hires extra help from the Midnight Mission. One tall, brown-eyed, good-looking Puerto Rican, Jose, stands out from the rest. Over lunch in the men's can, Jose talks about the wonders of California, and his wish for a steady job to get away from the smell of disinfectant. He has come to get into the movies. He has come from New York where he works as a chauffeur on 5th Avenue because the daughter falls in love with him and wants to marry. The guys say nothing, knowing everyone at the Mission has a line. Arguing with them does no good.

Easter means twenty to thirty thousand dozen hot cross buns, so Simmons hires Jose, who is happy until he come in one day with a letter and asks advice on American etiquette: how does a gentleman decline a marriage proposal? The 5th Avenue woman has inherited money and is coming to Los Angeles to marry Jose. The guys think he is a damn fool to decline, but he does not love her and must be gallant. A month later, Jose has another serious problem: he has been hired by a studio but feels obligated to Simmons. How can he quit without offending him? None of the guys' well thought out suggestions are gentlemanly, and Jose must follow Puerto Rican customs. Jose works both jobs until he knows his health is failing. Pinky Carson comes up with an idea: drop six to eight pies boxes in front of Simmons and get fired. Jose is desperate enough to try.

Jose drops the pies, but Simmons accepts his abject apology. Carson says next time push over a 180-pie rack. Most of the guys come to work early to see the fun and are perplexed to see a floral box lying on Simmons' desk. He is too when he arrives at 10 PM, but figures it is safe, and opens it. There is no card. At 2 AM, Carson decides blueberry will be most dramatic and positions a cart full outside Simmons' office. When a trembling Jose crashes it, Simmons looks shocked, storms out shouting epithets, regrets giving Jose a second chance, and fire him on the spot. Jose mentally forgives the insults and condemns his own wretched ingratitude. The flowers are an anonymous expression of gratitude. Jose sends a money order for $19.87 to combine with his unclaimed final check to make restitution. Bonham sees Jose before him, weaving, talking too quietly for someone with no ears. Asks him to come closer, since he cannot move. Bonham realizes that he has been dreaming. It is hard to tell.

Book 1: Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Through flashbacks, Bonham recalls a failed high school romance and one-day escape from reality into the Utah desert, contemplates friendship and betrayal and the antics of a supremely ethical and amusing fellow in the bakery. Bonham emerges from the first flashback remembering his extensive injuries, only to realize that they are far more

devastating than he'd known. He is being kept alive against his will and cannot express it. His mind-and-nerve exploration of the extent of the hole suggests how Bonham re-enters life in Book 2, but at this point, nothing appears recoverable or adaptable. In a powerful staccato piece, Bonham cries out for a mother who is not there. The second time, after seeing Jose, he is more composed: this is simply where he is.

Book 1: Chapters 7-10

Book 1: Chapters 7-10 Summary

Bonham has to find a way to stop all the fading, rushing, smothering, sinking, and rising that make him want to holler, laugh, and claw himself with hands rotting in a hospital dump. He needs to get a hold of himself. He knows time has passed because his stumps are healed and the bandages are gone. He needs to figure out what he will do next. He is like a full-grown man being stuffed back into his mother's body: helpless, fed through his stomach, but unable to look forward to living. He must remember and accept that he will live in this womb forever, unable to communicate or experience the sights and sounds and smells of his old life. He will never walk, run, jump, stretch, or get tired. If the place around him catches fire, he will burn; if an insect crawls on him or stings him he may try to shrug or endure it. It will be like this forever.

Bonham wonders how he has endured. One hears of people dying after scratching their thumb, of mountain climbers fall off their stoop, of simple appendectomies being fatal, of influenza carrying off five to ten million people in a single winter. How, though, can someone lose arms, legs, ears, eyes, nose and mouth and be alive. Plenty of people survive three to four years if doctors get patients fast enough and control the bleeding. Plenty of guys are deafened or blinded or breathing through tubes or are chinless or noseless—but he combines them all. Somehow, a shell misses his jugular vein and spine but scoops his whole face out. It has been quiet on the front, so the doctors have enough time to work on him, an interesting problem, an opportunity to see how much they have learned. Bonham wonders why he does not bleed to death with all those severed veins. Perhaps his limbs are only wounded a bit, but the doctors spend so much time on his head that gangrene sets in for lack of a few squirming white maggots, and they joint-by-joint amputate his arms and legs. Perhaps if they had known how he would end up, they would have let him die. They cannot kill him now, for that would be murder.

Many funny things happen in this war: a guy has the top of his stomach shot away so doctors use cadaver skin to make a window. Tubes help guys perform all bodily functions. In Southern France, they house the able-bodied who are so scared they cannot talk but act like dogs. A coal miner returns to his wife and kids in Cardiff so badly wounded that she kills him with a hatchet and then the kids. They find her trying to eat a beer glass in a saloon. None of the four to five million men killed want to die, while thousands of the blind, crazy, and crippled cannot die, no matter how hard they try. None of them are as bad as he. Doctors can point to him as their triumph. The war is a wonderful thing for doctors and Bonham profits from everything they have learned. The only problem is that he is back in the womb to stay. He must believe that is the situation. At that point, he will be able to think.

It is like reading about a lottery winner in the paper: a one in a million shot, so unlikely that one does not bother to buy a ticket. The winner does not expect it, but from now on

he can believe anything. Bonham is the one in ten million loser. He begins to quiet down, think more clearly, and put things together. There are small things wrong with him too, like a scab at the base of his throat that sticks to something. By moving his head, he can pull on it. He also senses a cord tied at mid-forehead. Both puzzle and divert him until he figures out he is masked so the nurses will not vomit at the sight of him. Bonham thinks that is very thoughtful. As a kid, he cannot let scabs heal without picking; now he becomes manic about dislodging the mask to prove to himself that he is not helpless. He cannot stretch his neck far enough to do so. It is worse than being in the womb, because babies get to kick and turn over. He can do neither. He abandons the scab to concentrate on rocking, because if in twenty years he manages to flip over, he can kill himself by plunging a metal tube into a vital organ or shut off a rubber tube and suffocate. Bonham has never been sick a day in his life, he has been able to heft ninety pounds of bread hundreds of times a night, and now he cannot roll over.

Suddenly, Bonham grows very tired and thinks about another minor injury, a small hole in his side that refuses to heal. He feels the slick trail from it. He remembers visiting Jim Tift at the military hospital in Lille. The ward stinks as bad as a "rich ripe corpse" stumbled on during patrol. Bonham thinks he may be lucky to have no nose and be spared smelling himself rotting away. He does not worry about loss of appetite; they pump food into his belly. Things grow dimmer and he knows he is slipping away. The blackness turns to twilight blue. He feels a large trench rat crawling over him, sniffing, tickling the skin around his draining wound, and he can do nothing about it. He recalls a dead Prussian officer they discover one day, his body swollen after being dead a week, and being eaten by a fat, contented rat. They go crazy, beat it into red jelly, feel foolish, and go back to the war. It does not matter whether the rat gnaws on buddy or foe—it is the enemy. A rat is eating the choicest parts of him now and there is no nurse. Rats are smart, so this one will return day and night until Bonham goes crazy. He pictures himself running down the corridors, grabbing a nurse, and forcing the "lazy slut" to get it off her "customers". He runs, shrieking for an eternity of nights, but the rat just sinks its teeth deeper. Worn out from running without legs and screaming without a voice, Bonham falls back into his lonely, black, silent womb.

Bonham feels the nurse washing him, manipulating his flesh, and dressing his side wound. He feels safe and snug like a child. She is company, a friend, even if he cannot see or hear her. She is in charge, so he need not think. He knows the rat is a dream and is relieved, but fears it will come back again. It starts when he thinks about his side wound; the awareness brings on the dream. He must find a way to break out of the dream if it comes, like he does as a kid with nightmares about ants—but that is back when he can run and scream. When he gets older, Bonham can end nightmares by opening his eyes—back when he had eyes. He realizes he has no way to convince himself when he is awake and when he is dreaming. He needs another approach. When he feels the nurse's hands and does not think about the rat dream, he knows he is awake. As he feels himself drifting off to sleep, he must stiffen himself and forbid the dream; otherwise, he has to live with it until he feels the nurse's hands again. Bonham reminds himself that he no longer tires himself out working, so he never gets tired. He sleeps on and off all the time without warning. He cannot prevent the coming of the rat. It is an awful mess. How can he tell?

As a kid, Bonham had daydreamed about things he would do some day or things he had done the past week. Lying here, it is different. Daydreams may become real dreams unknowingly. He cannot stand having to guess for the rest of his life. He knows this is the only important thing he has left. He must be able to think clearly. Guys who leave parts of themselves are supposed to develop special powers to compensate. He must concentrate on thinking until he tires himself out and falls asleep. The alternative is accepting oblivion and craziness, which is the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Right now, he does not know if the nurse, the rat, or he is real or unreal. Maybe nothing is. That would be wonderful.

As they have every summer since Joe Bonham is seven, he and his father go camping in high pine and lake country. Joe wonders how to tell his father that Bill Harper is coming up and he wants to fish with him instead. Joe tells him casually and his father lends him his very valuable rod, the only extravagance in his life. In the morning, the boys do not disturb father. Towards evening, as they are trolling in a rowboat, a sudden fish strike pulls father's rod into the water. They search for an hour, but it is gone forever. Walking back, Joe considers how his parents just get by. Father takes great pride in his two-lot vegetable garden; they keep chickens, rabbits, and bees, and eat better than city folk, but Bill Bonham is a failure because he cannot make money. Joe knows it is no good waiting until morning to tell his father, so when he stirs, Joe summarizes. After five minutes of silence, his father throws his arm across Joe's chest, comforting him, and saying a lost rod is no reason to spoil their last trip together. Both know that from now on they will fish with friends their own age. They jack-knife together and sleep as they always have. Joe blinks back tears. He and his father have lost themselves and the rod. Bonham awakens, thinking of his father and wondering where the nurse is. He is lonelier than he can remember and wants one look at, one smell, one taste of Shale City, Father, Mother, and his sisters. Even if they were standing by his bed, they would be ten thousand miles away.

Lying on one's back with nothing to do or anywhere to go gives a lot of time to think about things one has never thought about before. Joe Bonham asks himself why he will lie like a side of beef for the rest of his life, just because someone taps him on the shoulder and says he is going to war and he goes. In any other situation—buying a car or running an errand—he would ask: "what's there in it for me?". It is one's duty to ask this question. A lot of guys are shamed into fighting for liberty and die without ever thinking about how much liberty, whose liberty, and what does liberty mean? Can liberty be shown? Anyone who goes to the front line trenches for liberty is a fool and the guy who got him there is a liar. For Bonham there will be no "next time", but if there were, he would tell the guy his life is important and not to be swapped for some abstract idea. Let the guy himself fight. "Hell's fire guys" have been fighting and dying for liberty since 1776, but does America have more liberty than Canada or Australia? The bastards always find an excuse: freedom, independence, democracy, liberty, decency, honor, or native land, and in every war, anyone who dares say the hell with fighting is a coward. The little guys who always get killed deserve to know what they are bargaining for.

Americas say they are fighting for the triumph of decency—but whose idea of decency and for whom? Does a decent dead person feel better than an indecent live one?

Others talk of honor—but whose? What if the rest of the world does not want American honor imposed on it? Highfalutin words are useless. When little guys will not fight for other abstractions, they talk about stopping the "dirty Huns" from raping beautiful French and Belgian women. Little guys sign up, get splattered, and the "fierce old bats of the D.A.R." make noise over his grave about dying for womanhood. It might make sense to risk death for one's own women—a question of which he values more: himself or them—but defending women "in bulk" is just fighting for another word.

Every time armies march and flags wave, little guys trade their lives for noble words and no one profits. Idealists claim it is barbarity not to hold things higher than one's own life. People in churches, schools, newspapers, legislatures, and congress are always willing to sacrifice someone else's life, but what do the dead say? Only they know whether words are worth dying over, and they cannot talk. Those who proclaim their suffering noble and sacred are grave robbers and fakes with no right to speak for them. If these fools want to talk about death before dishonor, let them fight and leave the little guys alone. Death before dishonor is bull; life before death is what matters. Anyone willing to die for a principle is nuts. Saying one must die to protect one's life is senseless.

Millions have died to make the world safe for democracy and other meaningless words. How do they feel just before they die, as they look death in the face? They die without a thought for any high-sounding words, but crying like babies for a loved one, for a last look at their birthplace. They sigh for life and what is important. They scream, "I want to live." Bonham ought to know, since he is "the nearest thing to a dead man on earth" still able to think. He knows what the dead know but cannot express it. Nobody could dispute him or prove him wrong, because nobody knows what he does. The high-talking murderers screaming for blood can keep their words if he cold only walk, talk, see, hear, breathe, taste. He does not demand a happy, decent, honorable, or free life - just the ability to move. He knows what death is, while the talkers do not know what life is. There is nothing noble about dying. The little guys should ignore speeches and calls to arms, say they are busy, turn, and run. If they are called cowards, they should ignore it, for their business is to live. Nothing is bigger than life. When one is dead, everything is over and nothing is noble. You die for nothing.

Book 1: Chapters 7-10 Analysis

The concluding chapters of Book 1 grow more graphic and savage as Bonham fully realizes his predicament and rails against what brings him here. He looks at the medical profession, which has profited from the war in learning techniques that culminate in saving him when they should have let him go. Ironically, they cannot now euthanize him, as that would be murder. In a flash of humor, Bonham sees himself as a reverse lottery winner. His nurse counterbalances a rat that is devouring him. Bonham must figure out if one or the other or both is real. He must be able to discern reality from dream; the discernment being all he has left. This becomes the major theme of Book 2. After thinking about his father again, Bonham realizes that even if loved ones were beside him, he would not know. This leads him to think about those who enlist "little guys" into fighting wars for ideals. Bonham claims bona fides as the only living dead man in history

and the sole right to speak for the dead. All the patriots and idealists are liars and frauds. This theme is expanded in the book's finale.

Book 2: Chapters 11-13

Book 2: Chapters 11-13 Summary

Joe Bonham runs through the times tables but the numbers get too big to handle. He tries words like lie and lay, who and whom, and others. He runs through Dickens characters, the last of the Mohicans being an Iroquois, random lines of poetry, the names of planets, the thou shalt nots, and "the Lord is my shepherd". "Dwell in the house of the Lord forever" sounds good to him. Too bad his teachers never teach him anything and he pays no attention. Otherwise, he would have things to think about. His mind is all he has left and he must use it. He is ignorant as a baby when it comes to trying to think and decides it is time to learn to concentrate.

Bonham remembers from his tenth grade history class that early humans study the stars and learn to measure time. He remembers the Count of Monte Cristo and Robinson Crusoe keeping records of time. All he knows is that one day in September of 1918, time stopped and a great chunk of it is lost forever. He will always be behind the rest of the world. He has no idea how long he has laid unconscious or faded in and out, thinking, dreaming, and imagining things. When one is unconscious, there is no such thing as time, and when fading in and out, people feel time bunch up—like women in labor for three days saying it seems like ten hours. Considering he may have been like this for two years, Bonham feels a panicky dread. He needs to "trap" time and get back into the world. In dreams, he drifts too easily.

Bonham once thinks the key is his nurse's visits. He does not know how often the come in twenty-four hours, but knows there must be a schedule. If he counts the seconds, minutes, and hours between visits, he can keep days separate by the number of his visits. The vibration of her footsteps always wakes him up. He can crosscheck this by the frequency of his bowel movements, baths, and linen and mask changes. It takes Bonham a long time to figure out a formula because he is unused to thinking. When the nurse leaves he begins to count seconds, but gets lost at eleven minutes when his mind wanders off to a high school track meet. He loses track hundreds, perhaps thousands of times by daydreaming before realizing he is tackling things from the wrong angle. Even a normal person could not do this. He tries visualizing a blackboard keeping track of all the figures, but every failure makes him cry. He switches to simpler things. He is not sure whether his bowel movements come at the frequency of normal people, but realizes he has one every three to four nurse visits. Baths and bed changes average every twelve visits. He feels on the right track.

The solution comes to Bonham when he realizes he has patches of skin on his neck and forehead that are free to the air and are healthy, and figures he will put them to good use. He links sweating with heat and cold and the rising and setting of the sun. He gets excited realizing he can determine sunrise by counting nurse's visits between periods of sudden warming. Half a dozen times he falls asleep waiting for the change, or suspecting it is just a fever or excitement. He needs to be calm and think rationally to

"catch" sunrise. Bonham knows hospitals have schedules and assumes nurses do their heavy work—bathing and bed changes—in the morning. That becomes his starting point. He knows these average once every twelve visits. He further assumes bedding must be changed at least every other day, meaning four hours between visits. The cooling at sunset is more gradual than the warming at sunrise, so he concentrates on detecting sunrise. He panics at not knowing what side of the hospital he is in or it he ever gets direct sunlight, but he figures there will be some temperature change that he can correlate with a morning bed change. He avoids letting the calculations get too complicated. He assumes the bed change comes at 8 am and allows himself to sleep, for the nurse's approach always wakes him. He needs only count four more visits to put himself near 4 am, just before sunrise. At that point, he must be alert. He knows it may take weeks to feel the temperature change, but this is a sure method for setting up a calendar, once he catches two sunrises in a row.

Eight visits later, Bonham gets a sponge bath and grows excited at the prospect of trapping time. He feels the vibrations as she walks away and closes the door. He forces himself to calm down, not get cocky, and count five more visits. He uses his mental blackboard. When he feels the nurse's hands a fifth time he assumes it is 4 am and begins concentrating on not falling asleep or letting his mind wander. This is like being born again into the world. Time seems to stand still just to spite him. Sometimes he panics and feels sick to his stomach, other times he feels calm and sure he has not missed the temperature change. When he is sure it is happening, he goes rigid and begins to sweat. He holds his breath, lest he miss the moment. He feels his pores grab the change and suck it inside him. It happens gradually, but there is no more danger of falling asleep now than during a first kiss. He feels like he is running in slow motion towards a return to life. When he is sure there is no explanation other than the rising sun for what his neck experiences, he relaxes and sings in his heart to dawn. He thinks of humans and the rest of nature waking up. He remembers the smells and colors of dawn high in Colorado, bursts into tears, and thanks god for seeing dawn. He looks at the towns where he has lived, the ugly houses now made beautiful, sees and hears farmers going about their chores, babies greeting the new day, and realizes that now since he has trapped time, dawn can never be taken away from him. If he never has anything else, he will always have dawn and morning sunlight.

Bonham remembers and contrasts New Year's Eve in Shale City and Los Angeles. In the former: wet snow outdoors, warm, quiet, and peaceful indoors, with parental kisses, gratitude that the children are healthy, and hopes the new years turns out as good as the old; in the bakery: relief that a bad year has ended and a lonesome rush out into the fog to get drunk. Bonham has counted 365 days and declares today New Year's Eve. The time has passed quickly at a rate of six nurse visits per day, controlled by his own calendar. He has been a "busy guy", learning to double-check everything lest he lose his grip on time; becoming able to tell day from night without straining; predicting baths and bed changes (growing sullen when the schedule is interrupted).

Bonham can tell nurses apart. Based on her touch and the vibration of her footsteps, he imagines the day nurse as middle-aged, gray-haired, and large; she works briskly and competently, and Bonham likes her. He always squirms to let her know he is pleased,

and she pats his stomach or runs her fingers through his hair to acknowledge this. The night nurses are irregular and appear to be young. New nurses always uncover him and stare a while; one runs away in horror and does not return, another cries and tears fall on his chest. He imagines her young and beautiful and pained for him. Bonham finds such things interesting and important and organizes his new universe to his liking. He knows it is probably not New Year's Eve to the rest of the world but does not care. He names the days of the week and the months so he can celebrate holidays. Sunday afternoons he takes a mental walk in the woods near Paris as he did once on leave in the springtime. In his July, he goes fishing with his father; they have learned a lot since the last time they have seen one another; Father says death is better than worrying, but wonders how his wife is. Every night Bonham sleeps with Kareen Birkman, nestling together and whispering of love.

Birkman is nineteen the moment long ago when Bonham says goodbye to her at the station. He spends four months in training, eleven months in France—making her making her twenty—and loses track of time when he is wounded. She must be twenty-two or twenty-three. In ten years, she will have lines, then gray hair, and then be an old woman, and the girl at the station will never have existed. In Bonham's mind, however, she will remain nineteen forever; he will not let her age or her beauty fade. He wonders if she has forgotten him, if she has a baby by now. Bonham wishes he could be near her, feel himself breath the same air as she, but does not want her to see him like this. He remembers the funny excitement he feels walking to her house. For the first time in his life, he feels homesick. He realizes Americans are different from Englishmen and Frenchmen; they are friends, not strangers.

Even in his motionless blackness, he wishes he were home, but that is unlikely. All identification is probably blown off of him and with half a head he will look like any nationality. He is sure he is found among Limeys, for his company is mixed up with them in the trenches. He is probably in a "crummy English hospital", being cared for by Limeys. At home, they will think he is missing in action. Bonham has never been particularly patriotic, but lying in England, he feels he has lost something he can never get back. Limeys are funny people, even funnier and less understandable than Frenchmen. He recalls a little Scotchman who throws down his gun and refuses to fight when he learns the Huns across no-man's-land are Bavarian, whose Crown Prince is the rightful (Stuart) King of England. In any other army, that would get a guy shot, but the Limey officers all the way up to a colonel try to talk him out of it. He dares them to shoot him and says after his court martial, King George will have to abdicate as a fraud. The Scotchman is transferred behind the lines until the Bavarians move away.

A second example involves a big fat Hun who wanders upon Limey lines and is killed. His body gets tangled in barbed wire and within days begins to stink. One day, that same colonel comes on inspection, gets wind of the Bavarian, and orders Cpl. Timlon to bury him that night. A squad digs a shallow hole, pushes the Bavarian in, and the corporal prays as ordered. The air improves until a shell blasts the Bavarian out of the ground and back onto the wire. Timlon nicknames him Lazarus. The colonel orders the corpse put six feet under and the full Church of England order of burial said over him. Timlon reads the gist of the service as the enemy opens fire. He is shot in the rear end

and gets eight weeks of hospital leave, during which his regiment is nearly wiped out at the front. Timlon's replacement is an eighteen-year-old, anxious to win the war single-handed. To show the men he is no coward, he sneaks out on night patrol. He is found around dawn in a pool of his own vomit, deposited when he trips and sticks an arm through the liquefied Lazarus. The subaltern goes "mad as a hatter" and is expected never to leave his straightjacket. Bonham pictures this poor Limey kid yelling, crying, and brooding forever, and wishes they could swap minds. Mentally, Bonham comforts the poor kid and wishes him Happy New Year.

Only a night nurse stumbling and setting up a fine vibration in Bonham's bedsprings marks the second year. The third year he is moved to a new room and he determines his head faces east; the mattress is softer and the springs stiffer with stronger vibrations. It takes months for him to figure out the room's configuration, but doing so makes the time fly. The fourth year starts slowly as he tries to remember the books of the Bible in order and then trying to put words to characters in Bible stories. He does miserably, so these are poor time fillers. When he cannot fill time, he worries about losing track of time, panics, and gets more confused. Before falling asleep he plants the day, month, and year figures in his mind, but in the morning, he worries he has gotten it wrong before falling asleep.

Then, midyear, an astonishing thing happens: the nurse changes his bed linen two days in a row. Bonham feels bustling and chattering in the room and catches the excitement. He notices the nurse also sprays him with something cool, puts him in a new nightshirt, smooths his covers carefully, arranges a fresh mask fussily, and combs his hair. He luxuriates in feeling "completely redone. Soon four to five people enter and gather around his bed—more visitors than he has ever had here before. He feels like be is back in school. At first, he hopes it is his mother, sisters, and Birkman, but then feels ashamed and hopes it is not they. He does not want anyone who has known him before to see him now. He jerks his face away from the visitors, hoping to dislodge his mask and make them see his horror. As he rocks, a warm, heavy hand rests on his forehead to calm him. He feels the covers fold back and is sure these are doctors or firemen come to see this "famous guy" whose luck it is to be still alive, thanks to their fine work. He imagines them passing out his teeth as souvenirs.

Someone plucks at Bonham's nightshirt over his left breast, fumbling, and leaving behind a cool weight. Someone kisses both of his temples. He realizes they have pinned a medal on him. The kissing is a French custom, so he is probably in France, but since he has no hands to shake, it could be an American or English general following the custom. Bonham grows angry at big guys with arms and legs, who talk, smell, and taste, and give him a medal. Have they nothing more important to do? How many generals (besides Kitchener, accidentally) get killed in war? He has an overpowering desire to make them see his hole of a face. He tries to blow the mask off but has no lips and air goes in and out of a tube. He feels a vibration in his throat, which he is sure makes an audible if unintelligible noise, so he lies, thrashing, puffing, and grunting like a pig, hoping they will see how he feels about their medal. Feeling the vibration of departing guests, Bonham lies alone with his medal.

It dawns on Bonham that if vibrations can teach him height, weight, distance, and time, they should also allow him to communicate with the outside world. His mind begins to glimmer and then turn into a dazzling white light as he realizes he can use Morse code as he had as a kid with Bill Harper on boring rainy nights. He can dot-dash his nurse. He has captured time and geography; now he will talk. He practices tapping out SOS—help—with his head on the pillow. If anyone in the world needs help, it is he. He practices tapping out questions, but mostly SOS. As soon as he senses the nurse at his bed, he begins tapping frantically, waiting for her to let him know she understands. She will then rush away and spread his SOS. When she obviously fails to understand, he returns to grunting, and wishes he could simply shout his need for help. He feels her hand on his forehead and keeps on tapping, angry, hopeless, and nauseous. He feels pity in the way she strokes his head and hair—like Birkman had. He realizes the pressure of her hand is intended to wear him out so he will quit tapping, so he strains his vertebrae to tap faster. He grows tired and slows. The nurse brushes his forehead as he lies still.

Book 2: Chapters 11-13 Analysis

Book 2, "The Living", begins by showing how a person in Bonham's condition keeps busy. He laments having wasted his school years and having nothing to occupy his mind. His first attempt at telling time is too complex to work, so he simplifies his method, and it works. He declares that day New Year's, and recalls how differently people view and celebrate it. He longs for his own but wants no one who has seen him before to see him like this. He resents receiving a medal and wants the "big guys" to see what they have done for him. This theme continues through the closing pages.

Several musings about the British (Limeys) lighten the story, but continue pointing out the horrors of frontline warfare. They must deal with a dead Hun (German, also nicknamed Heinies) who, like the biblical character Lazarus, comes back from the grave (John 11). Ostensibly meant to show how odd Brits are, the story is milked for every bit of nauseating detail and sacrilege. It transitions into Bonham being cleaned up to receive a medal and the revelation that if vibrations can communicate to him, he should be able to communicate by them. This effort becomes the major focus of the rest of the book.

Book 2: Chapters 14-16

Book 2: Chapters 14-16 Summary

Bonham loses track of everything except tapping and again loses the distinction between waking and sleeping. He speculates about nothing, listens for nothing, cares nothing about past or future; he simply lies and taps out his message endlessly to people who do not understand. The day nurse tries to calm her suddenly irritable patient until he realizes she is too stupid to understand he is trying to communicate. She gives him hot baths, shifts his position, adjusts his pillow (to make tapping harder), and massages him. He feels a gathering love in her fingers, and when they move down his body and take up a steady rhythm, he can do nothing but yield to the pleasure.

Bonham recalls his sex life. Ruby, his first, is a big, fat, Italian sixth or eighth grader, younger than he, from the other side of the tracks, with whom all the boys start because she does not embarrass them. By tenth grade, they have nothing to do with her and she disappears. By age fourteen or fifteen, Stumpy Telsa's establishment with its five or six working girls fascinates them. Nearing graduation, Bonham and Harper visit and sit a while with two fully clothed girls. Laurette, who likes Bonham, talks about books, making him feel dumb. Visiting frequently, Bonham falls in love with her and wonders how to tell his parents. For high school graduation, Laurette sends him a pair of gold cuff links, but when he goes to Telsa's to thank her, he learns she is on her annual three-month vacation in Estes Park; she treats all the boys who fall in love with her this way, having her cake and eating it too. By fall, the Bonhams are in Los Angeles.

One day, in a drug store near the bakery, Bonnie Flannigan claps Bonham on the back, says she recognizes him from Shale City. She lives in a bungalow court nearby and wants to get together. He knows she is a prostitute and is sorry that a girl from Shale City has come to this. Flannigan is large, not cute, but good-natured, and full of life. She has already been married three times and all her husbands insist she looks like Evelyn Nesbitt Thaw. Bonham and Flannigan often have early breakfast in cheap restaurants on Main Street, where she knows all the sailors. She tells Bonham to stick with her and they will both wear diamonds. Flannigan is smart and careful.

In Paris, Lucky is the nicest, smartest, and best of the prostitutes who remind doughboys on leave of American fun. She receives Bonham in her room stark naked and gossips while crocheting a doily. She has a six or seven-year-old son in school in Long Island, being raised to be a polo player. Lucky nets $150-$200 a week, minus the cost of her necessarily fancy wardrobe. She survives the San Francisco earthquake in her teens, so she must be almost thirty now. She races into the street naked, refusing to die with some son-of-a-bitch on top of her. Talking with Lucky brings peace and removes loneliness in this strange city, Paris. Hundreds of thousands of Allied infantrymen spend a few days there before going back to the trenches, knowing the law of averages are growing against them. There is a little guy on the western front who keeps a book of averages—and never makes a mistake. Somewhere in Germany, a

German girl is polishing a shell with Bonham's number on it and a date; they will meet soon. The soldiers in Paris want to drown out foreign voices, try absinthe, get back in the boxcar for the ride back to the front. When taps sounds, there is $10,000 for the folks back home. Meanwhile, that German shell is on a heavy German truck coming through the Rhine Valley, nearer to Bonham, and not even God's hand can stop the meeting.

Every Allied nation expects its enlisted men to do their duties and lie down in Flanders fields when the guy who keeps the book without mistakes says so. Americans drink cognac but long for good old corn whiskey. They are four million fewer voters, so the prohibitionists will probably win. The prostitutes are friendly but do not want to take too long, as Paris is full of guys. Hidden beneath a hill shaped like a woman's breast is Bonham's shell. He must finish his "hot time in the old town" and hurry to the meeting. The shell will come with a rush, roar, shudder; so fast there is no time to reach out and embrace it. One can only accept it and the earth, which becomes one's "eternal bed" at the moment of union. Bonham feels the silence and wonders if a man can ever get lower or feel less than he. He is exhausted. Life is wasted. He begs God to give him rest and peace in death.

Bonham keeps on tapping because he dares not stop or think. He cannot ask himself how long before the nurse understands, for it may be the rest of his life. If he only had lips, it would be so easy. Looking at himself from the outside, he sees how no one would suspect the cruel and desperate insanity that hides beneath his mask and mucus. He has an overwhelming impulse to kill and harm others, but all he can do is tap. His normal mind trapped in his skull rushes frantically, hammering, seeking to escape, but no one has any idea what he is doing.

Bonham thinks of the nurse holding him prisoner more securely than any jailer in history, and thinks about other prisoners he has read or heard about. He thinks of little guys kidnapped from their homes and shacked in ships plying the Mediterranean, rowing below decks until they wear out and then are thrown overboard. He thinks that at least they can see one another, so they are luckier than Bonham. He thinks of the slaves of Carthage, blinded by the great lords and chained between doors and walls in the treasure stores so they will be torn apart if a robber sneaks in and their cries will sound the alarm. Bonham thinks that at least these lucky guys die soon and have arms and legs until they do. Sometimes they get to hear a human voice. Bonham thinks of the tens of thousands of slaves who built the pyramids or who fought one another in the Roman Coliseum to entertain the big guys. He thinks of slaves and other little guys the world round being tortured in various ways, none as mutilated as he and all able to die. Bonham is a slave: taken away from home, sent to a foreign country, forced to fight fellow slaves, mutilated, and "awaiting only the relief of death". Bonham asks God to help all the slaves who for thousands of years have been tapping.

A man with heavy footsteps enters the room, approaches the bed, pulls back the covers, and prods his body. It must be a doctor, come to see why Bonham is always tapping his head. Bonham taps much harder as he is being examined, hoping the doctor will understand. Bonham feels cold on his stump, then a sharp sting, and feels

the dope beginning to work. They are shutting him up. They must realize what he is doing—no one with brains could misunderstand—but they want to keep him in darkness. Bonham shakes his head frantically, trying to tell them he does not want to be doped. It does not matter what he wants. He taps until he falls asleep, and figures he will tap unconsciously, as a machine once turned on runs without looking after. Fog and numbness make his head heavier and his mind shrink. He admits to himself they have won again but cannot win forever.

Bonham relaxes completely and feels himself moving through a windless other world. He sees the colors of sunrise or the inside of a seashell and hears faint, high, tinkling music pass through him. His body drifts like smoke into the sky. Suddenly the music stops and he experiences a particular kind of silence, so dense it ceases to be silence and brings on fear. Bonham hangs in silence, waiting for something to happen. Feeling himself falling a million times faster than a shooting start or light, his terror grows. He sees great sun-like globes coming at him like cards shuffled through a pack They hit him like soap bubbles, too fast to flinch or prepare for the next. He whirls faster than a propeller and hears voices that have arms and legs to grab him or kick as they fly by. Seeing only light, no shadows, he knows these things are not real.

The sound centers in one voice that fills the whole world—a woman's voice calling for her underage son. She has come from Tucson to take her baby home. The voice fades and Bonham knows the boy is Christ. He sees Christ approaching like a purple-cloaked mirage and sitting down with them in the railway station, in a little room where guys are playing blackjack and waiting for trains to go. Bonham does not know the players—a guy with red hair and a Swede—and they do not know him. It does not matter. Outside, bands are playing and people yelling, but inside it is quiet. They invite Christ to play and explain the table stakes. Christ puts his quarter down. When the Swede says, "Christ I wish we had a drink here", Christ produces sixteen-year-old whiskey and they drink. He can do anything except hit a twelve.

The redhead announces it is all aboard time and he must say good-bye to his wife and eight-month old kid before he goes to take a bullet going over the top of a trench on a cool, sunny day. He will kick and squirm a little, then watch his blood run out, and die. He has to say good-bye as though he is coming back. The little guy who has been winning says they are all here because they are going to be killed. Christ is already dead; the big Swede will catch the flu and die in camp; another guy will get blown to pieces, and the guy who is winning will smother in a trench cave-in. The redhead is the first to hear faraway music, like a soft breeze that gets loud enough for them to hear. Christ tells them as they tremble that this is the music of death. The little guy who has been winning challenges Bonham's right to be with them, but he declares that with all he has lost he has the right. The Swede admits Bonham is worse off than any of them and the redhead agrees. They all head to the train. The little guy who has been winning asks if Christ is coming along, but he says only a short ways, as he has many trains and dead men to meet. Christ mounts the locomotive and screams, his robes trailing. In the middle of the desert, in the haze, Bonham sees Christ coming up from Tucson, floating on the shimmering heat waves. Bonham cannot stand it any longer on the train; he has no business here. He is alone, abandoned, and forgotten, so he runs toward Christ. The

nightmare train rolls on with dead men inside laughing, while Bonham runs toward Christ, his lungs squeaking, throws himself into the hot sand at Christ's feet, and begins to cry.

Book 2: Chapters 14-16 Analysis

Tapping is now continual, and Bonham despairs that the nurse will ever understand. Her compassion leads him to think about his sex life and his last leave in Paris. Bonham wants to die. This alone will give him peace. He searches history for fellow slaves and concludes even the most wretched of them is better off than he. Intertwined with song lyrics and streams of consciousness from the infantrymen on furlough are mental image of the shell that will shatter Bonham being manufactured, shipped, and warehoused. Bonham is sure a doctor will understand his tapping, but is instead tranquilized. In his frantic dreams, Bonham sees Christ playing cards with draftees soon to be dead, and falls weeping at his feet.

Book 2: Chapters 17-20

Book 2: Chapters 17-20 Summary

Bonham awakens slowly and painfully, like a drunk, and is still, unconsciously, tapping SOS. As his mind sharpens, he stops and holds still. He senses a new day nurse as soon as she comes in the door, light-footedly. He pictures her young. He cannot remember having a different day nurse. She pulls back the covers without hesitation. He knows she has been warned, but the reality is probably far worse. She does not throw the covers back or run away or drip tears on him as some do, but touches his forehead in a way none has. It must be nauseating for her, but she is obviously not afraid. Bonham ripples his skin to show appreciation and wonders if she is capable of understanding him. He does not know how long she will be around to work with. Certainly, she is his only hope, his last opportunity for reprieve. As he summons the strength to resume tapping, the new nurse opens his nightshirt and begins moving her fingertip on his chest. He struggles to understand what she is doing, for clearly it is not aimless. She repeats a design over and over—all straight lines and angles. She repeats and pauses to let him show he understands. Each time he fails to understand, he shakes his head. When he understands she has traced an "M", he nods and she pats his forehead encouragingly. Knowing what she is doing, Bonham progresses quickly, and realizes she has spelled "Merry Christmas".

The regular nurse is on Christmas holiday and this beautiful young replacement is wishing him Merry Christmas. He nods frantically, feeling hysterical happiness. He does not know how many years he has worked to break through to someone—and now someone is wishing him Merry Christmas. It is like light in darkness, sound in silence, and laughter amidst death. He hears sleigh bells and crunching snow, and sees candles in windows, wreathes, and berries; he feels peace, joy, and relief at being taken back into the world at Christmas. "'Twas the Night before Christmas" goes through Bonham's head. Mother reads it every Christmas Eve, even when the children are grown. Father comes home late from the store to join them as they nestle around the pot-bellied stove. Mother reads the poem, although they all know it by heart. Bonham wonders what Mother is doing tonight with him and Father gone. She is probably reaching the climax, animated, triumphant, and thrilling.

After a silent pause, his mother next opens the Bible to a marker and reads the story of the Christ-child born in Bethlehem. Bonham can hear her voice reading softly and reverently, but having never read the stories himself, he cannot remember the words. Instead, he pictures Bethlehem at tax time. The carpenter Joseph from Nazareth gets a late start because of his chores, and his young wife Mary is pregnant and cannot help. She hopes to get settled before her pains begin. Everyone is in Bethlehem paying taxes, so there are no places in cheap rooming houses. When Mary's pains start, Joseph gets frantic and talks a hotel manager into letting them sleep in the barn. The manager hopes she will not yell too loudly and upset the high-class guests and warns them his insurance does not cover fires. Mary gives birth to a boy, whom she wants to

name Jesus. Joseph notices a soft light around the baby's head, but figures all babies fresh from heaven have that. Then he notices light around Mary's head. Out in the hills, a sheepherder wants to sleep, but is blinded by starlight. He sees three out-of-state camel riders who look pretty well off. Then he hears angels singing about a baby born in Bethlehem to be savior of the world and Son of God. The sheepherder is not used to hearing angels sing, so he figures it is a miracle and prays. He hopes the noise does not wake the sheep so he will have to spend half the night rounding them up. In Rome, a big man awakens nervously. In Bethlehem, Mary hears the angels and is not as happy as before. She feels pain and fear for her little baby.

Forcing his mind away from Christmas, Bonham begins tapping firmly, vigorously, hopefully, confidently, knowing this new nurse is determined to batter down the walls of silence. She knows how to speak to him; will she know how to listen? Others have been too busy or tired or stupid or thought his tapping is a nervous habit rather than a cry from the darkness. Bonham taps his SOS as slowly as she had traced her "M" and pauses between messages. She begins to do things, deliberately and thoughtfully, to let him tell her what he wants. He rejects urinal, bed pan, more blankets, fewer blankets, breathing tube replacement, bandage on the hole in his side, rubbing his belly, soothing his forehead, smoothing his hair, loosening his mask. He senses she is as alert and eager as he. He taps again and holds still. He knows it is now or never. If this nurse walks away, she will never return, and she holds his only hope to escape the loneliness.

As he taps, Bonham prays in his heart. He has never been much for asking God for things, but feels he has been suffocating, smothering long enough, screaming for release that a merciful Christ could take a minute. He knows God is busy with millions of people praying every second—including important people asking for big things. He does not blame God for falling behind on his orders, because no one is perfect, but what he asks is so little. Bonham feels a finger tap four times on his forehead—the letter "H". He wonders if she knows what it means. He nods, hard, thanking God for putting the idea in her head. He feels the vibrations as she runs from the room, and pictures her telling doctors. He is as exhausted as in the old days working three nights straight at the bakery in summer. His head throbs, his body is sore, and still, he feels confetti, flags, and band music inside. He has succeeded in the one thing needed. He is happy beyond imagination. Two billion people have been pushing the lid of his coffin down and covering him with dirt and stone, but now he is on the surface again, leaping miles above the earth. No one has done as much as he. He is godlike.

Now the doctors will not boast about how they have kept a cut of meat alive. They will acknowledge his mind, which has found a way to speak. Bonham knows he has never been really happy in life, even when he gets an erector set for Christmas or when Kareen Birkman says she loves him. His happiness is wilder, more frantic than anything he could have conceived. It is nearly delirium. His missing legs dance, rotted arms keep time, his eyes consigned to a garbage heap see the beauty of the world, his shattered ears hear music, his hacked away mouth sings. He has done the impossible, speaking like a god out of a thick cloud. He imagines the nurse racing ward to ward, spreading the word of this wonder that she has seen—something unseen since Lazarus returns, and Lazarus does not speak. Bonham will tell them everything. He will speak from the

dead on behalf of the dead. This nurse is Gabriel summoning all to come and hear the voice of the dead. Bonham feels like an actor waiting for the curtain to go up. When the door opens, he feels vibrations from the nurse and a man, but not the throngs he is expecting. He is oddly disappointed, but awaits a response. An enormous, crushing finger thunderously taps out "What do you want?"

After verifying he has understood the tapping, Bonham hesitates, wondering what to ask for. It is so unexpected, so unimagined that the idea that has been driving him crazy would come about. Now Bonham cannot organize his thoughts or make sense to himself—much less to anyone else. He looks at it another way: what can they give him? There is nothing: ice cream, a good book, an open fire, a cat purring, a movie, a lemonade, dancing lessons, binoculars, piano lessons, a new suit, a better bed, a glass of water, a change of diet, sweeter coffee, smooth warm fudge. Can they think he has been tapping for years because he loves fudge? The silly bastards should know they can give him nothing he needs: working eyes, nose, mouth, arms, and legs so he can be like any living man. It comes rushing to Bonham: he wants out. He wants to taste fresh air and know he is out among people. It does not matter that he cannot talk, see, hear, or smell. He wants not to be shut up in a room, imprisoned. He wants to be part of mankind. They have no right to hold him prisoner like this. He has done nothing wrong. His bed is like an asylum or a grave. Can they not understand how this suffocates? He has no means of fighting for himself, so they must help him—and quickly before he goes insane. He needs room to breathe.

As he prepares to tap a flood of dots and dashes, it occurs to Bonham that there could be difficulties. He is a special case, requiring lifelong care at considerable expense. He has no money and the government will say it is a crazy idea and too expensive. Bonham realizes he can earn his own keep and care by becoming the premier curiosity of all time. He has seen an act where a man turns to stone, but he is even more terrible. People will pay to see him. He will do society good, serving as an "educational exhibit", letting people see the difference between propaganda and reality when a man meets up with a high explosive shell.

Bonham is excited at warning little guys unforgettably what could happen to them. Bonham begins tapping out all that he has in mind, fast, angrily, excitedly, hurrying to get out all the thoughts that have been trapped inside his head for years. He promises to be no trouble and to earn his own way if released. They can take his glass case everywhere and do a wonderful business. He is better than any half-man/half-woman, bearded woman, thin man, midget, human mermaid, wild man of Borneo, meat-eating girl from the Congo, man who writes with his toes, man walks on his hands, Siamese twins, and unborn babies pickled in alcohol. No one has seen the likes of him and will gladly pay a dime. He will be the new Barnum, guaranteed. Above all else, Bonham is the man who has made the world safe for democracy; if people will not fall for that, they should join the army and become real men.

They can take Bonham to farmhouses, factories, and shipyards to show things could be worse and encourage workers that, come the next war, and everyone will get either better wages or a chance to be just like him. If one gets drafted and comes back

maimed, it saves money on shoes, eyeglasses, clothing, and entertainment. Bonham used to be a consumer, but after consuming shrapnel and gunpowder, he needs nothing but a bit of broth every day. There will be another war soon and everyone can get lucky like him. This is a gravy train. They can take Bonham to schoolhouses, because it is best to get them started young realizing the horrors of war. They too may get to die for their country or come back like him. Not everyone dies. Let them remember going through their patriotic sayings and flag wavings as they look at a real soldier. They can invent new nursery rhymes about shellshock, gas, and bombs. They can take Bonham to colleges and universities to show the beautiful young girls what fathers, lovers, and children can look like. Let them kiss his red gash covered in mucus, because "a lover is a lover". Show the young men what they or their brothers or best friends can become. This living meat has a thinking mind, which may be writing symphonies or world-changing formulas, or curing cancer—but who could ever know. Bonham is like a chloroformed frog, helpless yet alive.

They may take Bonham before parliaments and congresses, wherever men talk of honor, justice, the world being safe for democracy, fourteen points, and self-determination. If he had a tongue or a cheek, he would remind statesmen they have both. They can debate embargoes, colonies, old grudges, yellow menace, white man's burden, empire, taking crap off Germany, South American markets, merchant marines, munitions, airplanes, battleships, tanks, gases, protecting the peace, blocks, alliances, neutrality, ultimata, protests, and accusations. When they vote and the gavel falls, the speaker should point to Bonham and say this is the only issue. Those who favor war should be hung, drawn, and quartered and their remains made to poison fields. They may take Bonham to churches and cathedrals and go through all the rituals that require arms, legs, mouths, noses, which he can no longer perform. While the fools sing hallelujahs, Bonham will know the truth that eludes them all.

Bonham feels the heavy vibrations leave his room and remains alone with the nurse, wondering, having misgivings. Perhaps he has rushes so much that he has not made sense. He has so much more inside he wants to say. Perhaps the man is talking with his superior and will return with a reply. Bonham pleads with god for that to be the case. He lies back in a dream coma, spent, disgusted, and sure of the worst. Hearing vibrations, he thanks a merciful God and awaits his return from the dead. The bedsprings sing like angels. Then the finger taps on his forehead: "What you ask is against regulations. Who are you?" Bonham's mind goes blank as he realizes the man means this. A wail of sharp, personal pain goes up from his heart. Having done no wrong, he is being dismissed forever. They do not want to be bothered with someone coming back from the dead. Bonham has tried to be as little trouble as possible. He is no thief, drunkard, liar, or murderer, just an average guy who goes to war, gets hurt, and wants to get out of prison. He sees the whole thing: they want to forget him, keep him off their conscience. They are a court of last appeal. He has thrown himself on their mercy and they are merciless. He might as well face the truth: he has no hope.

Bonham has hoped to break through to them every moment since he first awakens in darkness, dumbness, and terror, and now they have refused him. Vague hope has kept him going, kept him from going stark raving made. Now it is gone and there is nothing

left. He cannot fool himself any longer. He curses his mother for bearing him, the world, the sunlight, God, and every decent thing on earth. Having hoped they are tortured as he is and share his desolation forever, Bonham changes his mind. No human being can wish something this cruel on another. He cannot give up until good people understand. He resumes tapping, pleading to be let out of the hospital, to feel free and happy. He can raise his own money. He is lonesome and terrified. As the nurse tries to sooth him, Bonham wishes he could see her beautiful face. He feels the doctor swab his stump with alcohol and begs him not to administer dope again. How can they refuse to let him talk, to listen? Why do they want to drive him crazy when he has fought so hard?

Bonham feels himself sinking into the place they want him to be. Again, he sees Christ walking across the desert heat waves, crowned in thorns and dripping blood. In the distance, a woman's voice cries for her little boy. Bonham pushes the vision away. He is not ready to quit. He will keep on tapping, trying to talk. His muscles turn to water, but he refuses to let them close his casket and bury him alive. He fights to tap, vowing to tap awake and asleep, no matter how they ignore him or try to forget him. He taps slower and the vision swims toward him. He wonders why he is tapping and why they do not want him. He figures it has been at least five or six years since the war has ended (no war can kill people at this rate and endure), all the dead are buried and all the prisoners released. Why should he not be released or killed? Why would they be so inhuman?

Suddenly, Bonham sees a vision of himself as a new kind of Christ, carrying the seeds of a new order. He is the new messiah of the battlefield, showing the horrible future that awaits lovers, children, mothers, babies, bombed out cities, and tortured earth. He holds the secret that they are afraid will get out and little guys will refuse to fight. Little guys might begin asking questions and refuse to be butchered by the lying sons-of-bitches, no matter what slogans and speeches they make. They will remind the big guys how what they do for a living is important and tell them if somebody has to aim guns, it had better be them. If someone must die, it will be the big guys. If the powers that be force guns into the hands of the little guys, feed them slogans, and sing battle hymns, the little guys, two billion strong, will use the guns to live. War planners can point the way, but the little guys point the guns.

Book 2: Chapters 17-20 Analysis

Bonham gets a temporary day nurse who is determined to wish him Merry Christmas. They communicate and he is elated. He swiftly learns, however, that communication is more than an intellectual exchange; it requires empathy. The doctor whom the nurse summons stands on policy. Bonham's wild ideas of becoming a sideshow freak to earn his own way (while demonstrating the hidden horrors of war) are far more radical and threatening than he perceives. Only after he is drugged again and refuses to quit—after he sees a revelation of himself as a new messiah—does Bonham formulate his platform: the little guys who throughout history have obeyed the big guys, fought, and died, will never again allow this to happen. Every Johnny handed a gun will know where to point it.

Characters

Joe Bonham

The protagonist of Johnny Got His Gun, Joe Bonham is a twenty-year-old draftee when the novel begins, lying in a hospital bed, somewhere unknown, having lost his arms, legs, eyes, ears, nose, and tongue to a high-explosive shell. He was born and raised in Shale City, Colorado, to frugal, loving parents. Joe has two younger sisters, Catherine and Elizabeth. As a kid, Joe was given to daydreams and nightmares, but paid little attention in school. As he comes of age, Joe has girlfriends, including the unfaithful Diane, falls in love with a local prostitute, and loses his best friend, Bill Harper, and his father's prized fishing rod.

The family moves to Los Angeles after Joe's graduation and he began to work in a bakery on the night shift. He walks eleven miles a night at the bakery, hefting ninety pounds of bread hundreds of times a night without tiring, earning a respectable $18 a week. His father dies, America enters the war, and Joe is drafted. He spends his last night with girlfriend Kareen Birkman, who begs him not to report for duty. He reports, undergoes training, serves eleven months in France. In September of 1918, he is horribly wounded. Time stops for him. Joe lies in bed for years, thinking this is no place for him, no war for him, none of his business. What does he care about making the world safe for democracy? Joe also begins using his one remaining sense—feeling on his exposed forehead and neck—to determine when dawn arrives and thereby reclaim time.

Years pass more contentedly until Joe realizes that vibrations should allow him to communicate with the outside world. He begins tapping SOS with his head against the pillow. His day nurse never understands, but a compassionate substitute does. The doctor to whom she reports the joyous news is uninterested in letting Joe back into the world of the living and tranquilizes him. Joe, feeling himself a new messiah, is determined to go on tapping until the "little guys" of the world realize they should not be cannon fodder for foolish politicians.

Bill Bonham

The protagonist's father, Bill Bonham, dies at age fifty-one in Los Angeles, California after a long illness, and the phone call to his son at the bakery where he works is the opening nightmare Joe suffers in the novel, even before realizing he has lost his arms, legs, and senses other than touch. Bill Bonham is originally from Shale City, Colorado, where he settles with his bride, Macia, of nearby Cole Creek Valley. They live on the edge of town in a comfortable little house. Bill prides himself on his gardening, which he expands to the vacant lot next door. He feeds his family better than most city folk, and works hard in a store, but never makes much money. For this reason he is considered—by himself and others—a failure. Bill takes his son fishing in the mountains every

summer until Joe's teenage years, when he prefers the company of his best friend. When they lose Bill's prized fishing rod, which he cannot afford to replace, Bill takes it philosophically, not wanting to ruin their last outing together. Bill moves the family to Los Angeles when Romania enters the war (August 1916) and dies shortly afterwards at Christmas time, later remembered by his crippled son as a favorite family time of year.

Kareen Birkman

Joe Bonham's beautiful nineteen-year-old girl friend in Los Angeles, California, at the time he is drafted into the Army, Kareen Birkman insists she is not a "mick" but a "bohunk". She begs Bonham not to report for duty after being drafted. As he lies in his hospital bed, Bonham remembers their brief time together and their plans for a family, and realizes this is no place for him, no war for him, none of his business. He cares nothing about making the world safe for democracy. Nothing more is said about Birkman, for Bonham cannot be identified because of his wounds and is merely reported as missing in action. For years, he keeps Birkman in his mind as a nineteen-year-old, even though he realizes in the real world she will age and gray. She may already have forgotten him and be a mother. Sometimes he wishes she were nearby, even if he could not see, hear, smell, or talk to her, but then feels revolted at the thought of her seeing him.

Mike Birkman

Kareen Birkman's father, a tough, excitable twenty-eight-year veteran of the Wyoming coal mines, now reduced to being a "railroad bull", Mike Birkman has learned to hate everyone: Wilson, Hughes, Roosevelt, socialists, and even Debs (a little). Nevertheless, he orders Kareen and Joe Bonham off the couch and into her bed on the eve of Bonham's shipping out to the Army and serves them breakfast in bed in the morning.

Lincoln Beechy

A daredevil pilot, Beechy flies into Shale City one day, flying five loop the loops to everyone's amazement. When he crashes months later into the San Francisco Bay, Shale City mourns Beechy like part of the family.

Macia Bonham

The protagonist's mother, Macia, is a fine pianist and singer, and plays for Bill Bonham over the party-line telephones during their courtship. Everyone along Cole Creek Valley listens in and submits requests. Macia also sings in the kitchen of their Shale City, Colorado home, the same wordless tune absently, repeatedly, as she works at the coal-burning stove, laying up supplies for the winter. Every Christmas she reads "The Night Before Christmas" and the nativity story from the Bible to the family. After moving to Los Angeles (in August 1916), her husband falls ill and she tends him until his death at

Christmastime. Macia, with daughters Catherine and Elizabeth and Joe's girlfriend Kareen Birkman and her father Mike, sees her son off to boot camp at the train station. Lying in his hospital bed somewhere in France, Joe sometimes pictures them coming to visit, but does not want them to see his condition. He wonders if his mother still reads the Christmas stories now that he and his father are gone.

Pinky Carson

A worker in the Los Angeles bakery in which Joe Bonham once works, Carson convinces Puerto Rican coworker Jose that the only way to quit is to drop enough pies to be fired.

Jesus Christ

After being drugged to stop his head tapping, Joe Bonham sees Christ approaching the train station like a purple-cloaked mirage and sitting down, joining a blackjack game. When someone says, "Christ I wish we had a drink here," Christ produces sixteen-year-old whiskey and they drink. He can do anything except hit a twelve. When the train leaves, Christ can go with them only a short way, as he has many trains and dead men to meet. He mounts the locomotive and screams, his robes trailing. Bonham runs toward him, throws himself into the hot sand at his feet, and begins to cry. The vision returns after Bonham breaks through with Morse code but is tranquilized to keep him from stirring up trouble. This time, a crown of thorns bloodies Christ. Bonham suppresses the vision and imagines himself a new messiah to tell the little guys of the world not to become cannon fodder again. Joe also tries to remember the details of the nativity stories and pictures baby Jesus being born in Bethlehem in decidedly modern circumstances.

Bonnie Flannigan

A Los Angeles prostitute and pickpocket, Flannigan is originally from Shale City, Colorado, where she was behind Joe Bonham in school. She lives in a bungalow court near his bakery, and wants to get together. He knows she is a prostitute and is sorry that a girl from Shale City has come to this. Flannigan is large, not cute, but good-natured, and full of life. She has already been married three times and all her husbands insist she looks like Evelyn Nesbitt Thaw, an historical figure, a Broadway chorus girl, mediocre vaudeville performer, and silent film actress know for posing for risqué photographs and involvement in the murder of an old boyfriend. Bonham and Flannigan often have early breakfast in cheap restaurants on Main Street, where she knows all the sailors. She tells Bonham to stick with her and they will both wear diamonds. Flannigan is smart and careful.

Mr. Hargraves

The Shale City Superintendent of School, Hargraves orates about the airplane as mankind's greatest step forward in a hundred years when daredevil pilot Lincoln Beech comes to town. Hargraves declares that it will draw humankind together, create understanding, and usher in peace and prosperity.

Bill Harper

Joe Bonham's best friend in Shale City, Colorado, Harper ostensibly tells Bonham the truth about girlfriend Diane going on a date with rich Glen Hogan, and is punched for his troubles. Bonham and Howie leave town to work laying track in the Uintah desert to get away, but return to find Harper and Diane kissing on her porch. Bonham realizes that even if they make up, he and Harper will always have this obstacle between them. Harper is also the friend for whose sake Bonham ends the tradition of many years of fishing with his father every summer. Harper comes up, they borrow Bill Bonham's prized fishing reel, and lose it in the lake. Later, Bonham hears that Harper is killed at Belleau Wood and thinks him lucky to have had Diane and to have died.

Glen Hogan

Joe Bonham's childhood acquaintance in Shale City, Colorado, Hogan is the rich kid in the group, giving Joe for his birthday a pair of handsome brown silk socks that show he is grown up. Later, Hogan is the first to have hunting knives, silk shirts, and a car. As a result, Hogan gets all the girls. Joe Bonham fights with his best friend, Bill Harper, when Harper reports Hogan has been seeing Bonham's girlfriend, Diane. Only later does Bonham find Harper kissing Diane, but he is pleased Hogan at least has not won.

Howie

Joe Bonham's childhood acquaintance, not quite friend, with whom he goes to the Uintah desert to lay track after Howie loses his girlfriend, Onie, and Bonham his girlfriend, Diane, to rich Glen Hogan. The impetuous adventure overwhelms them physically, and when Howie gets a telegram from Onie asking to be forgiven, they catch a coal train home.

Jose

A Puerto Rican (or perhaps Mexican) living at the Midnight Mission, Jose is tall, brown-eyed, good-looking, and hard working. No one believes his stories about coming to get into the movies or having been a New York chauffeur with whom the rich daughter falls in love. In the end, both turn out to be true. Jose deals with the love interest gallantly, but feels obligated to Jody Simmons, the boss who has taken him in when he is down

on his luck. His fellow workers offer many suggestions on how to quit, but no method is gentlemanly enough. Jose works both jobs until he knows his health is failing. Pinky Carson comes up with an idea: drop six to eight pies boxes in front of Simmons and get fired. Jose is desperate enough to try. It takes two tries and pushing over a full 180-pie rack before Jose gets fired, but Jose sends Simmons flowers and makes monetary restitution for the pies.

Laurette

A prostitute working at Stumpy Tesla's in Shale City, Colorado, Laurette strings along all the boys who fall in love with her, withholding sex, but flirting. It is her way of having her cake and eating it too. Each year she takes the summer off in Estes Park. Nearing high school graduation, Joe Bonham and Bill Harper visit the legendary house and Bonham spends the night talking about books with Laurette, which makes him feel dumb. He begins visiting regularly, falls in love, and wonders how to tell his parents. For his high school graduation she sends him a pair of gold cuff links. When he goes to thank her, Telsa tells him she is in Estes Park.

Lazarus

The nickname given to a Bavarian soldier shot to death just outside British lines, and twice buried when his odor offends a British colonel's delicate nose. An enemy shell disinters Lazarus the first time, gaining him the nickname, a reference to the "friend of Jesus" in the Gospel of John whom he resurrects from the dead before his own passion. The Bavarian Lazarus is then reburied six feet under, with a hurried Church of England service over him, but pops up once again by another shell. He continues to stink this time. Cpl. Timlon is wounded during the second burial and on hospital leave when his gung-ho replacement goes out on night patrol to prove he is no coward, stumbles, and puts an arm through Lazarus' liquefied body. The experience puts him in the mental ward, probably for life.

Lucky

The nicest, smartest, and best of the Parisian prostitutes, Lucky receives Joe Bonham in her room stark naked and gossips while crocheting a doily. She has a six or seven-year-old son in school in Long Island, being raised to be a polo player. Lucky nets $150-$200 a week, minus the cost of her necessarily fancy wardrobe. She survives the San Francisco earthquake in her teens, so she must be almost thirty now. She races into the street naked, refusing to die with some son-of-a-bitch on top of her. Talking with Lucky brings peace and removes loneliness in this strange city.

Ruby

The Shale City girl who is every boy's first sexual conquest, Ruby, is a big, fat, Italian sixth or seventh grader, when Joe Bonham's turn comes as a seventh and ninth grader. All the boys begin with Ruby because she does not embarrass them. They laugh about her and soon grow ashamed of her. By tenth grade, they have nothing to do with her and she disappears, to their relief.

Jody Simmons

The night foreman at the Lost Angeles bakery where Joe Bonham works before the war, Simmons lets him go home early when his father Bill dies. As Easter approaches, Simmons hires Jose, an exceptional Puerto Rican temporary worker down on his luck. Jose is too honorable to quit when he gets a better job in Hollywood, but gets so worn out working both that he accepts coworker Pinky Carson's suggestion how to get fired: drop pies. Simmons forgives Jose the first time when he drops six to eight pies, apologizes, and offers to pay for them, but lashes out with racial epithets when he pushes over a full cart of 180 pies the next night.

Corporal Timlon

A British subaltern at the front who is twice ordered to bury the stinking body of a Bavarian soldier killed by his regiment and tangled in barbed wire. When an artillery shell disinters the corpse from its shallow grave, Timlon nicknames him Lazarus—for rising from the grave. Timlon's colonel orders him to put Lazarus a full six feet under and read the full Church of England funeral service over him. Timlon hurries the reading and as he is finishing, is shot in the rear end. During his convalescence, the regiment is nearly wiped out at the front—and Lazarus rises yet again.

Objects/Places

The Bakery

A business in Los Angeles, California, the bakery is shown cluttered and busy on the night shift when Joe Bonham works. Particularly busy are Friday nights, when extra help has to be laid on to cover weekend orders. Baking is done upstairs and checked at 2 am before being brought down by elevator to the trucks. The night foreman is the compassionate Jody Simmons. Men eat their lunch in the upstairs restroom. In his hospital bed in France, Bonham particularly recalls the exploits of a Puerto Rican coworker named Jose.

Cole Creek Valley, CO

A rural area across the mountains from Denver, Cole Creek Valley is Macia Bonham's home while courting Bill Bonham and before moving to nearby Shale City, Colorado.

Jim O'Connell's Cigar Store

A bar before Colorado goes dry, O'Connell's has a cool back room with pool tables and spittoons where the old men of Shale City discuss the war, and particularly how "Rooshia", is going to push the "goddam Germans" back to Berlin.

Los Angeles, CA

Joe Bonham's second home, after growing up in Shale City, Colorado, and graduating college there, Los Angeles contrasts most strongly with Shale City in how people celebrate New Year's Eve. The Angelinos with whom Bonham work curse the old year and want only to get drunk. In his hospital bed in France, Bonham remembers the bakery where he works, where he receives the phone call announcing his father's death; a whorehouse near the bakery, and the diner where Bonham breakfasts with his favorite girl (who is also beloved of the sailors dining there), the Bonham's modest home where his father dies, his girlfriend Kareen Birkman's living room and bedroom, and the platform at the train station whence he rides off to boot camp and his horrible fate.

Midnight Mission

Home to the mostly illiterate men that the bakery hires to help with the Friday night rush, the Midnight Mission in Los Angeles, CA, produces one exception, a Puerto Rican named Jose, who dislikes living there and proves competent.

Nightmare Train

After being drugged to stop his head-tapping, Joe Bonham sees Christ approaching the train station, playing blackjack with some soldiers soon to be killed in action, and rides on the locomotive a while, sitting astride the locomotive, screaming, his robes trailing in the wind. In the middle of the desert, in the haze, Bonham sees Christ coming up from Tucson, floating on the shimmering heat waves. Bonham cannot stand it any longer on the train; he has no business here, since he is not fully dead. He is alone, abandoned, and forgotten, so he runs toward Christ. The nightmare train rolls on with dead men inside laughing, while Bonham runs toward Christ, his lungs squeaking, throws himself into the hot sand at Christ's feet and begins to cry.

Paris, France

Allied infantrymen of all nations congregate in Paris for short periods of rest and recuperation. The Americans sample exotic cognac and absinthe, but long for good American corn whiskey, the sound of American English, and the pleasure of American prostitutes. These they find in a busy American whorehouse. Lucky is Joe Bonham's favorite there.

Shale City, CO

Bill Bonham's hometown at the time he is courting Macia and Joe Bonham's birthplace, Shale City is a pleasant town with (at least) a cigar shop where the old timers congregate, a high school, a pavilion for summer dances, the Elysium Theatre, and a large ditch where the kids swim. The annual County Fair is an event bigger than Christmas. Shale City is near mountains that offer good fishing. The Bonham home is on the outskirts.

Stumpy Tesla's

A small house of prostitution in Shale City, Colorado, Stumpy Tesla's is the height of mystery to teenage boys. Nearing high school graduation, Bonham and Harper pay an official visit at 8 pm and are entertained by two fully clothed girls. The one who likes Bonham, Laurette, talks about books, which makes him feel dumb. Telsa comes in and tells them to go home. On the way, they talk about being failures with women. Bonham returns to Telsa's somewhat later and Laurette is glad to see him. She says she is busy after 9 pm, but they can talk earlier. He begins to fall in love with her and wonders how to tell his parents. During the winter and spring, Bonham visits Laurette several times a month and begins to long for sex. For high school graduation, he receives a pair of gold cuff links and goes to Telsa's to thank Laurette. Telsa explains she has gone for her annual three-month vacation in Estes Park. She treats all the boys who fall in love with her this way, having her cake and eating it too.

Uintah, UT

Beyond the mountains from Shale City, Colorado, lies the Uintah desert, where Joe Bonham and Howie go to lay track for the summer when the romantic situations at home get out of control. They are part of a section gang, so they cannot stop work until the foreman allows. Bonham and Howie struggle to keep up with the Mexicans. It is 125° in the shade and there is no shade. Bonham feels like he is smothering under a blanket, heart beating, and breaths shallow. Bonham panics, knowing he cannot keep up, and wants to die. Realizing it is silly for him to be wasting summer vacation here over a simple date, he considers how all girls are untrue and faithless and guys have to learn forgiveness rather than rush to the desert and let Diane and Hogan be together for three months. He has been a fool. When Howie gets a telegram, the boys hasten to jump on a gravel train home.

Themes

Medical Ethics

From the time protagonist Joe Bonham realizes his left arm has been amputated at the shoulder, he considers doctors dirty bastards who have no right to do so without his permission. Army doctors have had plenty of practice over three to four years in keeping people alive if they get them fast enough and can control the bleeding. They must view him as an interesting problem, an opportunity to show how much they have learned. Bonham figures that his limbs had been wounded only a bit, but by the time the doctors finish working on his head wounds, gangrene sets in and they amputate his arms and legs joint-by-joint. He wishes they had considered how he would end up and let him die. Now they cannot kill him, for that would be murder. Bonham has heard of many medical and psychological oddities during the war. Doctors can point to him as their triumph. They keep Bonham's devastated face covered with a mask, so passers by will not vomit. Bonham considers this thoughtful.

By comparison with the doctors, nurses make Bonham feel safe and snug, even if he cannot see or hear them. He appreciates their professionalism and humanity—those who do not flee in horror at the first sight of him. Confused at and frustrated by his constant head tapping, Bonham's day nurse reports the odd behavior to a doctor, who comes to the room, makes a cursory inspection, and decides to sedate him against his will. A temporary nurse decides that Bonham deserves to be wished a Merry Christmas, traces the letters on his chest, and sees he understands. Bonham resumes his tapping until she finally understands the SOS and runs to tell the doctors. Bonham figures he has won. The doctors will no longer be able to boast about how they have succeeded in keeping a cut of meat alive, but will have to acknowledge his mind, which has miraculously found a way to speak.

When the doctor arrives, however, he taps in Morse code on Bonham's head, coldly, "What do you want?". He then takes Bonham's excited answer to his colleagues, confers, and comes back to declare that it is against regulations for a patient to be taken out into the fresh air and know he is out among people simply because that is what the patient wants. The doctors do not want to be bothered with someone coming back from the dead. They want to forget Bonham and keep him off their conscience. The doctor administers more dope, against Bonham's raging will.

Religion

Religion appears to have played little role in the Bonham house, beyond his mother singing hymns in the kitchen absentmindedly as she works or reading the nativity narratives from the Bible (after "'Twas the Night Before Christmas") every year. Lying in his hospital bed, wishing he had paid attention in school, Joe Bonham includes along with running the times tables and recalling random facts, reciting the whole 23rd Psalm,

and finds "Dwell in the house of the Lord forever" comforting. Only in the fourth year does he try to remember the books of the Bible in order and putting words to characters in bible stories. He does miserably.

In a dream, Bonham reprises an event that takes place at the station on the day he ships out to boot camp. A mother searches for her underage son to take him home. Bonham now dreams that the boy is Christ, approaching like a purple-cloaked mirage and sitting down with the draftees, joining them for a game of blackjack while waiting for the trains to depart. When one player says, "Christ I wish we had a drink here", Christ produces sixteen-year-old whiskey for them to drink. Christ can do anything except hit a twelve. He explains the music of death, mounts the locomotive and screams, his robes trailing. In the middle of the desert, Bonham sees Christ coming up from Tucson, floating on the shimmering heat waves. Bonham can no longer stand being on a nightmare train full of laughing dead men inside, so he runs toward Christ, throws himself into the hot sand at Christ's feet, and begins to cry.

Bonham's tapping achieves success on Christmas, and he recalls sleigh bells, crunching snow, candles, wreathes- and berries, and feels peace, joy, and relief at being taken back into the world at Christmas. He recalls the nativity stories, which he has never read personally, and fills in many contemporary details in how a carpenter and his pregnant wife might go to town to pay their taxes. In the end, Mary hears angels singing and fears for her little baby. Sensing that this nurse is his last chance to communicate with the world and escape his loneliness, Bonham prays in his heart. He has never been much for asking God for things, but feels he has been suffocating, smothering long enough, screaming for release that a merciful Christ could take a minute. He knows God is busy with millions of people praying every second—including important people asking for big things. He does not blame God for falling behind on his orders because no one is perfect, but what he asks is so little.

When the nurse understands and runs to tell the doctors, Bonham feels godlike in his breakthrough, a veritable Lazarus returning from the dead. The nurse is Gabriel summoning all to come and hear the voice of the dead. Bonham pleads with God for that to be the case, and hearing vibrations, thanks a merciful God for answering his prayers. The bedsprings sing like angels. Bonham tells the doctor how he can become an educational exhibit, and among the places he suggests taking him are churches and cathedrals; he notes that he no longer can take part in worship services, which he characterizes rather ironically. When the doctor rejects Bonham's plea to go outside and tranquilizes him again, Bonham sees Christ walking across the desert heat waves, crowned in thorns and dripping blood. In the distance, a woman's voice cries for her little boy. He then sees himself as a new kind of Christ, carrying the seeds of a new order, a new messiah of the battlefield, showing the horrible future that awaits lovers, children, mothers, babies, bombed out cities, and tortured earth. He holds the secret that they are afraid will get out and little guys will refuse to fight.

Jingoism

World War I is an outcome of jingoism—extreme, aggressive patriotism. The American version is shown at the Los Angeles train station as four trainloads of draftees are departing. Bunting hangs everywhere and women and children wave miniature flags. Three bands play simultaneously as the mayor gives a speech. Amidst patriotic phrases and songs, pious blessings, prayers, and a woman wailing about her underage son, is a man who is let out of prison if he agrees to enlist. Only when he lies in a hospital, without arms, legs, sight, hearing, smell, or taste, does he feel homesick for America. He recalls how Los Angeles newspapers drum up enthusiasm for war by telling of two Canadian soldiers crucified by Germans. Bonham realizes, too late, that this is no place for him, no war for him, none of his business. What does he care about making the world safe for democracy? He asks himself why he will lie like a side of beef for the rest of his life, just because someone taps him on the shoulder and says he is going to war—and he goes. In any other situation he would ask: "what's there in it for me?". It is one's duty to ask this question. "Hell's fire guys" have been fighting and dying for liberty since 1776, or for freedom, independence, democracy, decency, honor, native land, or stopping "dirty Huns" from raping beautiful French and Belgian girls. In every war, anyone who dares say the hell with fighting is a coward. The little guys always get killed. The high-talking murderers screaming for blood can keep their words.

Every Allied nation expects its enlisted men to do their duties and lie down in Flanders fields when the guy who keeps the book without mistakes says so. Bonham wants to be carried in a glass box before parliaments and congresses, wherever men talk of honor, justice, making the world safe for democracy, fourteen points, and self-determination. After all their important debates, Bonham's condition is the only issue on which to vote, and those who favor war should be hung, drawn, and quartered and their remains made to poison fields. Bonham sees his mission as showing the horrible future that awaits humankind and telling the little guys to refuse to fight, to ask questions, and refuse to be butchered, no matter what slogans and speeches are made. If someone must die, it will be the big guys. If the powers that be force guns into the hands of the little guys, feed them slogans, and sing battle hymns, the little guys, two billion strong, will use the guns to live. War planners can point the way, but the little guys point the guns.

Style

Point of View

Johnny Got His Gun, by Dalton Trumbo, is written in the third person but with the full intensity of a first person narrative. The third person is needed because the protagonist, an American draftee during World War I, lies immobilized in a hospital bed from September of 1918 onward for an indeterminate length of time—probably years. He cannot tell his story. Someone omniscient must do it for him.

Joe Bonham first comes to his senses hearing an annoying telephone ringing and picturing himself being summoned home from work because his father has died. When the ring and trip home repeat themselves too often, Bonham realizes it is a dream. Through much of the first half of the novel, Bonham gradually discovers, as he comes in and out of consciousness, he has also lost both arms, both legs, his ears, his jaw, his tongue, and his nose. He is a side of beef that cannot die. Trumbo lets the horror of such a situation sink into the reader very slowly. Throughout, Bonham dreams of mostly good old times growing up in Colorado and working in Los Angeles before being drafted. Gradually, Bonham realizes he has no business being in the army, no business coming to France, and no business lying here, wishing he could die.

In Book 2, Trumbo allows Bonham to triumph a bit and lifts expectations that he may reestablish some degree of contact with the human race, but then lets a bureaucrat crush all hope. Bonham vows not to give up, but to someday, somehow, become a messiah for the "little guys" who always become cannon fodder by super patriots and dubious statesmen. The cogent antiwar theme is built up less gradually than the sense of horror at Bonham's fate, but is delivered powerfully several times, particularly in the final defiant words as he fights off the tranquilizer meant to silence him.

Setting

Johnny Got His Gun by Dalton Trumbo is set entirely in protagonist Joe Bonham's mind as he lies in a hospital bed somewhere (probably in France) after being gravely wounded in the trenches of the western front in September of 1918. Over the course of years—at least four but probably more—Bonham recalls events from his past: growing up in Shale City, Colorado, fishing with his father in the mountains, working for a day in the Uintah Desert after fighting over a girl, and moving to Los Angeles, California, in August of 1916 (the day Romania joins the war). Several of his vivid memories come from the trenches and help solidify the message that war is hell. Bonham's mind jumps among varied locales, recalling considerable detail, often with a wry sense of humor, and displaying his emotional attachments vividly.

Blinded, deaf, dumb, and quadriplegic, Bonham's only functioning sense is feeling. He is able to feel the vibration of footsteps, doors opening and closing, etc., through his

bedsprings. A major event for him is being transferred from one room to another, for the new bedsprings are firmer, offering better reception. He spends hours, days, weeks, months, and years picturing his immediate environment, controlling time so he can celebrate Sunday walks and holiday celebrations in his mind. Eventually, vibrations bringing him information inspire him to vibrate and transmit information, using Morse code, tapping SOS with his head on the pillow.

Language and Meaning

The novel is told in Standard American English in the flavor of the World War I era. It has the air and bravado of a sensitive twenty-something year old—until that twenty-something year old panics at the prospect of lying in darkness and silence for the rest of his life, kept alive by a respirator, and unable to communicate with the outside world. In these passages, which intersperse with lyrical descriptions of life growing up in Colorado and transition without warning, protagonist Joe Bonham cries out in horror and fear in staccato passages without punctuation, sometimes without word breaks. Several times Trumbo most effectively strings together snippets of songs, orations, prayers, biblical and literary passages, and conversations to create a sense of the hurly-burly of going to and being in war.

The strong antiwar message comes across often more by the degree of panic in Bonham's mind as by the actual content. Author Dalton Trumbo gets a visceral hold on the reader from the first transition from dream state to reality and never lets go. The horrible realization of the extent of Bonham' s injuries keeps building. Bonham has the time to think about the nature of war and formulate cogent philosophical objections, and claims to be uniquely fitted to speak on behalf of the dead. No one has been dead-while-alive and alive-while-dead to the extent he is. He thinks lucidly, but his hopes of communicating this to the world are dashed. He then formulates a true final manifesto that he is determined, somehow—beyond the pages of the novel—to deliver to the powers that be in the world.

Structure

Johnny Got His Gun consists of twenty numbered but untitled chapters, divided into two named books. Book 1 (Chapters 1-10) is entitled "The Dead", and Book 2 (Chapter 11-22) is entitled "The Living."

"The Dead" introduces protagonist Joe Bonham as he lies in a hospital bed, gradually realizing he has lost his limbs and senses. His mind wanders through scenes of his youth in Colorado and work in Los Angeles before being drafted, introducing a number of characters and sketching life in pre-World War I America. Book 1 grows progressively more graphic and savage as Bonham fully realizes his predicament and rails against the medical profession, which holds him in limbo. Needing to discern reality from nightmare becomes Bonham's obsession and forms the major theme of Book 2. "The Living" shows him conquering time, setting up an internal calendar, and tapping out SOS in

Morse code with his head, trying to get a nurse to understand. A temporary nurse does understand and summons a doctor, who finds it inconvenient to let Bonham reconnect with the world. As he is doped back to sleep, Bonham formulates an antiwar manifesto for the "little guys" who always end up doing the suffering.

Helpful to the reader are an anonymous one-page "About the Author" and introductions by the author in 1959 and 1970. The bulk of Trumbo's writing career is as a screenwriter, including the movie based on this novel. It wins the International Critics Award and Special Award at the Cannes Film Festival. The 1939 novel wins a National Book Award. For much of his career, Trumbo is blacklisted after refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. He fights a lifelong fight against censorship and for trade union rights. He dies in 1976. Trumbo's 1959 Introduction describes how he writes the novel in 1938 when pacifism is "anathema" in America, and it goes into print two days into World War II. Trumbo supports keeping it out of print during this non-romantic conflict and during the Korean War, but denies it had been officially censored. Postwar editions prove popular. The 1970 Addendum provides gruesome statistics on Vietnam amputees and observes that Americans seem not to care.

Quotes

"He shot up through cool waters wondering whether he'd ever make the surface or not. That was a lot of guff about people sinking three times and then drowning. He'd been rising and sinking for days weeks months who could tell? But he hadn't drowned. As he came to the surface each time he fainted into reality and as he went down again he fainted into nothingness. Long slow faints all of them while he struggled for air and life. He was fighting too hard and he knew it. A man can't fight always. If he's drowning or suffocating he's got to be smart and hold back some of his strength for the last the final the death struggle.
"He lay back quietly because he was no fool. If you lie back you can float. He used to float a lot when he was a kid. He knew how to do it. His last strength going into that fight when all he had to do was float. What a fool." Book 1, Chap. 3, p. 25

"The hole began at the base of his throat just below where his jaw should be and went upward in a widening circle. He could feel his skin creeping around the rim of the circle. The hole was getting bigger and bigger. It widened out almost to the base of his ears if he had any and then narrowed again. It ended somewhere above the top of what used to be his nose.
"The hole went too high to have any eyes in it.
"He was blind.
"It was funny how calm he was. He was quiet just like a storekeeper taking spring inventory and saying to himself I see I have no eyes better put that down in the order book. He had no legs and no arms and no eyes and no ears and no nose and no mouth and no tongue. What a hell of a dream. It must be a dream. Of course sweet god it's a dream. He'd have to wake up or he'd go nuts. Nobody could live like that. A person in that condition would be dead and he wasn't dead so he wasn't in that condition. Just dreaming.
"But it wasn't a dream." Book 1, Chap. 5, pp. 62-63

"He awakened thinking of his father and wondering where the nurse was. He awakened lonelier than he had been since he could remember. He was lonely for Shale City and its pleasant ways. He was lonely for one look for one smell for one taste for one word that would bring Shale City and his father and his mother and his sisters back to him. But he was so cut off from them that even if they were standing beside his bed they would be as distant as if they were ten thousand miles away." Book 1, Chap. 9, p. 108

"Then there was this freedom the little guys were always getting killed for. Was it freedom from another country? Freedom from work or disease or death? Freedom from your mother-in-law? Please mister give us a bill of sale on this freedom before we go out and get killed. Give us a bill of sale drawn up plainly so we know in advance what we're getting killed for and give us also a first mortgage on something as security so we can be sure after we've won your war that we've got the same kind of freedom we bargained for.

"And take decency. Everybody said America was fighting a war for the triumph of decency. But whose idea of decency? And decency for who? Speak up and tell us what decency is. Tell us how much better a decent dead man feels that an indecent live one. Make a comparison there in facts like houses and tables. Make it in words we can understand. And don't talk about honor. The honor of a Chinese or an Englishman or an African negro or an American or a Mexican? Please all you guys who want to fight to preserve our honor let us know what the hell honor is. Is it American honor for the whole world we're fighting for? Maybe the world doesn't like it. Maybe the South Sea Islanders like their honor better." Book 1, Chap. 10, p. 113

"You're goddamn right they didn't.
"They died crying in their minds like little babies. They forgot the thing they were fighting for the things they were dying for. They thought about things a man can understand. They died yearning for the face of a friend. They died whimpering for the voice of a mother a father a wife a child. They died with their hearts sick for one more look at the place where they were born please god just one more look. They died moaning and sighing for life. They knew what was important They knew that life was everything and they died with screams and sobs. They died with only one thought in their minds and that was I want to live I want to live I want to live.
"He ought to know.
"He was the nearest thing to a dead man on earth.
"He was a dead man with a mind that could still think. He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with. Nobody could dispute with him. Nobody could prove him wrong. Because nobody knew but he." Book 1, Chap. 10, pp. 117-118

"Oh god god thank god he thought I've got it now and they can't take it away from me. He thought I have seen the dawn again and I will see it every morning from now on. He thought thank you god thank you thank you. He thought if I never have anything else I will always have dawn and morning sunlight." Book 2, Chap. 11, p. 139

"When he had thought for an instant that his mother and his sisters and Kareen might be standing beside the bed he had wanted to hide. But now that he had generals and big guys he felt a sudden fierce surging desire for them to see him. Just as before he had started to reach for the medal without an arm to reach with so now he began to blow the mask off his face without having mouth and lips to blow with. He wanted them to get just one look at that hole in his head. He wanted them to get their fill of a face that began and ended with a forehead. He lay there blowing and then he realized that the air from his lungs was all escaping through his tube. He began to roll again from shoulder to shoulder hoping to dislodge the mask." Book 2, Chap. 13, p. 160

"It will come with a rush and a roar and a shudder. It will come howling and laughing and shrieking and moaning. It will come so fast you can't help yourself you will stretch out your arms to embrace it. You will feel it before it comes and you will tense yourself for

acceptance and the earth which is your eternal bed will tremble at the moment of your union.
"Silence.
"What's this what's this oh my god can a man ever get lower can a man ever be less"? Book 2, Chap. 14, pp. 178-179

"The guy with red hair began to deal and everybody began to watch the cards except the Swede who grunted and said Christ I wish we had a drink here. Christ kind of grinned and said why don't you drink it if you want it so bad? The guy who looked like a Swede turned and looked at Christ and then he looked down at the table and sure enough there was a glass of whiskey sitting by his right hand and everybody had a drink of whiskey sitting there. They all looked up at Christ and the guy with red hair said how in hell did you do that? Christ just smiled and said I can do anything hit me only not too hard." Book 2, Chap. 16, p. 190

"He would be doing good too in a roundabout way. He would be an educational exhibit. People wouldn't learn much about anatomy from him but they would learn all there was to know about war. That would be a great thing to concentrate war in one stump of a body and to show it to people so they could see the difference between a war that's in newspaper headlines and liberty loan drives and a war that is fought out lonesomely in the mud somewhere a war between a man and a high explosive shell. Suddenly he took fire with the idea he got so excited over it he forgot about his longing for air and people this new idea was so wonderful. He would make an exhibit of himself to show all the little guys what would happen to them and while he was doing it he would be self-supporting and free. He would do a favor to everybody including himself. He would show himself to the little guys and to their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and wives and sweethearts and grandmothers and grandfathers and he would have a sign over himself and the sign would say here is war and he would concentrate the whole war into such a small piece of meat and bone and hair that they would never forget it as long as they lived." Book 2, Chap. 19, p. 224

"Call all the young men together and say here is your brother here is your best friend here you are young men. This is a very interesting case young men because we know there is a mind buried down there. Technically this thing is living meat like that tissue we kept alive all last summer in the lab. But this is a different cut of meat because it also contains a brain. Now listen to me closely young gentlemen. That brain is thinking. Maybe it's thinking about music. Maybe it has a great symphony all thought out or a mathematical formula that would change the world or a book that would make people kinder or the germ of an idea that would save a hundred million people from cancer. This is a very interesting problem young gentlemen because if this brain does hold such secrets how in the world are we ever going to find out. In any event there you are young gentlemen breathing and thinking and dead like a frog under chloroform with it's stomach laid open so that its heartbeat may be seen so quiet so helpless but yet alive. There is your future and your sweet wild dreams there is the thing your sweethearts loved and there is the thing your leaders urged it to be. Think well young gentlemen.

Think sharply young gentlemen and then we will go back to our studies of the barbarians who sacked Rome." Book 2, Chap. 19, p. 230

"He stiffened.
"The vibrations were coming toward him again. The man was returning with an answer. Great merciful god thank you here it is here it is my answer. Here is my triumph here is my return from the dead here is life vibrating against the floor singing in my bedsprings singing like all the angels in heaven.
"A finger began to tap against his forehead.
W H A T
Y O U
A S K
I S
A G A I N S T
R E G U L A T I O NS
W H O
A R E
YOU
"The tapping went on against his forehead but he paid no more attention to it. Everything in his mind went suddenly blank hollow completely quiet. A moment of this and then he began to think about the message to make certain there was no mistake that it meant exactly what it said. And he knew it did.
"He could almost hear the wail of pain that went up from his heart. It was a sharp terrible personal pain the kind of pain that comes only when someone to whom you have never done any harm turns on you and says goodbye goodbye forever without any reason for doing it. Without any reason at all." Book 2, Chap. 20, pp. 234-235

"We are men of peace we are men who work and we want no quarrel. But if you destroy our peace if you take away our work if you try to range us one against the other we will know what to do. If you tell us to make the world safe for democracy we will take you seriously and by god and by Christ we will make it so. We will use the guns you force upon us we will use them to defend our very lives and the menace to our lives does not lie on the other side of a nomansland that was set apart without our consent it lies within our own boundaries here and now we have seen it and we know it.
"Put the guns into our hands and we will use them. Give us the slogans and we will turn them into realities. Sing the battle hymns and we will take them up where you left off. Not one not ten not ten thousand not a million not ten millions not a hundred millions but a billion two billions of us all the people of the world we will have the slogans and we will have the hymns and we will have the guns and we will use them and we will live. Make no mistake of it we will live. We will be alive and we will walk and talk and eat and sing and laugh and feel and love and bear our children in tranquility in security in decency in peace. You plan the wars you masters of men plan the wars and point the way and we will point the gun." Book 2, Chap.7 20, pp. 242-243

Topics for Discussion

What role does the visit of daredevil pilot Lincoln Beechy play in the novel?

How does Joe Bonham's experience in the Uintah Desert prefigure his hospital ordeal?

What does the Jose anecdote say about Joe Bonham?

What importance is there to the story of the little Scotchman who throws down his gun rather than shoot a Bavarian?

How are Lazarus and Jesus Christ used in the novel?

Do you believe Joe Bonham will get to deliver his messianic message after the novel ends? Defend your answer by at least three story points in the novel.

Do you believe Joe Bonham would commit suicide if he could, or ask to be euthanized? Defend your answer by at least three story points in the novel.