

# **The Last Picture Show Study Guide**

## **The Last Picture Show by Larry McMurtry**

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## Plot Summary

In the mid-1950s, Sonny Crawford and his best friend Dwayne are high school seniors in the small town of Thalia, Texas. Both boys play football, hang out at the pool hall and obsess about sex. Dwayne dates Jacy Farrow, the richest, prettiest girl in town, and Sonny dates Charlene Duggs, an unattractive and unpleasant classmate. As the novel begins, Sonny is overwhelmed by the loneliness of the town and his dissatisfaction with his dating prospects. Sonny dumps Charlene after a night at the picture show and begins an affair with Ruth Popper, the football coach's attractive but neglected wife. Sonny enjoys having sex with Ruth and accepts that she is in love with him.

Meanwhile, Dwayne does his best to get Jacy to have sex with him, but she is gradually lured away to a faster, wilder crowd of rich kids from Wichita. Jacy is a selfish, manipulative girl, constantly seeking the attention of her parents and the town. Jacy's mother Lois was once the prettiest, liveliest girl in town, but she is now an unhappy alcoholic in a miserable marriage. Sam the Lion owns Thalia's pool hall and keeps an eye out for Sonny, Dwayne and Billy, a mentally challenged boy who Sam took in after Billy's father abandoned him. Sonny and Dwayne go on a road trip to Mexico, and while they are out of town, Sam the Lion has a stroke and dies. He leaves the pool hall to Sonny and Billy.

Jacy starts going to naked swimming parties in Wichita and develops a crush on Bobby Sheen. It is only when Jacy learns that her virginity is a turn off to Bobby that she decides to sleep with Dwayne on the class trip to San Francisco. She dumps Dwayne afterwards and begins her process of seducing Bobby. She sleeps with him once, and then he runs off to marry his girlfriend to Jacy's annoyance. Dwayne is so depressed about losing Jacy that he moves to Midland. Jacy sleeps with her mother's lover, Abilene, and after he fails to fall in love with her, she is so depressed and bored that she decides to break up Sonny and Ruth. When Jacy shows Sonny that she wants to date him, Sonny stops going to see Ruth, leaving her brokenhearted. Dwayne finds out about Jacy and Sonny and hits Sonny in the face with a beer bottle, seriously injuring his eye.

Jacy tells Sonny she wants to marry him, and they run off to Oklahoma. Jacy only does it because she knows her parents will find them and have the marriage annulled, which they do. As Lois drives the dejected Sonny back to Thalia, she sleeps with him in a roadside motel, and Sonny realizes how badly he treated Ruth. As football season starts, Sonny feels lost and empty in Thalia, like he has disappeared. The picture show closes, and Dwayne leaves for Korea. A trucker runs over Billy one morning, and Sonny is so distraught he goes to Ruth's house. Ruth is furious, but she realizes that her decision is not whether to forgive Sonny, but whether she is brave enough to face being hurt by him again. As the novel ends, Ruth and Sonny sit holding hands in her kitchen, facing an uncertain future.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

On a Saturday morning in late November, with the streets of Thalia completely empty, Sonny has the lonesome feeling that he is only human creature in the town. The night before Sonny played his last game of football for Thalia High School. As Sonny drives his old 1941 pickup truck through town, he sees Billy sweeping the streets, heading out of town. Billy lives at the pool hall with Sam the Lion and sweeps the pool hall and picture show, but if he is not stopped, he will sweep all the way out of town. Sonny picks Billy up, already feeling less lonesome, and drives to the pool hall.

While Sonny eats a packet of chips and warms himself before the fire, Sam the Lion teases him about how badly he played football the night before. Thalia was tromped, but Sonny doesn't feel too bad about it. Sam the Lion starts coughing and can't stop, which makes Sonny feel uneasy. He doesn't like to be reminded that Sam is no longer young or healthy. Sam is kind to the boys in town because he had had three sons, all of whom died before age eighteen. Sam's wife lost her mind, and Sam drank a lot and was said to be loose with women. Now Sam owns the pool hall, the picture show and the all-night cafy. He takes care of Billy, who is slow in the head and was abandoned by his father after his mother died in childbirth. Billy likes to sweep and go to the picture show.

Sam the Lion and Sonny hear Abilene's Mercury coming into town. Abilene drives the nicest car and plays the best game of pool in Thalia. He is also Sonny's best friend and Dwayne's boss on the oilrig. Sam the Lion gets Abilene's fancy cue stick, and Abilene beats Sonny easily in a game. Sam the Lion pays Abilene fifty dollars because they bet on last night's football game. Sam always bets on Thalia to raise the boy's morale, but they still almost always lose. Sonny thinks they are handicapped by their hatred of Coach Popper. Dwayne gets dropped off in front of the pool hall, and he and Sonny head to the cafy for breakfast. They only have eighty cents, so they order eggs and sausage and flip to see who gets what. The waitress Penny is giving the old drunk chef Marston a hard time, so Sonny and Dwayne wink to cheer him up and manage to indicate that they are broke so that he will give them a couple of extra pieces of toast.

Sonny and Dwayne own the pickup jointly. They work out that Dwayne will get it first that evening because Sonny is working, and Sonny will just meet his girl Charlene at the picture show later. Dwayne is dating Jacy Farrow, the prettiest girl in town, while Charlene is a mediocre slug by comparison. Double dating is painful to Sonny because Jacy is so much more desirable than Charlene that he has disloyal fantasies afterwards. When the boys finish eating, Dwayne goes back to the rooming house where they live, and Sonny goes to pick up his delivery orders for the butane company he works for. He heads out to Megargel, a town even smaller than Thalia, and regrets not inviting Billy. With the cab empty and the road empty, he gets the funny feeling he is driving around in a completely empty place.



## Chapter 1 Analysis

In the first chapter, the author introduces a few of the characters in the small town of Thalia, Texas, but the web-like nature of small town life is already apparent. The book's interest in loneliness is also immediately introduced in this chapter, as Sonny twice thinks about how lonesome the empty town and empty roads make him feel. Sonny's malaise is apparent from the first page, and in spite of the kindness of Sam the Lion and the obviously close friendship he shares with Dwayne, it is clear that Sonny doesn't feel fulfilled or happy. Sonny's ways of coping with this emptiness and loneliness will be a driving force throughout the novel. Dwayne and Sonny's close friendship is introduced in this chapter. The boys share a truck and breakfast, just as they will ultimately share the same manipulative girlfriend. Sam the Lion, one of the novel's only unequivocally good characters, shows Sonny and Billy the kindness in this chapter that will mark his character through the story.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Sonny next delivers butane to a ranch in Scotland, but nine dogs stand guarding the tank and barking. He waits in the truck for an hour, feeling a little depressed. Sonny doesn't get back to Thalia until almost 10 p.m., and he finds his boss, Frank Fartley, playing pool. Lester Marlowe is also there, losing to Abilene, as usual. Frank pays Sonny, and Sonny has Sam the Lion cash the check. Sonny crosses the road to the picture show and sits down next to Charlene and her sister Marlene. After the feature has been playing a few minutes, Charlene and Sonny get up and move to a back corner to hold hands and kiss, though Sonny's interest is muted because he wants to see the film. Sonny squirms against her, kissing passionately for a bit, because the movies are the only place Charlene's passion is really inspired.

Charlene reminds Sonny that it is their anniversary and demands another stick of gum and a dollar for her and Marlene's entrance to the film. Sonny gives her the gum. Dwayne and Jacy come back in from their two hours of necking in the car, say hello to Sonny and Charlene and then continue to kiss until after the show is over and the lights come up. Dwayne walks Jacy to her car, depressed by how long it is until next Saturday, and then Sonny and Charlene drop Marlene at home and Dwayne at the rooming house. It is almost Charlene's curfew, but in honor of their anniversary, she suggests they go to the lake anyway. Sonny feels depressed as Charlene tuts about Dwayne and Jacy kissing in the picture show once the lights went up, because Sonny suddenly realizes that Charlene really wants to go with Dwayne, just as he really wants to go with Jacy.

Sonny and Charlene begin their ritual of making out in the truck, and as he holds Charlene's breast in his hand, he can't understand his lack of liveliness. It never crosses Sonny's mind that he might be bored. He tries to put his hand lower, but she swats him away and accuses him of trying to get her pregnant. Even more depressed, Sonny thinks even if he wasn't going with someone prettier, it would at least be nice to be dating someone more likeable. Charlene tells him he isn't good-looking enough for her and that there will be plenty of time after they are engaged anyway. Sonny fights the urge to say something nasty to Charlene, but instead he breaks up with her. Charlene is surprised, but she is proud to be a martyr to virtue. She makes Sonny give her back her photos and returns his football jacket. She warns him to stay away from Marlene and then goes up and weeps her eyes out to Marlene, telling her about how Sonny had forced her to fondle him indecently. Marlene stays up thinking about when Charlene will be sent away to have her baby and whether she will get Charlene's photo of Van Johnson when she is gone.



## Chapter 2 Analysis

Again, Sonny's depression and malaise is evident throughout this chapter, but it is interesting to see him take action to improve his situation. From the little the reader already knows of Sonny, it is already apparent that Sonny is not the most proactive of characters. In dumping Charlene, Sonny takes the first step to kicking himself out of the rut he has been in. The author's description of Sonny's boredom, and the fact that he doesn't recognize it because no boy in Thalia would think he could be bored while holding a girl's breast, is very funny and very telling about Sonny's character. In fact, McMurtry's writing is hilarious throughout this chapter. His account of Marlene and Charlene's conversation after Sonny and Charlene break up is unbearably funny, perfectly capturing Charlene's mixture of small-minded pettiness and flair for melodrama.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Sonny feels very relieved to be done with Charlene and to have his football jacket back. When he gets back to the town square, it is as deserted as it was that morning. Sonny drives to the all-night cafe, but when he sees his father sitting at the counter talking to Genevieve Morgan, the night waitress, he pulls around the corner to wait for his father to come out. They both like Genevieve, but they can't both talk to her at the same time. Genevieve is an attractive woman whose husband was injured in an oilrig accident a year ago, and she has gone to work to support him and their two sons. Sonny has a crush on her. Sonny sees his father come out of the cafe, shivering in the thin jacket he always wears, and he feels guilty for not offering him a ride. Sonny's dad can't help offering Sonny money, though, and Sonny can't help refusing it, which makes them both nervous. Sonny's father was injured in the car accident that killed Sonny's mother, and six operations failed to restore him to health. He once was Thalia's high school principal, but he is now Thalia's only prescription drug addict.

Sonny goes into the cafe and orders a cheeseburger from Genevieve, who pours him a glass of milk and sits down with him in the booth. Sonny tells her that he and Charlene broke up, and he tells Genevieve she will have to be his girlfriend now. He is painfully aware that she is only joking with him. He watches Genevieve do the dishes and is strongly affected by her, even as she sweats. He tells Genevieve he is blue because there is no one to go out with in Thalia except Jacy, and Dwayne's got her. Genevieve tells Sonny that she'd call that Dwayne's tough luck, because Jay will bring him more misery than she'll ever be worth and Jacy's parents wouldn't let her marry a poor boy anyway. She also tells him how Jacy's grandmother disowned Jacy's mother Lois when she married Gene.

Genevieve and her husband used to be friends with the Farrows when they were young and poor, before Jacy's dad Gene struck it rich. Genevieve thinks Lois is a good woman, but people who get rich all of a sudden feel guilty around people who have stayed poor. Genevieve tells Sonny he should take money from his father sometimes, because it would make him feel good. Of all the boys that have a crush on her, Sonny is Genevieve's favorite. Genevieve watches Sonny comb his hair, and he looks so young and intent that the sight of him makes her feel so good she wants to cry for a moment. When Sonny gets back to the rooming house, his room is very cold and dusty from the wind, and he fantasizes about Genevieve until he falls asleep.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Although Sonny feels blue and hopeless in his chapter, his youth and the promises it holds make Genevieve feel so good that she is overwhelmed by happiness and almost cries. Genevieve and Sonny's dad have both suffered terrible losses. Sonny's father lost



Sonny's mother, and Genevieve's husband was badly injured. Clearly, neither is the type to dwell too much on these mishaps. The distance between Sonny and his father is tragic for this very reason, and no doubt it contributes to the loneliness that Sonny suffers. Genevieve's stories about the Farrows are interesting and set a good backdrop to the later revelations Sonny will learn about Lois, who is not merely the rich snob she first appears to be. Genevieve foreshadows those developments in this chapter and also hints at the fact that Jacy will end up making Dwayne miserable.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Sonny and Dwayne sleep through most of their high school classes, but they try to stay awake for Mr. Cecil's English class because they think he is nice. Mr. Cecil is teaching Keats when Joe Bob Blanton raises his hand and tells the class that it was wrong for Keats to want to be a nightingale because that was criticizing the Lord. Joe Bob is the preacher's son, and he is a preacher now himself after receiving the call at church camp the previous summer. Civics is the next class, and it is very popular because Coach Popper, the dumbest, laziest teacher in the school, teaches it. Coach Popper always falls asleep at the beginning of class, and the boys in class sleep, or torment the only girl in class, or hang Joe Bob out the window by his ankles.

Lunch is a boring time of day. One year, Dwayne and Jacy snuck off to the lake at lunch everyday to court, but that was when Lois was drinking particularly hard. Lois is the only woman who drinks openly in Thalia. That same year at a barbeque at Gene's ranch, Lois was downing whisky and lost six hundred dollars in craps to Abilene. Lois thought Abilene cheated her, and when Gene refused to fire him, she got into her Cadillac and smashed it into a tree. That night somebody busted Lois's lip and blacked her eye, and no one could agree whether it was Gene or Abilene. Lois is a tall, rangy blonde, as slim as her daughter, and she seems scared of nothing. Unless Thalia students can sneak off at lunch, there is nothing to do except play volleyball or watch the Melly brothers jack off in the bathroom, which Sonny and Dwayne really consider beneath themselves as seniors.

That afternoon, Coach Popper announces that anybody interested in coming out for basketball should come to the gym in fifteen minutes. Sonny and Dwayne go out for basketball because they feel obligated, but it is not a big deal sport in Thalia. The team is widely considered the worst in the state, once losing by over one hundred points. Only nine boys show up for practice, which makes Coach Popper furious. He goes off to find Joe Bob Blanton, ordering them to run laps, which none of them except Bobby Logan, the most conscientious athlete, runs. The coach makes them do wind sprints, but the boys still grin, because while the coach was gone they mixed a little glue in with the foot-toughener. By the end of the wind sprints, Joe Bob's feet are so badly blistered he is hopping on one leg, which Coach Popper finds hilarious. Joe Bob can only get his socks off because his feet are so badly blistered, and the blisters peel off easier than the glue. Coach Popper makes it even worse for Joe Bob by horsing around and trying to grab his penis, teasing him about how small it is.

When the boys all come out of the shower later, Coach Popper catches Dwayne, Sonny and Bobby having a three-way towel fight, and for some reason it makes him so furious that he corners Dwayne and Sonny, whipping them with his towel. This terrifies the freshmen, but Dwayne and Sonny have seen the coach flare up before and know they just have to wait it out. The coach once shot at Sonny when he thought Sonny had



scared away a dove he was sneaking up on. Dwayne says he feels sorry for the coach's wife, Ruth, and Sonny points out she isn't the healthiest looking woman in town. Jacy is waiting for the boys when they come out, and the three go to the drive-in in Jacy's convertible. Jacy and Dwayne sit in the front, feeding each other fries, until Lois Farrow pulls up in her Cadillac and tells Jacy to take the boys to town and get on home. Lois looks bored with her sunglasses on, but Sonny still feels scared of her, as Jacy and Dwayne clearly do too.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Several characters are introduced and/or explained in this chapter as the author begins to flesh out the personality of the town of Thalia. Joe Bob Blanton, the preacher's son, and Lois Farrow, Jacy's mother, are both explicated hilariously. Lois is wild and reckless and has everyone in town scared of her, although she seems scared of nothing. Joe Bob is the target of much bullying and cruelty from the other boys, and the after effects of this are felt in a very dramatic way later in the novel. It is clear from early in this chapter that Coach Popper is a bully and a stupid, lazy man. However, there are also serious homoerotic undertones in the way that Coach Popper torments Joe Bob Blanton, which foreshadow Ruth's later suspicions of Coach Popper's sexual preferences. Coach Popper and John Cecil's characters are both explicated in this chapter and create polar extremes of value as both teachers and humans. This dichotomy becomes even more significant later in the novel, when Coach Popper ruins Cecil's career by leading a witch-hunt that ends with Cecil fired for being a homosexual.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Lois and Jacy ignore each other through dinner, and afterwards Genevieve gets into bed and quickly drinks himself to sleep. Lois is annoyed by how easily Gene does this because she has to drink for hours before the liquor will turn her off, and she will usually just use pills if she wants to sleep. After dinner, Lois goes up to Jacy's room and watches her washing her face. She looks around Jacy's room and finds that every tacky photo and piece of memorabilia annoys her. Lois tells Jacy that she'd hate to see her marry Dwayne because after two months he would stop flattering her. She wouldn't be rich anymore, and she'd be unhappy. Jacy tells her mother that she doesn't care about money, and Lois tells her she is stupid then. Lois tells Jacy that she scared Gene into getting rich, and Jacy isn't scary enough to make Dwayne rich. Jacy notes that Lois is rich and miserable, and Lois asks Jacy if she has slept with Dwayne. Jacy is shocked and says she would never do that, and Lois quietly suggests she should and tells Jacy that she will take her to the doctor.

When Jacy says premarital sex is a sin, Lois tells her not to be so mealy-mouthed. She says that sleeping with Dwayne might show Jacy that there isn't anything magical about him. Then, she can go off to a good school and marry someone with the money to give her a pleasant life. Jacy says she wants to stay in Thalia and go to school in Wichita, and Lois says life is too hard in Thalia, flat and empty with nothing to do except spend money. Lois puts on some of Jacy's perfume, and smelling good immediately makes her feel less depressed. Lois tells Jacy her point is that life is monotonous, and Jacy will find out about monotony quickly if she marries Dwayne.

After killing time all day, Lois finds it unfair that she still must kill the night. She pours herself a bourbon and calls the pool hall. Sam the Lion answers, and they greet each other warmly. Then she asks for Abilene. She asks Abilene if he wants a night off, and he says it depends on the salary. She tells him he is better at oil wells anyway and hangs up. Lois takes her bourbon to the kitchen and settles down to watch a movie on TV.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, Lois shocks her daughter by telling her harsh truths, and she clearly gets a kick out of doing so. Her educational session reveals much about both Lois and Jacy - Lois's bitterness and jadedness, and Jacy's naivety, trust and vanity. Lois's unhappiness and boredom seem connected to her marriage and her meaningless life in Thalia, but also to her money in some strange way, which is the very thing she is entreating Jacy to wait for. The irony of this advice will come into play later in the novel as Jacy becomes increasingly scheming and manipulative. The last pages reveal an intriguing connection between Lois and Sam the Lion and Lois and Abilene that will not be explicated until

later in the book. The relationships are left purposefully unclear at this point, but in the warmth with which she greets Sam the Lion, a different side of Lois is again revealed.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

After civics class on Thursday, Coach Popper asks Sonny to drive Ruth to the doctor in Olney. Sonny immediately accepts because it will get him out of algebra. When he gets to the Poppers' house, he realizes that the coach hadn't told Ruth that he wouldn't be driving her. She looks disappointed but tries to hide it, and the two don't talk much during the drive. Sonny notices that she is really pretty, if a little too thin. Sonny sits in the waiting room, reading hunting magazines. He feels too gloomy from the other people waiting, so he goes to wait in the car. The waiting room hasn't changed since he used to come with his father. When Ruth comes out, she is crying quietly, and she tells Sonny that she has to have an operation to remove a tumor in her breast tomorrow. She sits quietly the rest of the drive, but Sonny feels like she is pulling at him, trying to get him to say something. It makes him uncomfortable.

When Ruth and Sonny get to the Poppers' house, Ruth asks Sonny in for a Coke and cookies, and Sonny can't think of any way of getting out of going. As Sonny eats the cookies, Ruth watches him, and then to Sonny's disgust and amazement, she starts sobbing loudly. Sonny thinks she must be crazy, and when she tells him he can go, he takes her at her word and gets up. Ruth tells him it's not the operation that has her scared, but the thought of it makes her so lonely, she can't stand it. When Sonny says she will probably feel better when basketball season is over and Coach Popper is around more, Ruth goes completely calm. She tells Sonny he doesn't know a thing about it. Then she gets up, comes around the table and traces her cool hand down Sonny's jaw. She takes his hand and presses it against her cheek and throat before setting it carefully back down on the table.

Sonny feels confused and can tell she wanted to kiss him. He knows it would have been nice, much nicer than kissing Charlene. She apologizes to Sonny. He thinks she is a little crazy, but he likes her anyway. He tells her he already likes her better than he ever liked Charlene, and he can tell this makes her happier. Sonny has finished his cookies, but he continues sitting at the table in case she tries to come around again. She knows that, and she tells him he had better go on to basketball. Sonny hates to leave because he has started to like Mrs. Popper, and he knows she will start to cry as soon as he leaves. When Sonny gets to the gym, the coach doesn't really ask about Ruth, instead asking Sonny if the doctor gave her any prescriptions. Coach Popper complains about how expensive her pills are, and he tells Sonny that women like to be sick. He could have bought a new gun with what he has spent on Ruth's pills. Coach Popper tells Sonny that "a good gun beats a woman any day." (p. 60)



## Chapter 6 Analysis

Ruth enters the story in the chapter, and it is immediately obvious what a fragile and unhappy person she is. Although Sonny is made uncomfortable by her neediness and tears, it is clear that he treats her with exponentially more kindness and patience than Coach Popper, who believes that a gun is better than a woman. Ruth's description of her loneliness is heartbreaking and mirrors in some ways Sonny's sense of loneliness in the first chapter. When Ruth reaches out and touches Sonny, it involves a huge moment of bravery and strength for her, and it foreshadows the relationship to come between the two. Sonny's sense that a force inside of Ruth is trying to pull at him is also a powerful metaphor of Ruth's need for Sonny and the way that the same need both draws and repels Sonny.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Sonny and Dwayne play pool with Jerry Framingham, as Dwayne complains because Jacy has gone to a country club dance with Lester Marlow and didn't seem all that sad about it. Jerry drives a cattle truck and invites the boys to drive a truck full of yearlings to Fort Worth that night, and they agree. First Sonny and Dwayne stop off at the all-night diner to have a chicken fried steak with Sam the Lion. Dwayne asks Sam the Lion how rich Gene Farrow is, and Sonny and Dwayne are stunned when Sam the Lion tells them Gene probably only has fifty dollars in his pocket with everything else wrapped up in goods and mixed up with bank credit. Sam the Lion predicts that there won't be much more because the oil fields are drying up and the cattle business dying. Dwayne is relieved that the Farrowes are going broke, but Sam explains that if Gene thought he was going broke, he wouldn't let Dwayne within a mile of Jacy because nobody is snootier than an oil man who has had to sell a Cadillac. Dwayne gets huffy when Sam the Lion suggests Jacy is going to be hard to please, and Sonny feels depressed.

On the drive to Fort Worth, Sonny and Dwayne drink two six packs of beer and get giggly reminiscing about old times at Thalia High School. Sonny thinks briefly about what Ruth Popper might be doing on a Saturday night but quickly forgets her in the joy of bouncing along the road, carefree. After they unload the cattle in Fort Worth, Jerry talks them into putting up five dollars a piece towards a fifteen-dollar prostitute he knows about. Then he wins the flips and he goes up to sleep with her while Sonny and Dwayne stand around freezing outside. On the ride home, Jerry pulls the truck to the side of the road, and they all fall asleep piled on top of each other and wake up freezing and stiff. Jerry and Sonny scrape the windshield as Dwayne vomits in the ditch, and then they drive back to Thalia and head straight for the cozy-looking all-night cafe. Genevieve makes them toast and coffee, watches them as they sleep with their heads on the counter and then drives them back to the rooming house when her shift ends. Even though they only went to Fort Worth, Sonny has the feeling of having been to a city, part of the big world, and the satisfying sense of having traveled.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The joy of traveling, even if it is just to Fort Worth, fills the boys in this chapter. Their life is so wrapped up in the small town of Thalia that even a short trip to a nearby big city feels like travel to them. Sonny's momentary thought of Ruth, who he saw heartbroken and weeping a few days before, is brushed aside as quickly as it comes to him. Sam the Lion tells the boys in this chapter that the oil fields are drying up and the cattle business is dying. Throughout the novel, themes of death and decay are prevalent, and Sonny's suggestion that the financial underpinnings of the town are decaying indicates that the town itself will die. The boys don't seem to notice this and are more concerned with how

those factors will affect Dwayne's chances with Jacy. The reader, though, will note Sonny's suggestion of Thalia's impending death.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

During the first basketball game of the season, somebody trips Sonny, and he smashes into the wall of the Paducah gym and is knocked unconscious. He feigns a coma as long as he can, but the coach catches on and immediately sends him back out. Thalia is losing horribly. Mr. Wean, the Paducah home-economics teacher cum referee, fails to identify an elbow to Lester Malone's groin as an intentional foul, and Sonny is so angered that he throws the ball at the back of Mr. Wean's head and knocks him out. This makes Sonny a Thalia celebrity, though the Thalia basketball ultimately loses to Paducah 14 to 121. The coach immediately falls asleep on the bus, because football is the only sport that really counts for him. Sonny tries his luck with the pretty but prudish sophomore he has had his eye on, and his new celebrity gets him a kiss, but only a closed-mouth kiss.

Dwayne and Jacy, on the other hand, have their most passionate kissing sessions on the back seat of the bus during basketball road trips. Excited by the thought of all their classmates watching on, catching shadowy glimpses, Jacy lets Dwayne go further than she does anywhere else, almost all the way. Each trip adds to her legend. Dwayne finds the frustration painful, but he supposes he will have to bear it until they get married. Towards the end of the bus trip, almost all of the kids have fallen asleep, including Dwayne and Jacy. When Coach Popper wakes up and sees Jacy asleep with her legs across Dwayne's, he is infuriated by the thought that Gene Farrow could have his job for an incident like that. He marches Jacy to the front of the bus. When the coach gets home, Ruth asks him to bring her a pain pill because she feels groggy, and Coach Popper tells her to get it herself. He feels she is making too big of a deal of her operation, which only left a three-inch scar. In his opinion, the doctor should have taken the whole breast off to make sure the tumor was really gone, as she wasn't using the thing, and another operation would be expensive. The doctor ignored him, and Ruth bawled. The next day, Coach Popper shouts at Dwayne in front of the whole squad and orders him to run fifty laps. Dwayne quits the squad, and Coach Popper is relieved.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The cruelty and callousness of Coach Popper is further explored in this chapter, in the way he treats the weaker boys on his basketball squad, but especially in the way he treats his wife Ruth. His stupidity is also on full display, as he fails to notice the serious making out that Dwayne and Jacy have long undertaken on the back of the bus, while is sent into a fury by the sight of her legs lying across his. It is interesting that the boys in the book, Sonny and Dwayne, are obsessed with sex, but the girls, both Jacy and Charlene, are aroused only by ideas about love and lust, the idea of someone watching or the thought that their partner resembles a film star. Only the older women in the book, like Lois Farrow and later, Ruth Popper, seem genuinely interested in sex.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Winter in Thalia is always dull, and now that Dwayne has quit basketball, even that feels like a tiring chore to Sonny. Frank Fartley also has Sonny out making butane deliveries late into the night, and Sonny has started drinking coffee to stay awake. Everyone has the winter blues, even Sam the Lion, who must take daily naps for his heart condition. Jacy feels uncertain after her strange conversation with her mother, and she decides her mother's license to sleep with Dwayne must have been a trick. Jacy decides to allow Dwayne even less access to her body, in order to protect him from her mother's "subtle treacheries." A week before Christmas, there is an annual square dance that everyone in town attends.

Lester Marlow, proud of the record \$280 he lost to Abilene the night before, shows up early with a plan involving Jacy. When Jacy arrives, Lester tells her he is going to a naked swimming party in Wichita after the dance, and he invites her to come. Dwayne and Sonny arrive and get into Jacy's car with her. After some thought, Jacy decides she must go to the party because she always runs with the fastest crowd, moral or immoral, and the most immoral thing to do would be to waste the opportunity. The only problem is Dwayne, who has the whole night off work to devote to her. Jacy decides to be extremely nice to him for a few hours so that he will be too in love with her to be mad when she leaves. When Sonny goes into the dance to check on Jacy's parents, Jacy lets Dwayne take off her bra.

When Dwayne and Jacy go inside, Jacy is annoyed to realize that men pay much more attention to her mother dancing than to her. All of the men in town watch Lois as her breasts move under her low-cut dress, and Jacy realizes the only boys who want her are Dwayne and Lester, and Sonny, who doesn't count. Jacy takes Dwayne to the back corner and dances very close, pressing herself against him even though she finds it creepy. She then goes to find her mother, and she is shocked to see her kissing Abilene in the foyer, as Abilene's date watches on in dismay. When Lois sees Jacy, she snorts and takes a nip of bourbon. Jacy asks her mother if she can go to the swimming party with Lester, and her mother says yes, suggesting that Jacy and Lois leave each other alone where men are concerned as they compete with each other enough already. Jacy decides her feelings are hurt and cries a few tears, and then she uses those tears to tell Dwayne her mother is forcing her to go to the party with Lester. Dwayne is furious, and Jacy takes him out to his truck to avoid a scene and lets him put his hand between her legs.

After a bit of fumbling, Dwayne tries to lay Jacy down on the backseat, but she struggles up and gets out of the car to meet Lester. To Jacy's annoyance, Dwayne gets out too and tries to get Lester to hit him so that he can fight him. Lester is too frightened. On the ride to Wichita, Jacy realizes she wishes they had fought. At least it would have taken people's minds off her mother. Jacy and Lester approach Bobby Sheen's mansion in



Wichita somewhat apprehensively. They let themselves in the front door, and Lois confirms that everyone in the pool is naked. There are about six girls and six boys, and Jacy recognizes several from country club dances. To Jacy's embarrassment, they all swim over to look at Jacy and Lester, and Bobby Sheen makes a big show out of shaking Lester's hand, as if he weren't naked. Jacy tries not to look at Bobby's penis or the water droplets in his girlfriend Annie-Annie's pubic hair. Bobby tells them they can join their club by taking off their clothes on the diving board and jumping in the pool. Jacy is surprised to see Bobby's little brother swimming around in the pool with flippers, a snorkel and a small erection.

Lester goes first, and though he and Jacy expected whopping and clapping, the crowd is eerily silent. He decides speed is of the essence and disrobes and jumps in the pool very quickly. Jacy is annoyed with him when she sees him sitting naked on the side, no longer embarrassed. Jacy feels like it takes her half an hour to undress, and then when she is removing her panties, Bobby's little brother comes up under the diving board and startles her, so she sits down quickly. Everyone laughs, but when Jacy drops her panties on the kid's mask, she can tell she has won back her audience. She jumps in to much acclaim. They swim and giggle for an hour, and Jacy feels like they are the wildest, smartest kids she has ever met. By the end of the night, she can comfortably stand around naked, and she can even look at boys' penises without embarrassment. The only thing that upsets her is the fact that she forgot to remove the fifty-dollar wristwatch that Dwayne gave her for Christmas, and it breaks in the water. The other kids tell her not to worry about it, and she thinks she can make it up to Dwayne in some other way.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Jacy's manipulations in this chapter are extremely impressive, as she carries out her plan to get her way with Dwayne with an almost military precision. For the first time, the reader gets a sense of what Genevieve and Sam the Lion meant when they spoke warily of Jacy. The competitiveness between Jacy and her mother also comes to light in this chapter, and no doubt informs Jacy's wildness at the Wichita pool party. Her coyness in dealing with Dwayne and her squeamishness about touching his body stand in stark contrast to the way she quickly embraces the nakedness of strangers at the later party. The way that Jacy justifies going to the party to herself is a priceless piece of self-delusion. When Dwayne's gift, the wristwatch, breaks at the chapter's end, it is highly symbolic. It is clear to the reader that the fifty dollars the watch cost would have meant much more to Dwayne than it does to Jacy, as Dwayne labored hard as a roughneck to earn it. More importantly, the meaning of the gift is also clearly more important to Dwayne than Jacy. She recovers easily from its loss. This foreshadows the way Jacy will treat Dwayne's love - as something easily won and easily discarded after barely a moment's sadness.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

The news that Jacy and Lois have gone to a naked swimming party circulates quickly at the square dance. Sonny is not surprised, but he knows Dwayne will be very depressed. As he waits for Dwayne to find out, Sonny is surprised to see Ruth Popper in the refreshment room. She has clearly come just to help clean up, and she looks tired. Sonny offers to help her, and she asks him if he has found a girlfriend. She tells him if he is looking, he should look at her. Sonny is surprised and remembers suddenly their moment in her kitchen. Looking at her mouth, he wants to kiss her again. There is something fresh and soft and beautiful about it. Ruth mistakes his silence for rejection and sadness comes over her face, so Sonny offers to help her take out the trash. Her face shows relief. In the alley, they kiss, and it is the first time kissing has ever felt as nice to Sonny as he thought it should. Ruth asks him to drive her to the hospital next week, and Sonny agrees. Ruth is thrilled by the feeling of Sonny pressing against her, wanting her.

Sonny walks around to the building to find Dwayne extremely furious. Dwayne and Leroy suggest that they go get drunk, and Sonny agrees because kissing Ruth has left him excited and confused. Leroy swipes some vodka from a car, and they drive to the pool hall, where they spike their Cokes and proceed to get drunk. Leroy suggests they get Billy drunk, and Sonny and Dwayne agree. Leroy also has an uncle with a blind heifer and suggests they go have sex with it. Dwayne and Sonny give only tacit approval, as they aren't as rabid about having sex with heifers as they both were in their youth. Actually, both were considered overly fastidious by the farm kids for restricting themselves to cows and heifers, because many of the farmers do it with horses, sheep, dogs and whatever else they can find.

Sonny, Dwayne, Leroy and Billy get in the pickup and head for the stock pens, with eight or nine younger kids in the back. Sonny and Dwayne give Billy a Coke with vodka in it that he drinks happily. Sonny is bothered when Dwayne calls Billy an idiot, because Sonny thinks Billy isn't that much dumber than most people, and he is a whole lot friendlier. When it comes time to decide who gets to go first with the heifer, Sonny surprises everyone, including himself, by withdrawing from the competition. He doesn't know why, but it has something to do with Mrs. Popper and the way she made him feel. Kissing her even once seems more fun than anything he could possibly do with a heifer. He knows no one else will understand this, so he goes off into the bushes and pretends to be sick. The heifer ultimately escapes from the boys holding her down, and Leroy proposes buying a prostitute for Billy to sleep with. Sonny argues against it because it seems wrong to him, but he has no experience arguing against a crowd and gives up.

Leroy and Dwayne make arrangements with Jimmie Sue Jones. Jimmie Sue has been a prostitute in Thalia for nine years. She is fat and has dyed red hair and smells of onions. She agrees to sleep with Billy even though he is an "idiot" but reminds the boys



that she doesn't sleep with racial minorities. The boys throw Billy on the ground and take off his clothes, and they shine a flashlight on Jimmie Sue's crotch to show him the way. Billy tries to back out of the car, but the younger boys hold the door tight. Billy seems to get the hang of it, rocking back and forth, but he accidentally reaches the "end of his journey" in a wrinkle in Jimmie Sue's stomach instead of the natural target. She yells at him and bloodies his nose, while Dwayne and Leroy laugh hysterically. Sonny was standing by the back of the pickup, determined not to look, but now he helps Billy out of the car, dresses him and tries to calm him down. Billy is scared and confused and his shirt front is covered in blood. Sonny wishes he had known how to stop the whole thing, but the only way would have been to offer to fight the crowd. He couldn't do that when his best friend was part of that crowd.

When Billy and the boys get to the pool hall, Sam the Lion is waiting up for Billy. He never goes to bed until Billy is in safe. Billy runs past Sam the Lion up the stairs, and after checking on him, Sam comes out front where the boys are waiting and quietly asks for Billy's underwear. Sonny has them in his pocket. He hates to hand them over because it makes him look like more of a participant than he was, but he does. When Sam the Lion learns that they made Billy go with Jimmy Sue, he is startled, and then he quietly tells them to go home. He says that he is done with them and doesn't want to associate with people who would scare an unfortunate creature like Billy without reason. He tells them to stay out of the pool hall, picture show and cafe, too. Dwayne is asleep in the truck when this happens, and he thinks it is hilariously funny. Because Sam didn't see him, Dwayne thinks he isn't included in the banishment. Sonny is even more depressed by Dwayne's response to the news, and he finds the only way he can fall asleep is by thinking of Ruth Popper and masturbating.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

As Sonny watches the cruel way his friends treat Billy and feels powerless to stop them, he realizes he has never wanted to go against a crowd before and has no idea how to go about doing it. This is consistent with the inertia that Sonny shows from the novel's first pages, but in his desire to do something, Sonny follows the new trend of self-assertion that led him to break up with Charlene. Sonny's desire to stop the boys is made even more complicated because he has never wanted to go up against or contradict Dwayne before. Although Sonny fails to protect Billy in the way he would like to, he does take responsibility for his action to Sam the Lion, thereby temporarily alienating the one noble and purely good character in the novel.

Sonny also has the uneasy feeling that he has "graduated" in some way when he isn't interested in having sex with the blind heifer. Although graduation is generally considered a good thing, for Sonny it represents a distance between himself and his old life, and hence from Dwayne, that doesn't feel like a good thing. The reader may question Dwayne's character for the first time, and this initial unspoken conflict between the boys foreshadows the greater conflict that arises later in the novel. The fact that something beautiful, the kiss with Ruth, and something horrible, the later abuse of Billy, happen on the same night is consistent with the world that McMurtry creates in the



novel. It seems a world where nothing unequivocally good and pure happens. The good and pure always seems balanced by sadness and filth.





# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Neither Sonny nor Ruth has ever experienced a kiss as exciting or full of promise as the kiss they shared outside the dance, and both long to discuss it with someone. Talking about sex is not done in Thalia, though. Sonny and Ruth both expect things to be simple and wonderful when they meet on the following Wednesday, and instead they find it awkward. Both feel it necessary to take the unnecessary trip to the doctor in Olney. They have nothing to discuss on the drive, and it isn't until they are back in the Poppers' garage that they kiss. Although both are happy kissing in the car, they feel obliged to go in the house and complete the experience, and once they are inside, in the bedroom where Ruth and Coach Popper sleep, both feel uncomfortable. They undress quickly and awkwardly, and Ruth waits for something beautiful to happen, before opening her eyes and realizing that Sonny is too young to know what to do.

Ruth and Sonny have sex, but Ruth does not enjoy it. The sound of the bed loudly squeaking upsets her so much that she starts to cry. Once Sonny stops, Ruth likes the feeling of his body on top of hers, warm and young, like a child. Ruth wanted children, but Coach Popper had not. Ruth tells Sonny she is sorry she cried, but she was frightened that she was so heartbroken that she couldn't do anything, even the thing with Sonny, wholeheartedly. Sonny wants to leave but thinks it is too soon. He looks at Ruth's thin body, and she is seized with self-consciousness. She tells Sonny that she knows he could never like someone as old and ugly as her. Sonny tells her he likes her, and Ruth is relieved when she realizes Sonny wants to come again. He is willing to miss track season to see her. Even if he just wants her for sex, it is more than anyone else has ever wanted her for.

The second time Sonny comes to see Ruth, she is even more disturbed by the sound of the bedsprings, and she almost wishes that Sonny would never come to see her again. She is scared to ask him to be with her on the floor, because she knows her husband would have thought her depraved. On the third time he visits she musters her nerve, and on an old blue quilt on the floor, she enjoys being with him for the first time. Her favorite part is still afterwards, when he is still inside her, and it almost feels like he is a child inside her.

After several visits, Sonny is everything to Ruth. He makes the days worth enduring. Sonny finds it strange, but he allows her to love him. They spend about five hours a week together, and after they make love, Ruth often mends Sonny's shirts because she knows it gives him a sense of adventure to be naked around her. Ruth still cannot reach orgasm when they are having sex, but she wants to so badly that she is sometimes overcome with disappointment when it doesn't happen.

After one such time, Sonny doesn't come back for several days, because he is worried about causing Ruth disappointment again. When he does return, Ruth tells him that her



loneliness has been like ice, which has gotten thicker through the years. She tells Sonny that no matter how good a man he is, he can't melt all that ice in just a few days. Lest she scare him away, Ruth withdraws from the struggle and concentrates on making Sonny feel welcome and happy, and it thrills her to realize that the reason he keeps coming to see her is because he enjoys what they do on the quilt. She is so certain he will tire of it that she feels happy every time she sees him come through the door.

Things change in March when Sonny tells Ruth a story he has just heard about Coach Popper. The coach took the track team to a meet in Fort Worth the week before, and the coach shared a room with Bobby Logan. In the middle of the night, the coach mistook Bobby for Ruth and kissed him on the ear. Sonny tells the story in hope that it will get Ruth talking about the coach. The coach is so manly that the boys assume he is after her all the time. In fact, Sonny has a nagging fear that the reason Ruth can't come with him is because Coach Popper is bigger and better than he is. Instead of being flattered by the story, Ruth is completely dispirited, and with tears in her eyes, she tells Sonny that if Coach Popper wants to play around with little boys and they think it's funny, then she won't care either. Sonny is stunned and asks Ruth why she married him and why she has stayed with him. Ruth tells Sonny she married the coach because her mother didn't like him and because she was twenty and thought football coaches were the big deal. She doesn't know why she has stayed. Sonny figures she thinks the coach is gay, but Sonny knows nobody else thinks that. Some people suspect Mr. Cecil, but not Coach Popper.

That night, Ruth has a vivid dream that she is giving birth to Sonny. When Sonny comes the next day, Ruth fantasizes that she is giving birth while they make love on the quilt, and she has a powerful orgasm for the first time. Ruth never uses the dream again, but just having it in the back of her mind helps her in the future. She and Sonny become very close and comfortable with each other, and sometimes he just comes over to talk or watch TV. The only problem is that the town has found out about them, but even this does not worry Ruth.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Sonny and Ruth's relationship unfolds in this chapter, and as this happens, the sadness and loneliness of Ruth's life becomes even more evident. Ruth's insecurity about her body and her worth is painful to read, but it clearly is, at least in part, a product of the coach's cruelty and neglect. Sonny quickly becomes Ruth's world. Although Sonny enjoys being with Ruth, the relationship means less to him. She loves and needs him so much that it is worrying. This sort of unbalanced devotion fills the reader with foreboding. Ruth's metaphor of loneliness as ice that fills up a person like a defrosted refrigerator is an interesting one. Clearly being with Sonny and loving him has thawed something inside of Ruth. Added to this mix of good and bad effects is Ruth's disturbing conceptualization of Sonny as her child, the child she never had. This imagery is extremely discomfiting. Ruth's fantasy also introduces the possibility of symbolism to Sonny's name.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

One morning, Sonny wakes around 3:30 a.m., and realizing that Sam the Lion will be asleep, he decides to brave his banishment and go to the cafy. Sonny is very relieved to see that Genevieve looks delighted to see him. She makes him two cheeseburgers, which he eats too quickly. Genevieve notes he has lost weight from eating at the drive-in. She tells him it was a terrible thing to do to Billy, but she is on his side. Genevieve asks if Dwayne was there, and when Sonny admits it, Genevieve says Dwayne lacked the decency to take his fair punishment. Nobody has ever criticized Dwayne in front of Sonny before, and Sonny thinks that life keeps becoming more complicated. Sonny mentions the situation with Ruth Popper to Genevieve, and after looking worried, she laughs to think of someone as confused-looking as Sonny getting up to wickedness. Sonny gets ready to go, and Genevieve makes him stay until Sam the Lion gets there because she thinks it is time they made up. When Sam and Billy walk in the door a few minutes later, Billy's face lights up when he sees Sonny. Sonny apologizes, and Sam the Lion says if Billy can stand Sonny, so can he. All three are happy as they sit and eat their breakfasts.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

The reader is relieved when Sonny and Sam the Lion reconcile, because in many ways the pool hall and the cafy are Sonny's home and Billy, Genevieve and Sam the Lion his family. It is an unorthodox arrangement, but these are the people who have long given Sonny unequivocal love and support. When Genevieve criticizes Dwayne, Sonny has the sense that the world is getting more complicated. Before the night they get Billy drunk, Sonny has never had reason to question Dwayne's judgment or his friendship. Even more than just hearing Genevieve's criticism, one suspects that Sonny may be disturbed because Genevieve's criticism mirrors some doubts and worries that Sonny is experiencing too.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

In the early spring, while Sonny and Ruth are getting close, Dwayne and Jacy are getting less close. Jacy starts going to Wichita with Lester more and more, telling Dwayne that her mother insists upon it. Dwayne decides he needs to marry Jacy over the summer to keep her, but Jacy has decided that would be selfish, as it would cause Dwayne to lose his job and go into the army. Jacy has actually been going to hang out with the Wichita crowd because she wants to. She likes their reckless ways and is very attracted to Bobby Sheen. He isn't particularly handsome, but he has a rakish, merry, lustful manner that Jacy finds very appealing. One night, after a naked swimming party, Bobby comes to get Jacy out of bed, and he takes her into his parents' room and undresses her. Jacy is prepared to go all the way with him, but he stops when he realizes she is a virgin. He rebuffs her with mock horror, and Jacy is mortified. They fool around instead of having sex, and Bobby laughs at Jacy's lack of experience with handling penises. Afterwards, when Bobby doesn't call her for a date, Jacy thinks she must have come off as backwards and country. She decides she must get rid of her virginity.

Jacy decides to have sex with Dwayne on their senior class trip to San Francisco, thereby making the senior trip and making it easier to break up with Dwayne afterwards, since he will have something beautiful to remember. She can then begin the project of taking Bobby away from Annie-Annie. In case Dwayne is stubborn about breaking up, she decides to make an ally of Sonny. She can always date Sonny a few times, and Dwayne would never forgive that. Jacy begins driving Sonny out to the lake after play practice to talk about Dwayne and how much she wants to marry him. Sonny still finds Jacy so attractive that he occasionally wishes both Dwayne and Ruth were out of the picture. Jacy seems so cool and simple compared to Ruth, who has an insatiable sexual appetite that has left Sonny exhausted. As Sonny grows more tired and uncertain, she seems to become fresher and livelier and lovelier with each day. Sonny's feelings about her swing wildly from happiness to fear of the insistent way she pulls at him and offers himself to him completely. Sometimes, Sonny is tempted to talk about Ruth with Jacy, but he realizes that it would end their talks because Jacy doesn't want to hear about his problems. He begins to fantasize about Jacy again.

Ruth feels like her life is a little insane, but in a good way. One evening in early May, she is in her backyard taking clothes off the line when she sees Sonny ride by in Jacy's convertible. She is gripped by a sudden panic and dread that Sonny is in love with Jacy and will leave her. She asks Coach Popper if Dwayne and Jacy have broken up, and she is relieved when he doesn't seem to know anything about it. The coach thinks about Jacy as he undresses for bed, and the thought of her angers and arouses him so much that he puts on a condom and gets on top of Ruth. Ruth feels like her body has become a plank, and she feels crushed by the coach's massive weight. She moves to try to lighten the weight, and she starts to feel a pleasure that causes her to wiggle some



more. The coach is disturbed as he feels Ruth moving beneath him, and he tries to recapture his mental image of Jacy. When he finishes, he tries to pull out of her, but she holds him in until she has had her orgasm. When he rolls away, Ruth feels drowsy but a little guilty for feeling with Coach Popper what she intended to reserve for Sonny. The coach is even more disturbed, and he tells Ruth she has become nasty in her old age. Ruth, feeling sleepy and a little mean, asks him if he hadn't liked it.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

As Jacy explores her "wild" side with the rich Wichita kids, Sonny finds himself exhausted by Ruth's sexual appetite. It is not just her desire for sex, but also her desire for *him* that Sonny finds so overwhelming. Sonny that feels that when Ruth "touched him, drew him into her, it was not that she was trying to have him exactly - she was insisting that he have her. She was not saying 'You're mine,' she was saying 'I'm yours,' and that was almost more troubling." (p. 141) Ruth's unwavering focus on Sonny is a lot for the boy to handle, and one can understand why he finds Jacy relatively simple. The irony, of course, is that Ruth's feelings are genuine and pure, while Jacy's are anything but simple. What Sonny mistakes for simplicity is actually manipulation and dishonesty. The fact that Sonny will end things with Ruth in order to be with Jacy is also foreshadowed in this chapter, from Jacy's continued power over Sonny and Ruth's premonition when she sees Sonny ride by in Jacy's convertible.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

In May, Sam the Lion takes Sonny and Billy fishing at the same poorly stocked tank he takes them to every year. They rarely catch anything, but Sam the Lion doesn't care and neither do the boys. Sam the Lion comes back from urinating in the grass, grumbling about how hard it is for him to do it these days. Sonny has to go too, and he goes out to the edge of the tank dam. Feeling warm and happy, he tries to see if he can make his stream reach the foot of the dam. When he turns around, he is embarrassed to see that Sam the Lion observed his game, and Sam starts snorting and then laughing out loud. Soon tears are flowing down his face, so Sonny can't tell if he is laughing or crying. Sam the Lion wipes his face and then gets up and stomps around in the grass, cursing and shouting, "I don't want to be old. It don't fit me!" Suddenly embarrassed, he sits back down and tells Sonny that seeing him pee off the dam reminded him of something.

Sam the Lion tells Sonny that the sentimental reason that he always brings them to the same tank is that twenty years ago, right after his sons died and his wife lost her mind, he came swimming there with a young lady. They were pretty crazy and came swimming without any suits. Sam went up to the dam to urinate, and the young lady bet him a silver dollar that he couldn't hit the water with his stream. He couldn't do it, and the young lady still has the silver dollar. Sonny is awed by the story and wants to ask Sam the Lion who the woman was, but he lacks the nerve. Sonny asks why Sam the Lion never married her, and he says she was already married, young and miserable. Sam the Lion thought they'd work it out in time and get comfortable as they got older, but it didn't work out that way.

Sonny asks if growing up is always miserable, and Sam the Lion says only about eighty per cent of the time. On the drive home, Sonny asks Sam the Lion if he knows about Sonny and Mrs. Popper. Sam says yes and asks how she is doing. Sam calls it the understatement of the year when Sonny says she is unhappy, and he says people are tougher than you expect them to be. Sonny asks Sam for advice on what to do about her, and Sam the Lion snorts and says he has never known what to do about women. He suggests Sonny get some good out of her while he is growing up, because somebody should get some good out of Ruth. Sam asks Sonny if Dwayne was along the night they got Billy drunk, and Sonny finds he can't answer. The truth and the lie stick together in his throat. Sam the Lion understands.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Sam the Lion faces old age and his impending death in this chapter, and it is clear that for someone so powerful and full of life, it is not an easy task. Sonny later finds out that Sam the Lion's story was about Lois Farrow and that they were in love. When Sam tells Sonny that he would still be crazy if the woman was there with them that day, he



suggests that he still loves Lois, even though he decided to leave her to try to sort out her marriage. Sonny asks if growing up is always miserable, and Sam the Lion says only about eighty per cent of the time. Sam's observation is funny, but also poignant and relevant to Sonny's coming of age story, which is full of heartache. Sonny is again forced to face the new complications of his life when Sam asks him if Dwayne was present the night they got Billy drunk. Sonny finds he is equally unable to rat out his friend and lie to Sam.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Three days later, Dwayne beats up Lester, infuriated by Sam the Lion's suggestion that Jacy might not mind spending as much time with Lester as she has been. Dwayne only hits Lester four or five times and warns him to stay away from Jacy. Back in Wichita, Lester tells a few of the wilder boys that Sonny and Dwayne beat him up together in Thalia. The guys decide to get the Bunne brothers, two local Golden Gloves champions, to beat up Sonny and Dwayne. After Dwayne fights Lester, Sonny and Dwayne go to the all-night cafe, where Genevieve refuses to give Dwayne any sympathy. When they get back to the rooming house, they see the Bunne brothers waiting for them. Both Sonny and Dwayne are scared, but they pretend they aren't. Sonny explains that they didn't both beat Lester, and if they had he would have looked a lot worse. The Wichita boys recognize this logic, but they want a fight anyway and tell Sonny and Dwayne that country boys can't tell them whom to screw. Dwayne points out that he just didn't want Lester to screw Jacy, and Mickey Bunne says he had seen Jacy naked at Bobby Sheen's house. He knows that she and Bobby have fooled around, and he says he might take his turn next. Dwayne hits Mickey, and the fight is on.

The fight isn't too bad for Dwayne, who is so mad he doesn't feel it, but Sonny is hurt badly in his ear and ribs. As they sit in the curb afterwards, Dwayne proposes they go to Mexico for a few days. They discover they have almost a hundred dollars between them, and they go get cleaned up. After borrowing Genevieve's map, they decide to go to Matamoros, which is twice as far away as either has ever been before. Genevieve suddenly starts to cry in the street and offers Sonny and Dwayne her car because the boys' pickup isn't looking very good. Sonny has never noticed before, but Genevieve looks lonesome. They refuse the car, but she makes them take ten dollars for an emergency. She suggests they go say goodbye to Sam the Lion, who is sitting on the curb in front of the pool hall, and the boys are glad to "prolong the ecstasy of departure." Sam is touched by their folly and forces them to take ten dollars for insurance, which the boys accept, too embarrassed to tell him Genevieve already did the same. Genevieve waves at the boys as they drive off. They stop at the town's one stoplight until it turns green, even though there isn't another moving car within fifteen miles. Genevieve remembers when she was young, and she and Dan drove to New Mexico on a whim. She wishes for a moment that she was young again and free.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Sonny notices for the first time in this chapter that Genevieve looks lonely, and it seems that Genevieve has the same feeling that Sam the Lion had in the previous chapter, of the sadness of youth passed. The boys do act young and foolishly in this chapter - fighting and brawling and spontaneously deciding to go to Mexico. It is worth noting that Sonny is the one most badly injured in the fight that Dwayne starts. This is consistent





with the way Sonny stands by Dwayne up to this point in the book, taking knocks for him even when Dwayne isn't completely in the right and often getting the shorter end of the stick. When Sam the Lion says goodbye to the boys, it is the last time they will see him alive, and in this moment, he shows them the kindness consistent with his whole life's work. The image of the boys pointlessly waiting for the stoplight to change before leaving town is a classically wonderful one. It perfectly captures their youthful innocence in the face of their upcoming adventure.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

The boys take turns driving and sleeping all day, until they reach the Valley. They see the Rio Grande for the first time, and immediately after crossing the bridge to Matamoros, a boy jumps on their running board and offers them girls and dirty movies. They agree and follow his contorted directions, amazed at how different Mexico is from Thalia. Matamoros's streets are teeming with people. They pull up in front of a house, and their guide leads them inside past an old woman stirring something in a pot and an old man playing dominos at a table. They enter a bedroom where three little Mexican boys are fast asleep, and they make Sonny feel uncomfortable. They pay fifteen dollars to watch a dirty movie, but Sonny insists that they be away from the sleeping boys. They are taken outside and shown the projection on the back of a calendar hung on an outhouse wall. The movie is called *Man's Best Friend*, and Sonny and Dwayne are shocked to find it depicts a woman having sex with a dog. They immediately feel their trip was worthwhile for the gossip value alone.

Sonny and Dwayne are offered more reels at a reduced rate, but decide they need to leave and think over what they have seen. Their guide leads them to Boy's Town, and they go to a brothel called Cabaret ZeeZee. After downing many Mexican beers, Sonny selects a girl named Maria, and for twenty-five dollars, he leaves with her for a full night. Maria takes him to a tiny room, and when she undresses, Sonny realizes that she is younger than he thought and pregnant. She scrutinizes his groin for so long that he starts to worry that his equipment is too small. Sonny lies down on the cot with Maria, but he can already tell that twenty-five dollars has been lost. After a few minutes the screeching of the springs makes him feel terrible, and the weight of his journey hits him. He simply stops and falls asleep.

Sonny awakes the next morning, very hot in a tiny room that has no roof. When Sonny stands up, he must rush outside and vomit in the street. He sees the prostitutes passing him to get water from a tank on a wagon, and they all look much happier and more relaxed than the night before. The old man on the wagon gives Sonny a tin dipper full of water and says something in a philosophic tone. Sonny finds Dwayne asleep in the front seat of the pickup, and when Sonny wakes him up, Dwayne is sick and bleary and asks Sonny to drive. When they get to the border, they realize they only have four dollars between them and must use the money Sam the Lion and Genevieve gave them. Sonny starts to think of Ruth, and the thought of her body excites him. He feels depressed that he slept with a pregnant prostitute. He and Dwayne start to worry they may have a disease, and they pee every fifty miles just to make sure they can. When evening comes, the boys get a second wind and begin to see their trip to Mexico as a great adventure, and they can hardly wait to tell Thalia about it. When they pull into Thalia, they are shocked to see the cafe dark for the first time ever. They go wake up Andy Fanner, who tells them Sam the Lion died the morning before from a stroke. His



funeral is today. Sonny sits on the curb and feels like he has lost track of things. He just wants to sit and watch the traffic light changing.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The boys' debauched trip to Mexico is full of comic moments and the poignant imagery that marks the entire book. The colorful trip makes all the more shocking the news of Sam the Lion's death when they return. Although the author repeatedly drops hints that Sam is old and unwell, the news still comes as a horrible surprise both to Sonny and the reader. Sam the Lion is so full of life and warmth that his death seems inconceivable. Sonny is so floored by it that he feels displaced, and he can only sit on the curb and watch the traffic light changing. The light symbolizes the ways in which Sonny's life is changing. He cannot control it, and it probably serves no purpose. All Sonny can do is stand by and watch it changing.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Sonny is embarrassed that he doesn't have a suit to wear to Sam the Lion's funeral, but no one seems to notice, perhaps in part because Lois Farrow weeps throughout. Because of her crying, Sonny learns that's she was the woman with Sam the Lion at the tank dam. Genevieve tells him that Lois loved Sam the Lion so much that she would have married him in spite of his age, but Sam wouldn't let her leave Gene. Genevieve tells Sonny that Sam the Lion was quite a man and Lois was beautiful and more full of life than anybody in town. Sonny thinks about this a lot, along with all the other strange things Sam the Lion did, like his will, which left the pool hall to Sonny and Dwayne, the cady to Genevieve and the picture show to Old Lady Mosey and her nephew. He also left a thousand dollars to Joe Bob Blanton and five thousand dollars to the swimming pool fund. Two weeks later is the senior trip to San Francisco, and Sonny is glad to leave. Thalia has felt strange to Sonny since he returned from Mexico.

On the long bus ride, Sonny sometimes thinks of Sam the Lion, and his eyes leak tears. In San Francisco, every one looks at the kids from Thalia like they are freaks, but they believe it is the other way around. Dwayne and Jacy are full of big plans to do the Thing, and at the first opportunity, they sneak into Jacy's motel room while Sonny stands guard in the lobby. Dwayne's enthusiasm is high and mounts as he sees Jacy completely naked for the first time, but when it comes time to perform, he can't keep an erection. Jacy is furious, and she says hateful things to Dwayne. That evening, she tells the other girls that it was inexplicably wonderful. The next day while Jacy and Dwayne are walking around San Francisco, holding hands in case anyone from class should see them, Dwayne feels himself suddenly return. He rushes Jacy up to the nearest cheap hotel and surprises her horribly with the painful act.

Dwayne and Jacy do it twice more on the way home because Jacy thinks Bobby might like her to have a little more experience. Jacy never swoons with bliss, though, and she makes Dwayne worry that he is doing it wrong. Dwayne feels more in love with Jacy than ever, but she tells him she doesn't want to see him ever again. She is so tired of the seniors as an audience that she doesn't even bother making up an excuse for their benefit. When Lois picks her up, she shrewdly notices that Jacy doesn't even say goodbye to Dwayne. Dwayne is so depressed that he can't even tell Sonny about it. Sonny and Dwayne are now living above the pool hall with Billy, and they both wish Sam the Lion was there, since telling him about the trip would have perked them up.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

In this chapter, Sonny learns the truth about Sam the Lion and Lois Farrow and also learns about his legacy in Sonny's will. The townsfolk of Thalia are scandalized and shocked by the seemingly bizarre requests. The will, though, is consistent with the kind



and caring man Sam was, always taking care of other people, in life and in death. Sonny feels like since he came back from Mexico, he hasn't actually been able to return to Thalia, and he hopes that going to San Francisco and coming back will allow him to actually return. The truth, one suspects, is that Sam the Lion is so much a part of Sonny's sense of home and of Thalia that Sonny can't ever return to the place he left when Sam was still alive. In San Francisco, Dwayne and Jacy have sex for the first time, and after all the buildup and anticipation on Dwayne's part, it is a bit of a letdown. Jacy dumps Dwayne immediately afterwards, just as Lois predicted she would when she recommended Jacy sleep with him.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

While the seniors are in San Francisco, John Cecil is fired for being a homosexual. Coach Popper starts the rumor when Bobby Logan tells the coach that Mr. Cecil is driving him to trig class every day that summer so he can't work out with the coach in the gym every day. Coach Popper is furious, and it comes to him in a flash that Cecil is gay. He shares this opinion with some men at the filling station, and soon Cecil is before the school board and summarily sacked. Bobby Logan isn't even questioned because his father doesn't want him to know what homosexuality is yet, and if it happened to him his father doesn't want him to realize it. Mr. Cecil's wife leaves him and takes his daughters.

Ruth notices that her husband seems unusually jovial when he gets home that night, even rubbing her in a husbandly way. When he tells her that he got Cecil fired, she kicks him as hard as she can and calls him a fat turd. Popper thinks she is mad at him because he farted in bed, and when she tells him that she knows that *he* is a homosexual, Popper incredulously points out that he is the football coach. Ruth sees that she could tear him apart with words, and instead she kicks him out of bed and tells him to sleep on the sofa. The coach feels like a martyr and thinks his mother must have been the last good woman who ever lived. The next morning, Ruth goes to visit John Cecil and brings him banana-nut cake. Ruth tells him that if anyone needed to be fired for what Cecil was fired for, it is her husband. Cecil is astonished and points out that her husband is the football coach. Ruth realizes that he doesn't believe her, and nobody will. She feels sad and uncertain, and she points out to Cecil that he has two kids and that they have none. Cecil tells her it clearly doesn't take much enthusiasm to make kids. The next day John Cecil leaves Thalia for good to work in his brother's grocery store.

Ruth and Sonny find they are starved for each other when he returns from San Francisco, and one afternoon he stays so long that they hear the coach's car pull up in the driveway. Sonny dresses quickly and does to the living room so he can exit the front door, as the coach will come in through the back door. Before he leaves, Ruth wraps her naked self around him from behind and tells him she loves him. She instructs him to treat her right from now on. They hear the back door open, and Sonny kisses her lightly and skips out the front door. For three weeks, Ruth continues to make the coach's bed on the couch, and although she is loathe to lose her advantage, she misses sleeping next to a body. Ultimately, she puts his pillow back on the bed, and he returns without a word.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

This chapter continues the trend of ambivalence that the author weaves throughout the novel. The coach is clearly a bad person, and Ruth's suspicion that he is a homosexual



seems justified, even if no one else in Thalia could possibly believe it. On the other hand, John Cecil is clearly a good man, and the victim of the coach's wrong doing. However, what Cecil says to Ruth about his lack of enthusiasm for his wife suggests he may not be a completely innocent victim. Cecil's statement seems to imply that Cecil may be a homosexual, though he never touched any of the boys. This is just one more example of the way McMurtry employs doubt and ambivalence to avoid any black and white situations in the novel. The situation also gives Ruth her first taste of empowerment, as she takes on the coach and wins her first victory over his pigheadedness. This victory is no small matter for Ruth.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Sonny's summer is shaping up nicely, but Dwayne's is not. Sonny quits his job delivering butane and starts rough-necking for Gene Farrow so he can have the afternoons free to spend with Ruth. Ruth is happier every day, which makes her even more fun to visit, and he and Ruth both live for the afternoons. Jacy, on the other hand, has cut Dwayne off completely and won't even take his phone calls anymore. She starts dating Lester Marlow in order to spend more time around Bobby. Dwayne decides to head to Midland, as there is nothing to keep him in Thalia, and Sonny doesn't try to make him stay, figuring Dwayne will be back when Jacy leaves for college. Jacy is annoyed that Dwayne has left, since his needy phone calls provided a pick-me-up while she waits to fall in love with Bobby Sheen. Wichita kids call sex "screwing," and Jacy begins screwing Lester every afternoon for practice.

Jacy realizes some of the girls think dating a roughneck is sexy, and Jacy worries she may have run Dwayne off too soon. She decides Sonny will do, though, if it becomes necessary to have a roughneck in love with her. She invites Sonny to have a hamburger with her once, and she realizes afterwards that she enjoyed herself with him. The next day, Bobby Sheen seduces her when Annie-Annie is out of town, and they have exciting, very athletic sex. Afterwards, Bobby is cheerful and relaxed, if distracted, and Jacy is surprised that he doesn't hang on her more than he does. She goes to the pool for the next few days, waiting to hear that Bobby and Annie-Annie have broken up. The next Sunday, her mother is reading the paper, and she reads Jacy an announcement that says Bobby Sheen married Annie Martin in Oklahoma a few days before. Jacy begins weeping bitterly, and she says she will be an old maid. Lois is surprised to see Jacy so worked up over a boy, and she tells her that in life, you win a few and lose a few. That's how it goes all through life.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Jacy's sexual manipulations backfire in this chapter when she fails to win Bobby Sheen's heart by sleeping with him. Sex has brought Ruth and Sonny closer together, increasing each one's happiness, but the way that Jacy uses sex as a ploy has yielded no results. Jacy's future manipulations are foreshadowed though when she thinks that "there was always Sonny" if it becomes necessary to have a roughneck in love with her. Lois advises Jacy at the end of the chapter that you win a few and lose a few. This philosophy is clearly born of Lois's experiences in love and casts an interesting light over her relationships with Abilene, Sam the Lion and her husband. It is even more interesting in the context of the night she spends with Sonny later in the book.





# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

A week after Bobby Sheen gets married, Thalia is rocked with scandal when Joe Bob Blanton is arrested for rape. Lois Farrow blames his father, but she is the only one who takes that view. Joe Bob is seventeen and a virgin, and his father whipped him the one time he found him masturbating and told him that masturbating drives people insane. However, Joe Bob finds he can't stop, even in the face of certain insanity. He believes that there may still be hope when he gets the call to preach the summer of his junior year, but he finds he doesn't like preaching. He still can't stop masturbating. In San Francisco, he sees a picture of a naked woman that he can't stop thinking about, and he starts masturbating even more, knowing he is doomed to insanity. In the wake of Mr. Cecil's dismissal, the church ladies call for an All City Revival, and Joe Bob must preach two sermons. Joe Bob is sick with nervousness, and his first sermon is nearly a disaster, with only the Pender family rededicating their lives, which they do regularly.

Joe Bob has worked himself into such a state before the second sermon that he can't do anything but masturbate to stop thinking about it. He borrows his father's car, drives out to the lake for a couple of hours and then drives into town to get a Coke. The sheriff is in the pool hall with Sonny when the deputy, Monroe, bursts in to tell him that Joe Bob has kidnapped Johnny Clarg's little girl, Molly. The sheriff tears out of the pool hall with Sonny in his car, and they head towards an old lover's lane four miles south of town. On the way, they encounter Joe Bob heading back into town, driving very slowly. Mrs. Clarg is there, hysterical, and she runs over to the Plymouth and pulls Molly out. Everyone notices that she isn't wearing panties, and Joe Bob collapses and is rushed back to Thalia in the sheriff's car. Sonny drives Joe Bob's car back to town, and he notices the panties on the floorboard. The sheriff puts Joe Bob in a jail cell, and then Monroe comes in to report that the doctor found no sign of rape. When Coach Popper finds out, he says he always knew Joe Bob was that kind. Joe Bob found a way of getting out of preaching his second sermon, though. He adds to the success of the revival, because Brother Blanton preaches the sermon in Joe Bob's stead and works everyone up into a religious lather.

However, when Blanton says that he prays to God that He will put Joe Bob in prison, Lois Farrow walks out of the revival. Even more surprisingly, Lois then goes down to the prison and makes Monroe let her play checkers with Joe Bob. Jacy is home watching *Guns Smoke* when her father and Abilene come in. She can hear them talking in the kitchen, and then Abilene comes in the room and tells her that her father has gone to bed. He says that he is about to go to the pool hall. Jacy says she wishes she could go to the pool hall, and Abilene invites her to come along. Jacy is excited to be in his famous Mercury, and she is then thrilled by the maleness of the pool hall. She watches Abilene play pool, impressed by how sure he is of himself, and when he hits the last ball in extremely hard, she has the same feeling inside that she had when she courted with Dwayne on the basketball bus. Abilene then comes over to her and kisses her, rubbing



her shorts. He spreads overalls on the snooker table, and then he urges her out of her clothes and lays her on top of them.

As Abilene thrusts into her, Jacy feels like nothing more than an object he is using, and she begins to lose herself, overwhelmed by feelings, ultimately scattered like the snooker balls and almost unconscious. Afterwards, she tries to find herself and begins to feel excited that Abilene will be in love with her now. He drops her off at the Farrows, and when she leans in to kiss him, he turns his head away and then races his motor, making his mufflers roar so Lois will hear. Lois is watching the late movie, and when she hears Abilene's car, she wonders what he wants so late. When she gets to the kitchen, she sees Jacy, tousled and confused, with tears in her eyes. Lois realizes that Jacy has just figured out that Abilene isn't going to be in love with her. Lois's legs feel weak from what Abilene did, and she wants to cry for a moment but feels too insignificant and valueless to cry. Lois invites Jacy to watch the late movie with her, and Jacy asks her what to do about life when it isn't the way it's supposed to be. Lois tells her that what she's done about it hasn't worked very well, so they should work out something different for Jacy.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

This chapter is interesting because a link is clearly created between Joe Bob's alleged molestation of a little girl and Abilene's arguable molestation of Jacy. Although this chapter most concerns Joe Bob, Jacy and Abilene, it could be said that it is most telling about Lois, who shows both her strength and her weakness. When she stands up for Joe Bob and stands up against the appalling way his father has treated him, it is evident that public opinion means nothing to her in the face of what she believes in. Taking an unpopular position isn't frightening to Lois, and it is a side of her that the author doesn't really reveal until this chapter. However, when she realizes the way that Abilene has hurt her daughter, and her own involvement in that happening, she feels too insignificant and valueless to even cry. This moment of complete and total self-doubt illustrates a powerful dichotomy of strength and weakness in Lois Farrow.

Jacy's experience with Abilene is the next step on her twisted sexual journey through the novel. Sex with Abilene leaves her feeling lost, scattered, "spread out, diffused, almost unconscious." One suddenly remembers after this scene, in spite of all of Jacy's sexual bravado, how very young and vulnerable she is. When she realizes Abilene has used her, she is crushed, although the reader knows that she is so deeply selfish that she would be incapable of connecting that feeling to the way she used Dwayne and Lester earlier in the novel. This is also played out in the way she treats Sonny in the next chapter.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Jacy is depressed after her disappointment with Abilene, and with six weeks left in the summer before she leaves for college, she is dying of boredom. She feels she has slept with two of the most interesting men in the area, and neither fell in love with her or even expressed an interest to sleep with her again. She is complaining to her mother one morning, and Lois says the key is finding a good man to sleep with. She points out that Ruth Popper has a good setup with Sonny. Jacy is amazed to learn that Sonny is sleeping with someone forty years old, and she decides to end that romance immediately. Jacy decides she will date Sonny for the rest of the summer, although she won't have sex with him. She misses the days of necking and boys wanting her desperately. She decides she will wait until college to start screwing again, because fraternity boys are gentlemen and will fall in love with her when she sleeps with them.

Jacy calls Sonny that evening and suggests they go get Mexican food in Wichita. Afterwards she proposes they go to the lake, and Sonny feels racked with disloyalty to Dwayne and also Ruth, whom he realizes he is bound to in some way, but he can't refuse what he has fantasized about for so long. Sonny and Jacy kiss that night, and she lets him feel her breasts almost every night for the next two weeks. When he tries to go all the way, though, Jacy puts him off by telling him she is afraid her parents are watching because they think she and Sonny will run off and get married. Sonny never thought about marrying Jacy, but now he thinks about it all the time.

Sonny never goes back to see Ruth after the first night with Jacy. He misses her often and wakes up in the middle of the night feeling nervous and ashamed, but he can't face her. He knows that she loved him and put herself at his disposal, and he knows he has treated her unfairly. He thinks his feelings for Jacy are beyond fairness, though. Compared to Jacy, Ruth and her body begin to seem old to Sonny, too. Ruth understands immediately what Sonny's absence means, but she hopes he will still come to her for sex from time to time. When two weeks pass without a visit, she concludes that sex with her hadn't meant much to Sonny, and she despairs for the first time.

The neighborhood women all smugly come to see Ruth then, but she stops going out anywhere except the grocery store. Ruth bumps into Jacy one day that summer at the grocery store while Ruth is wearing an old dress and no makeup, and Jacy is tan with shiny hair. Jacy takes off her sunglasses, grins at Ruth and tells her she hadn't seen her in so long she thought Ruth must have left town for the summer. When Ruth gets home, she throws away the blue quilt and has the terrible feeling that she will never really touch anyone or be touched again. She lies on the bed all afternoon, wanting to die and unable to remember a time in her life when she was young and attractive. Ruth feels there is no relief in blaming Sonny because Jacy is the type of girl boys are supposed to fall in love with, while she is just the football coach's wife.



## Chapter 21 Analysis

As soon as Jacy finds out about Sonny and Ruth, she resolves to put a stop to their romance. It is almost as if seeking her own happiness is no longer enough for Jacy, and she must now destroy other people's. In spite of her very adult scheming, Jacy displays a child's knowledge of human relationships. Jacy misses the days when boys wanted her desperately, and she decides not to sleep with Sonny. She decides she will wait until college to start screwing again, because fraternity boys are gentlemen and will fall in love with her when she sleeps with them. The obvious falsity of this opinion is laughable. However, it works on Sonny, who leaves his satisfying sexual relationship with Ruth Popper to enter Jacy's world of sexual mind games and frustration without a single look back. The selfishness of this move seems inconsistent with the kind heart that Sonny has shown through the novel thus far, and Sonny is unable to face Ruth or himself for the whole time he is with Jacy. Sonny feels like he is powerless to resist Jacy, and it seems that Ruth, filled with self-hatred, sees it almost the same way.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Dwayne comes back to Thalia for a weekend. Sonny is relieved that Jacy is in Dallas for the weekend, and Dwayne seems to know nothing about them. Dwayne is browner and drives a nice second-hand Mercury. Sonny and Dwayne decide to drive to Wichita, and Dwayne insists that Sonny drive the Mercury to see how well it handles. They are having a nice time when Sonny feels an edge come into the evening, and even though Dwayne is his best buddy, he feels uncomfortable. Finally, Dwayne tells him that he knows about Sonny and Jacy. He tells Sonny he is going to marry Jacy one day when he gets a little more money. Sonny is shocked that Dwayne could be so wrong about the situation, and he tells him that Jacy is going to college and won't marry either of them.

Dwayne makes fun of Sonny for never sleeping with Charlene, and he tells Sonny that he could have, which Sonny knows is true, but unfair. Sonny says the only reason Jacy went with Dwayne was that Dwayne was in the backfield. He tells Dwayne that Jacy told him Dwayne couldn't perform in San Francisco. Dwayne slams his beer bottle into Sonny's face, and they fall onto the floor, fighting and rolling around until they find themselves pulled up and handcuffed to police officers. Once they have paid their fines, they find they no longer feel angry. Sonny's eye hurts, so he asks Dwayne to take him to the hospital so he can get a shot in it. When a doctor finally looks at Sonny's eye, he orders Sonny to a hospital room and tells him he might lose sight in the eye if they aren't careful. Dwayne is really worried and apologetic. They give Sonny a shot that makes him sleep, and when he wakes up his father is there and stays there. Sonny is surprised to find it is nice and comfortable to be around him.

Sonny is in the hospital eight days and has an operation on his eye. Dwayne goes back to Odessa, but Genevieve and Billy come to visit. Genevieve tells Sonny that Dwayne has joined the army. Sonny suddenly worries that they won't take him in the army if he is one-eyed. The next day a nurse brings him a note from Ruth asking if she can come up, and Sonny asks the nurse to tell her he is asleep. Sonny wants to see her, but he feels like seeing her will just make everything worse. The next to the last day he is in the hospital, Jacy comes to see him. She tells him she has been seriously worried and wants to marry him as soon as he gets out. This is an inspiration she has as soon as she hears about the fight, and she decides that she can show Sonny how much she is willing to sacrifice for him. In addition, Jacy thinks that running off to marry someone poor and mutilated will be much wilder than Bobby and Annie-Annie getting married, and her parents will have it annulled anyway. The next day, the doctors take the bandage off of Sonny's eye, and all he can see is fog in that eye. All he can think about, though, is marrying Jacy. Sonny gets a black patch to wear over his eye, and he gives Billy the extra one, which Billy is delighted to wear as he sweeps the town.



## Chapter 22 Analysis

Ironically, Sonny and Dwayne have never even had an argument before the day they engage in their full-fledged bar brawl. Dwayne's legitimate anger over Sonny dating Jacy unfolds an entire world of unspoken feelings between the two. Sonny is frustrated that Dwayne was on the football backline, and Dwayne harbors the knowledge that Charlene liked him. Dwayne resents Sonny's knowledge of Dwayne's impotence in San Francisco. This is truly the more complicated world that Sonny feared earlier in the novel. It has been there the whole time, beneath the surface of their friendship. There is symbolism in Sonny's loss of vision in one eye, because he seems blind to the realities before him. In spite of the way that he hurt Ruth, she loves him so much that she comes to see him in the hospital. Jacy, on the other hand, doesn't come to the hospital until a week has passed. She showers him with insincere worry, and she proposes they marry while Sonny is at the height of his local celebrity. Sonny's inability to see the truth in the women's actions is a kind of blindness.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

The day after Sonny leaves the hospital, he and Jacy drive to Wichita to get a marriage license. Sonny spends the three-day waiting period thinking about having sex with Jacy, and Jacy thinks about the effect that their marriage will have on her parents and the town. When it is time for them to run away, Jacy writes her parents a note that says where she and Sonny are going to get married and where they will honeymoon, and she leaves it on the cabinet. Gene finds it when he comes home from work three hours later, and he shows it to Lois when she gets home later that night. Gene is distressed and thinks they need to leave to intercept them immediately, but Lois suggests they wait. They can get the marriage annulled any time, and Jacy won't be able to stay with Sonny for ten days. Lois calls Jacy a bitch, and Gene slaps her indecisively.

Meanwhile, Sonny and Jacy think they are having a great adventure running off to get married. They get milkshakes on the way to Altus, Oklahoma, and when they get there, they are sent to the justice of the peace's old frame house. They are married on his front porch, with his wife as a witness. The justice of the peace keeps winking lecherously at Jacy, which infuriates her, but Sonny is just happy to be married. They are both in a great mood and drive to Lawton for dinner. In Lawton, Jacy starts to feel depressed, and she begins to worry about what will happen if her parents don't try to stop them. Sonny can tell that marriage is making Jacy nervous, and Jacy starts to feel creeped out about even kissing someone with just one eye.

When a cop stops Jacy and Sonny outside of Madill, Jacy ceases to feel nervous. The cop asks them to come to the Madill jailhouse, where they wait for the Farrowes to come pick them up. Jacy realizes she is tragically in love, and she kisses Sonny passionately for the two hours they spend at the police station. Sonny is depressed, however, and he realizes he will never get to sleep with Jacy. He can't even remember why he ever thought that he would get to sleep with her. Gene starts yelling at Sonny the moment he walks in the door, while Jacy clings to Sonny, sniffing. He puts Jacy in his Cadillac and tears off, leaving Lois to drive Jacy's car home. Lois apologizes to Sonny and tells him she thinks he had a right to get whatever he could out of Jacy, though it wouldn't have been much. Lois can tell Sonny is tired, and she offers to drive him back to Thalia. Lois drinks from a little flask in her lap, and she offers the flask to Sonny. He is surprised to find her so likeable, and she tells Sonny he was lucky they found them when they did because Jacy would have found some way not to give it up to Sonny ever. She tells him he would have been better to stick with Ruth, and Sonny says he figures he can't go see her anymore now.

Lois finds herself moved by Sonny's youth, and she puts her hand on his neck and strokes it lightly. Sonny says he knows why Sam the Lion liked Lois, and Lois quietly tells Sonny that Sam loved her. She cries a little and then pulls the car off the road. She tells Sonny that Sam the Lion was the only man in town who knew what sex was worth,





and who knew what *she* was worth. She lays her head against Sonny's chest and weeps. Then, smiling at him, Lois tells Sonny she likes him and says she ought to give him a nicer wedding night. Lois asks Sonny if he is scared of her, and Sonny says no. Lois drives the car to a big motel on the highway. They undress, and Lois notes that Sonny is scared and tense all over. She touches him gently and kisses him, and they have sex. Afterwards, Lois tells Sonny that he has an inferiority complex that he should get rid of, because it isn't what you are worth to a woman, but what you are worth to yourself that matters. Lois tells Sonny that she graduated with his mother and never would have expected to sleep with her son, but that's life in a small town. Sonny feels sad because he realizes how badly he treated Ruth. He wants to thank Lois, but she stops him and tells him to let ladies say the thank yous.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

In an ironic twist, Sonny spends his wedding night sleeping with his new wife's mother. Although by any known standards what Lois does in this chapter is wrong and even sick, somehow it seems like a true kindness on her part. Lois and Sonny both loved Sam the Lion, and he loved them both too. When Lois tells Sonny that Sam the Lion was the only man in town who knew what sex was worth, and who knew what *she* was worth, Sonny begins to understand for the first time how he made Ruth feel valueless. Lois also points out that if Sonny isn't worth very much to himself, he can't be worth very much to a woman. She identifies Sonny's inferiority complex and teaches him not to be scared of her or her strength. Just as Lois educated Jacy about sex in the beginning of the book, Lois teaches Sonny about women here and prepares him to be a better man.





# Chapter 24

## Chapter 24 Summary

The next morning Sonny wakes up in love with Lois, but he is over it by the week's end and is missing Jacy again. Genevieve tells him that Jacy has been taken to Dallas until college starts, and Genevieve notes that Jacy took Sonny for a ride. While they are talking, the football team comes in, laughing, and Sonny feels left out and depressed. He goes to the picture show and watches a funny movie, but when he comes out Old Lady Mosey tells him that she is going to have to close the picture show because she is losing money. Sonny feels sad, and he goes to wait on the curb for Billy to finish sweeping. Billy has become restless since Sam the Lion's death. He is only happy with Sonny, and Sonny watches out for him.

Sonny continues to see the doctor in Wichita about his eye every week, and the doctor tells him he may need an expensive operation. Sonny's new pumping job is lonely, but Sonny isn't in the mood for people anyway. He thinks about Ruth a great deal, but it is always painful. Everybody is talking about Coach Popper because it looks as if Thalia's football team may win the district, but Sonny doesn't go to the first three or four games because he doesn't want to. Finally, he decides to go to the game that will decide the conference, and he initially enjoys himself. He only briefly feels a part of it again before having the depressing realization that he isn't a part of it anymore. He wishes he was out on the field, and he has the same lonely feeling he used to get in the mornings when Thalia was empty, but worse. Now he feels like he isn't even *in* the town. Thalia wins the game, but Sonny feels "like he has been completely erased. People he had known all his life were all around him, but they simply didn't see him. He was out of school." (p. 261)

Back in the empty pool hall, Sonny begins to cry. He knows Ruth would make him feel real, but he can't go see her. Lois or Sam the Lion could help him, but he can't go see Lois, and Sam the Lion is dead. Sonny goes to find Billy and discovers that Billy can bring him back too. Sonny begins to talk to Billy, even though Billy never answers, and Sonny realizes how badly he treated Ruth. He thinks she must have felt for a long time that she wasn't there, and he had made her feel she *was* there. Then he had left her to the old feeling. Sonny has started to realize how hard it is to get through the days if you feel hopeless. Billy and Sonny can hear people in Thalia celebrating the victory, but Sonny and Billy keep walking.

## Chapter 24 Analysis

Sonny finally begins to understand how badly he hurt Ruth, because he feels for the first time the invisibility and hopelessness that she has long felt. Sonny identifies the feeling as being similar to the feeling he used to get in the mornings when Thalia was completely empty, and he felt like the only person in town, or even in the world. Now



Sonny feels like he isn't even *in* town. He feels like he isn't anywhere, like he has been erased.

This identity crisis comes in part from Sonny's transition out of high school and into a world where he has no support network or meaning, but it is also likely a response to all of the loss he has suffered in the course of the year. Billy brings Sonny back and makes him feel real again, but Sonny still remains outside of the world of Thalia that was once his home. They go on celebrating without him.



# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

A week before the picture show closes, Dwayne comes home from boot camp. He is getting ready to leave for Korea. Dwayne doesn't come to see Sonny all week. Genevieve says it is because his conscience is bothering him about Sonny's eye, and Sonny feels nervous about going to see him. Sonny decides to go see him at the rooming house, and he can tell that Dwayne is glad he did. They get something to eat at the cafe and then decide to take in the picture show because it is the last night. The boys are both so plagued by memories of Jacy at the picture show that they can't enjoy the film, and they leave early. Miss Mosey is almost in tears and tries to give them their money back, but they won't take it. Dwayne and Sonny decide to drive down to Fort Worth for a few beers, planning to return for Dwayne's 6:30 a.m. bus. They drink two six packs of beer on the way to Fort Worth and end up at a bar called the Cozy Inn, where the barmaid sings a song for Dwayne and the other soldiers in a rough, strong voice that moves the boys. Sonny feels suddenly depressed that he isn't in the army.

The boys decide to go to a whorehouse, and because it is Dwayne's last night, they splurge on a nice one. They see a bunch of high school boys waiting outside in the cold, and Sonny and Dwayne tell them how much it costs. The girls are so efficient that afterwards Sonny feels like they barely touched. Sonny thinks about Billy as they drive home, and he hopes Miss Mosey made sure he got home out of the cold. Outside the picture show, the posterboards are empty, and Sonny wishes Old Lady Mosey had left up some poster. The boys have two hours until Dwayne's bus is scheduled to leave. Dwayne puts on his uniform, and they go have a coffee in the cafe. Dwayne looks very different in his uniform. He gives Sonny the keys to his Mercury and asks Sonny to watch it while he is gone. As Dwayne goes out to catch the bus, he asks Sonny if he has heard from Jacy, and Sonny says no, she stays in Dallas all the time. Dwayne says he still isn't over her. Sonny and Dwayne shake hands awkwardly, and Dwayne tells Sonny that he will see him in a year or two if he isn't shot. Sonny watches the street and doesn't feel very good. It is another lonely morning in Thalia.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

The closing of the picture show, the heart of downtown Thalia and the site of Sonny and Dwayne's high school courtships, is a symbolic moment in the book and corresponds to Dwayne's leaving for Korea. Both events mark the end of an era in Sonny's life and also in the life of Thalia. Dwayne almost avoids seeing Sonny while he is home because it makes him feel guilty to see Sonny's eye. However, Sonny takes action and reaches out to Dwayne, allowing them a last night together.

Dwayne and Sonny visit the picture show on its last night, but both can already feel that something there is dead. They go to Fort Worth, and outside a brothel they advise some



high school boys on how much it costs. This shows the distance they both feel they have come since they were high-schoolers. Sonny's experience with the efficient prostitute only underscores how starved he is for real physical intimacy. Sonny and Dwayne's awkward parting and Sonny's sense of the empty loneliness of Thalia on the morning Dwayne leaves are both touching, and they emphasize Sonny's need for human touch and affection.



# Chapter 26

## Chapter 26 Summary

Billy misses the picture show more than anyone else in Thalia. He doesn't understand when it doesn't reopen, and he starts sweeping further and further away. Sonny worries about him and doesn't know what to do, but he also doesn't know what to do about himself. Sonny buys a television, but Billy doesn't really like it. He keeps going to the picture show night after night, waiting for it to open again. Sonny takes another lease to pump, trying to tire himself out so he can sleep at night. One morning in late November, Sonny wakes up early and goes downstairs. Billy is not in the pool hall, but that isn't unusual. Sonny hears a big cattle truck roar past the pool hall and then brake suddenly with a shriek, and Sonny thinks it must have been stopped short by the traffic light. Sonny gets dressed to go out for breakfast, but he can't find either of his eye patches. When he steps outside, he notices a small crowd beside the stopped cattle truck and sees the doctor's car pull up. He starts to turn away but sees Billy's broom in the street.

Billy is lying face up on the street with both eye patches on. The group of men isn't paying any attention to Billy, instead trying to keep the trucker from feeling bad. Sonny hears the sheriff say it wasn't the trucker's fault, because Billy was simpleminded and sort of retarded, and he was standing in the street doing nothing. Sonny can't stand the way the men are ignoring Billy, and he yells suddenly, "He was sweeping, you sons of bitches!" They look at him like he is crazy, and Sonny goes and vomits behind a tree. Sonny's father comes and tells Sonny that he will take care of the funeral arrangements, but Sonny can't stand to leave Billy with the circle of men. He pulls Billy under the arms, running down the street with him, and lays him in front of the picture show.

Sonny goes back to the apartment and sits staring at the TV. He has the feeling again that he is the only person in town. He gets in his truck, but he feels scared because everything feels so empty, including Sonny. He looks around the town, and it looks different than when he was in high school and Sam the Lion was alive. Feeling scared, he drives to Ruth's house and knocks on the front door. She opens the door in her bathrobe, and Sonny asks if he can come in for a cup of coffee. Ruth reluctantly lets him in, apologizing for being in her bathrobe and telling Sonny she finds it harder all the time to get dressed. As she pours the coffee, she feels furious, and she flings Sonny's coffee cup against the wall, then flings her own and finally the coffee pot. She calls Sonny a bastard and tells him she can't believe she apologized to him, when he is the one who should be sorry. He is the one who made her quit caring whether she got dressed or not. Ruth tells him she isn't sorry for him because of Billy, and she knows he would have deserted Billy just like he deserted her.

Sonny finds that having Ruth angry at him is actually a huge relief. He reaches across the table and takes one of her hands, and disconcerted, she lets him hold her hand. Ruth looks at him and can tell he is beyond being hurt by her words. She realizes she can forgive him, but that isn't the real decision. The real decision is about herself and



whether she wants and can stand to be hurt again. She knows that Sonny will do it all over again in a year or so. She is not sure if she is brave enough to accept it, but she lets her hand go up his sleeve. It wants to keep going. Ruth starts to cry and realizes she will have the nerve after all, and she presses Sonny's hand to her wet face. She feels like she is about to say a beautiful truth, something that Sonny will need to know about life, but she loses the words. Instead she strokes Sonny's fingers, straightens his collar and quietly tells him, "Honey, never you mind..."

## Chapter 26 Analysis

When Billy dies, Sonny feels he is the only one who cares, and that feeling causes him to act in ways that the men in town find strange. Sonny loved Billy, and his death marks the loss of the only person Sonny knows he can go to in order to make himself feel real again. This is what ultimately causes him to go back into Ruth's arms. Ruth finally allows herself to feel and express anger, instead of only despair, and it is airing these emotions that allows her to realize that she can forgive Sonny. However, in a critical moment, Ruth realizes that forgiveness is not the real decision. In Ruth's certainty that Sonny will leave her again, there is a bleakness and a sadness, but Ruth instead sees that certainty merely as a situation requiring bravery. As Sonny and Ruth sit holding hands and looking into an uncertain future, it is unclear what will happen between them. It appears Ruth has decided to give Sonny another chance, but even that is not certain. It is on this note of uncertainty that the novel ends, with the same ambiguity and beauty that marked it throughout.



# Characters

## Sonny

The novel's protagonist, Sonny is a high school senior and lives in a rooming house with his best friend Dwayne. His mother is dead, and his father runs the local domino parlor. Sonny has lived in Thalia his whole life, but he is still sometimes overwhelmed by the loneliness of the town. He breaks up with his girlfriend Charlene at the end of football season and starts sleeping with Ruth Popper, the football coach's wife. Sonny is kind-hearted and gentle, but he is sometimes overwhelmed by the enormity of Ruth's need and love for him. Sonny loves Sam the Lion and Billy, both of whom die in the course of the novel. Sonny's eye is seriously injured after Dwayne hits him with a beer bottle, making him ineligible for military service.

## Billy

Billy is a mentally challenged boy who was abandoned by his father and now lives with Sam the Lion. Sonny says he is friendly but not very smart. He sweeps Sam's buildings and will sweep all the way out of town if he is not stopped. He is killed when he is hit by a truck in front of the pool hall.

## Sam the Lion

Sam the Lion is the owner of Thalia's pool hall, picture show and all-night cafe. He is an old man, but large, and he has a big mane of white hair. His three sons died young, and he has a warm heart for the young boys in town, especially Billy and Sonny. He loves Lois Farrow.

## Dwayne

Dwayne is Sonny's best friend. He is a tall boy with curly black hair. He is the fullback of the football team and roughnecks with Abilene for Gene Farrow. He dates Jacy Farrow, but she dumps him after they sleep together in San Francisco. Dwayne moves to Midland after that. Dwayne is involved in getting Billy into trouble one night, and he never confesses to Sam the Lion that he was involved, which loses him Genevieve and Sam the Lion's respect and opens up an invisible rift between him and Sonny. This rift tears opens when Dwayne finds out that Sonny has been dating Jacy, and the boys fight. At the novel's end, Dwayne leaves for Korea to fight in the war.



## **Abilene**

Abilene is the wealthy driller who employs Dwayne. He drives a souped-up Mercury and is the best pool player in Thalia. He sleeps with Lois and also has sex with Jacy in the pool hall.

## **Coach Popper**

Coach Popper is Sonny and Dwayne's football coach. He is a cruel man and may be a homosexual. He treats his wife Ruth terribly. Coach Popper loves hunting and winning football games. He is also the civics teacher and widely recognized to be the dumbest, laziest teacher in school. He is over 235 pounds, most of it gut, and he is proud of it.

## **Penny**

Penny is one of the surly waitresses at the all-night diner. She is a member of the Church of Christ and enjoys identifying wickedness and sinners. She got pregnant before she was engaged, which makes her even harder to get along with.

## **Marston**

Marston is the chef at the all-night diner. He is an alcoholic, but he is nice to the boys and slips Sonny and Dwayne extra toast when they are broke.

## **Frank Fartley**

Frank Fartley is Sonny's boss in the butane business. He plays a dangerously bad game of pool, lunging through cigar smoke.

## **Old Lady Malone**

Old Lady Malone is Sonny and Dwayne's landlord at the rooming house. She is the worst thing about the rooming house because she is nosy and mean about the fires, and she has such bad diarrhea that the boys frequently do their toilet in the Texaco rest room.

## **Sonny's Father**

Sonny's father runs Thalia's domino parlor and lives in a room at the local hotel. He was injured in the car accident that killed Sonny's mother, and six operations failed to restore him to health. He once was Thalia's high school principal, but he is now Thalia's only prescription drug addict.





## **Lester Marlow**

Lester is a rich kid from Wichita Falls who comes to Thalia to lose to Abilene in pool and to court Jacy Farrow. He introduces Jacy to the wild crowd in Wichita.

## **Charlene Duggs**

Charlene is Sonny's girlfriend for a year. Charlene is an unattractive and bad-natured girl who likes the movies and film stars. She fancies Dwayne and won't have sex with Sonny until after they are married.

## **Marlene Duggs**

Marlene is Charlene's younger sister.

## **Royce Duggs**

Royce is Charlene and Marlene's father. He runs a dinky garage outside of town and never gives his daughters any pocket money.

## **Beulah Duggs**

Beulah is Charlene and Marlene's mother. She has a secret passion for toilet water, and she buys it for the girls behind their father's back.

## **Andy Fanner**

Andy is the night watchman of Thalia. He is often found asleep in the front seat of his car on the town square.

## **Genevieve Morgan**

Genevieve is the night waitress at the all-night cagy. Sonny and his father both like Genevieve, but can't both talk to her at the same time. She is an attractive woman whose husband was injured in an oilrig accident a year ago, and she has gone to work to support him and their two sons. Sonny has a crush on her.

## **Dan Morgan**

Dan is Genevieve's husband. He was injured in an oilrig accident a year ago. He used to roughneck with Gene Farrow.



## **Lois Farrow**

Lois is Jacy's mother. Lois's mother disowned her when she married Gene because he was a poor boy, but Gene later strikes it rich. Lois is a tall, rangy blonde, as slim as her daughter. She is the only woman in Thalia who openly drinks, and she seems scared of nothing. She loves Sam the Lion.

## **Gene Farrow**

Gene is Jacy's father and Lois's husband. Gene is poor when he marries Lois, but he gets rich after he buys a rig and strikes oil. He employs Abilene and Dwayne, but many feel he isn't man enough to handle Lois.

## **John Cecil**

Mr. Cecil is the English teacher at the Thalia high school, and he is the only good teacher there. He has a fat bossy wife and two fat bossy daughters, but he manages to be good-natured anyway. In the summer, he sometimes drives a carload of boys to the irrigation ditch and watches them swim.

## **Joe Bob Blanton**

Joe Bob is the preacher's son, and he is a preacher now himself after receiving the call at church camp the previous summer. The other boys in Thalia bully Joe Bob mercilessly.

## **Brother Blanton**

Brother Blanton is Thalia's preacher and Joe Bob's father.

## **Ruth Popper**

Ruth is Coach Popper's wife and Sonny's lover for most of his senior year. Ruth has an operation to remove a lump in her breast, and her relationship with Sonny begins when the coach asks Sonny to take her to the hospital. She is a small, thin woman, pretty but tired and nervous-looking. Sam the Lion says she was lovely when she was younger. She loves Sonny and is devastated when he leaves her for Jacy.

## **Bobby Logan**

Bobby is Thalia's most committed athlete. He always trains hard and is smart too, but no one holds it against him because he is so nice. He is Coach Popper's favorite.



## **Jerry Framingham**

Jerry is a friend of Sonny and Dwayne's who drives a cattle truck. He drives Sonny and Dwayne to Fort Worth one night.

## **Mr. Wean**

Mr. Wean is the frail little home economics teacher and basketball referee of Paducah High School. Sonny knocks him out with a ball to the head during Thalia's game against Paducah.

## **Bobby Sheen**

Bobby is a rich kid from Wichita. His house is the location of the naked swimming parties. He isn't particularly handsome, but he has a rakish, merry, lustful manner that Jacy finds very attractive.

## **Annie-Annie**

Annie-Annie is Bobby Sheen's girlfriend and later his wife. She is also a rich girl from Wichita, with a wild reputation, a tall willowy frame and long black hair.

## **Leroy Malone**

Leroy is one of Sonny and Dwayne's classmates. He is with them the night they get Billy drunk, and he is the one who proposes buying him a prostitute.

## **Jimmie Sue Jones**

Jimmie Sue has been a prostitute in Thalia for nine years. She is fat and has dyed red hair and smells of onions. The boys force Billy to go in a car with her, and she bloodies his nose after he makes a mess on her.

## **The Bunne Brothers**

Mickey and Jack Bunne are the two Wichita Golden Gloves champions who beat up Dwayne and Sonny after Dwayne beats up Lester.

## **Molly Clarg**

Molly Clarg is the little girl kidnapped by Joe Bob Blanton.



## **Johnny Clarg**

Johnny Clarg is Molly's father.

## **Monroe**

Monroe is Thalia's skinny deputy. He discovers that Molly Clarg has been kidnapped.

## **Old Lady Mosey**

Old Lady Mosey runs the picture show for Sam the Lion. Sam leaves her the picture show in her will, but she ultimately has to close it down.

## **Hurley**

Hurley is the truck driver from Oklahoma who runs over Billy.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Thalia High School**

Thalia High School is Sonny and Dwayne's high school, where they play football and basketball.

### **The Pool Hall**

Sam the Lion owns the pool hall and often opens it early because he doesn't sleep well. It is a very male place, and women aren't allowed in. Sam the Lion leaves the pool hall to Billy and Sonny in his will.

### **The Picture Show**

The picture show is where Jacy and Dwayne and Sonny and Charlene court in high school. Sam the Lion owns the picture show, and he leaves it to Old Lady Mosey when he dies. She has to close it soon thereafter. The picture show is Billy's favorite place.

### **The All-Night Cafy**

Sam the Lion owns the all-night cafy and leaves it to Genevieve when he dies.

### **The Rooming House**

The rooming house is where Sonny and Dwayne live. They are proud of having their own place. The only drawback is the landlady, Old Lady Malone.

### **The Rat-Hole**

The Rat-Hole is Thalia's drive in restaurant.

### **The Fishing Tank**

Sam the Lion takes Billy and Sonny to fish in the fishing tank every summer. He picks it for sentimental reasons, because it is where he used to come with Lois Farrow.

### **Altus, Oklahoma**

Altus is where Sonny and Jacy are married by the justice of the peace.



## **Lawton**

Lawton is the town where Jacy and Sonny have their first meal as man and wife.

## **Madill**

Madill is the town where Sonny and Jacy are taken after a cop stops them on their way to their honeymoon.

## Social Sensitivity

The social concerns of *The Last Picture Show* are largely the concerns of teenagers in the early 1960s. Compared to the "information age" of the 1990s, the 1960s were an age of social change. Instead of seemingly flexible mores, the 1960s saw the beginning of a distancing from static, long-held beliefs to the questioning of those beliefs. The 1960s were a fairly rootless period—the threat of the Bomb, the death of Kennedy, the advent of the counterculture, the oncoming sexual revolution, the commercialization of society, the early disintegration of the "nuclear family," the fighting in Southeast Asia, all were woven into the decade. In Texas, the slow decline of the family farm or ranch, the desolation of many small towns, economic uncertainty all played a part, as well as the erosion of the mythic cowboy ethos, the reverence for the land, and the stoicism of the people inhabiting it. And, while hardly cosmopolitan, the youth of Thalia, Texas have their own concerns—being popular, having money to be popular; finding sex, showing physical prowess on the athletic field; impressing girls; gaining status in a small-town high school society.

The characters seem desperate to achieve some recognition, especially those on the fringe of the high school popular group. This desperation is no less desperate among the adults. Jacy's father, Frank Farrow, is obsessed with money and social position, as to a degree is his wife; Ruth Popper, whose only standing is as "the football coach's wife", longs for her own identity and finds it in an affair with a high-school boy. The only one not concerned with social standing is Sam the Lion, the owner of the pool hall and picture show. Sam's lived a long time, and has no use for the unimportant—to him — motivations of the others in town. The richness of his life and his imminent death suffice to occupy his thoughts.

Critic Brandon Trenz notes another social theme, that of "the debilitating monotony of small-town life" which seems to sap the energy out of the town and the characters, and which may well cause the road trips, affairs, and desire for escape, as well as to Sonny's feeling that sometimes "he was the only human creature in the town."

Adding to the poignancy of the teens' plight is that their problems and situation recur frequently in teen culture today as well as 35 years ago; teens still look for and experiment with sex, find themselves in dead-end towns looking for hopeless jobs; money, prestige, and power still rule (although drugs are much more a part of this milieu), and adults still do a good-to-poor job of either helping them find a decent path through this part of their lives.



# Techniques

It is the description of the town and the characters that gives *The Last Picture Show* its reality. McMurtry captures precisely the moods, thoughts, reactions, and desires of small-town high-school students; likewise, he discovers the characters in the town by revealing their thoughts—not grand thoughts, but the small thoughts that run through peoples minds that, altogether, define them. The description of the town, though, is what captures the reader at the beginning of the novel: There was only one car parked on the courthouse square—the night watchman's old white Nash. A cold norther was singing in off the plains, swirling long ribbons of dust down main street, the only street in Thalia with businesses on it. Sonny's pickup was a '41 Chevrolet, not at its best on cold mornings. In front of the picture show it coughed out and had to be choked for a while, but then it started again and jerked its way to the red light, blowing out spume of white exhaust that the wind whipped away.

Later, Sonny reaches the point at which his disconnection and loneliness are too much for him to bear: When he passed the city limits sign he stopped a minute. The gray pastures and the distant brown ridges looked too empty. He himself felt too empty. As empty as he felt and as empty as the country looked it was too risky going out into it—he might be blown around for days like a broomweed in the wind.

He turned around and drove back past the sign, but stopped again.

From the road the town looked raw, scraped by the wind, as empty as the country. It didn't look like the town it had been when he was in high school, in the days of Sam the Lion.

Scared to death, he drove to Ruth's house.

Thalia is McMurtry's incarnation of, Archer City, Texas. Growing up there until he went to college, McMurtry had every opportunity to view the attitudes and daily life of his homeland. As a result, the novel sounds to the mind as if a native of the area is telling it; McMurtry talks of the lives, livelihoods, and icons of the people easily and familiarly. The names of towns such as Ranger, Megargel, Altus, and Scotland are given in the tone of one who has been there and knows the places well; the fact that the only liquor store is on the county line reveals the author's knowledge of Texas' dry counties.

It is in discussing the characters that the West-Texanness of the style shines.

McMurtry discusses Penny, "an 185pound redhead, not given to idle threats;" "when the Church of Christ held its prayer meetings and shouting contests anybody who happened to be within a mile of the church could hear what Penny thought about wickedness." Coach Popper, who states that "a good gun beats a woman any day," is a chauvinistic lout; McMurtry tells us that "the only thing that worried him about Ruth was the chance that they hadn't removed all the tumor and might have to operate again, in which case there would be no end to the expense." And the calculated airheadedness of





Jacy is revealed in her elopement letter: "Dear Mama and Daddy—. . . Sonny and I have gone to Oklahoma to get married—I guess it will be in Altus...I guess I will live at the poolhall until we find someplace else to live." Jacy could not have written a more effective letter to get herself out of the marriage.

# Themes

## Themes

The themes of loneliness and decay are central to the novel. The town is dying; the rich are really rich only on paper; the buildings are old and rotting; the only entertainment, the picture show, closes; the pool hall is the only remaining source of any kind of fun in the town. Not only does the town decay and die; so do the dreams and aspirations of the characters.

Sam, the one noble person in the novel, shuffles in house shoes, his feet aching, his body broken by age and a hard life.

Lois Farrow, once the most popular girl in school, satisfies herself with liquor and affairs; her daughter Jacy, beautiful and popular, seems to be following in her footsteps. Ruth Popper's life is broken by her ignorant fool of a husband, and later by the unthinking self-interest of Sonny.

Another theme prevalent in the novel is that of disappointment. All the characters want something; few of them get it.

Charles Peavy notes that in the book *McMurtry* shows the relative unimportance of things once held to be important, such as being popular and playing football. Sonny and Duane want Jacy; neither of them has her for very long.

Jacy wants popularity, but it soon fades.

All are stuck in dead-end lives in a dying town; the reader sees the death of the town long before the younger characters even feel the clash of their humanity against the bars of the cage that is Thalia, Texas. The title, then, is a significant emblem of the death of the town, of hope, of structure—the last movie takes with it a slim vestige of civilization, of glamour, of hope. With its passing, and the prior passing of its owner, Sam, the last representative of a wilder but more romantically-desired time, Thalia is nothing.

## Loneliness

Loneliness and isolation are two of the most pervasive themes of *The Last Picture Show*. From the first page, Sonny surveys the emptiness of Thalia and feels "like he was the only human creature in the town" (p. 1). This feeling haunts Sonny frequently and comes back strong the morning that Dwayne leaves Thalia for Korea. It is almost as if both Sonny and Thalia are lonely, as if the town itself could feel the effects of its isolation. Its worst manifestation is when Sonny feels so lonely after Sam the Lion's death that, as he stands on the sidelines of a football game he can no longer play in, he feels like he has been erased. He is no longer merely alone in the town, but it is as if he



has ceased to exist. Other characters also suffer from these feelings. Ruth says that she isn't upset about her breast tumor or the operation it requires, but "thinking about it makes me so lonely I can't stand it" (p. 55).

Ruth, in her miserable marriage to Coach Popper, may be the loneliest character in the novel. She tells Sonny that "loneliness is like ice. After you've been lonely long enough you don't even realize you're cold, but you are" (p. 126). She has been so lonely that she is like a refrigerator that has never been defrosted. Lois also suffers loneliness in her unhappy marriage, and Sonny even senses it in Genevieve, who loves her husband but has lost his physical comfort since he has been injured. Jacy's sexual manipulations and games cover the emptiness and loneliness that she feels. In the last pages of the book, as Sonny and Ruth sit holding hands, a mixed message is sent about characters' ability to fix the loneliness that plagues them. Ruth knows that Sonny will leave her again, but the joy of physical contact and emotional intimacy may prove too tempting to pass by.

## Death and Decay

Thalia is a dying town, as McMurtry repeatedly makes clear, and death and decay are recurrent themes throughout the book. Sam the Lion tells the boys early in the book that the oil fields are drying up and that the cattle business is dying. Sam's suggestion that the financial underpinnings of the town are decaying indicates that the town itself will die.

The closing of the picture show further symbolizes the death of the town's heart. Sam the Lion's death and Billy's death are the two most emotional moments of the novel. Though Sam the Lion is old when he dies, and Billy still very young, both deaths highlight the fleetingness of life. Dwayne's parting words to Sonny when he leaves for Korea are that he will see Sonny in a few years if he isn't shot. Dwayne's cavalier attitude about death indicates that it has become an eventuality not feared by the boys of Thalia.

## Boredom and Monotony

Boredom is one of the most common emotions but also one of the motivating forces for the residents of Thalia. Sonny fails to identify it while he is holding Charlene's breast in his hand, but it is clearly the defining quality of his year-long relationship with her. Lois tells Jacy that "life is very monotonous. Things happen the same way over and over again. I think it's more monotonous in this part of the country than it is in other places, but I don't really know that - it may be monotonous everywhere" (p. 49). This monotony is clearly what causes Lois to drink and sleep around. It is boredom that causes Jacy to constantly seek the attention of her mother and her father, and it is boredom that leads her to break up Sonny and Ruth. The residents of Thalia all seem to be straining against the monotony of the town and its quality of unchangeability. However, Sonny finds that

when the town does change, when the picture show closes and Sam the Lion and Billy die, he misses the Thalia he knew before. He can't seem to find his way back to it.

# Style

## Points of View

The novel is told in third-person point of view, primarily through the perspective of Sonny, Dwayne and Jacy. However, the perspective changes throughout the novel depending on who is featured, and Sonny, Dwayne and Jacy are not even present in some scenes. By varying the storytelling in this way, McMurtry allows the reader to understand the motivations and feelings of many different characters in the town of Thalia. In many ways, Thalia is also a character in the book, and it is fitting that the story be told in a way that exposes its varied inhabitants. McMurtry also brilliantly uses the perspective of characters to expose their own weaknesses, fears and desires. This is done hilariously in a scene where Jacy justifies to herself why she must go to the naked swimming party in Wichita, because it would be a wasteful sin not to go. McMurtry invites the reader to see things as his characters do, but also encourages us to question their motivations in viewing things a particular way.

## Setting

The novel is set in the small Texas town of Thalia in the 1950s. Much of the action takes place in the pool hall, the all night cady and the picture show. Because the novel is largely concerned with the town itself, and the way that its slow dying effects the town's inhabitants, the setting is critical. McMurtry carefully and lovingly depicts the dusty, isolated town in detail, and the loneliness of the town becomes a powerful metaphor for the loneliness of its inhabitants. The author also creates a contrast to the setting of Thalia by taking his characters out of Thalia and sending them on road trips to Mexico, Fort Worth, Wichita and San Francisco. Sonny and Dwayne feel that nothing ever happens in Thalia, and on each of these trips out of Thalia "something" invariably happens: Jacy goes to a naked swimming party, Dwayne and Jacy have sex, Sam the Lion dies, and so on. By varying the setting from Thalia, the author reinforces his depiction of Thalia as sleepy and lonely, and also questions the ability of his characters to ever truly leave the town.

## Language and Meaning

The author's style is simple and straightforward but the writing in the novel is often extremely beautiful and evocative. The author manages to create incredible word pictures without extraneous verbiage. Little dialogue is employed, and when it is used, it is concise and usually imparts some insight into the characters who speak it. The characters speak in the language of small town Texas, of roughnecks and oilrigs and drive-ins and picture shows. However, the author never patronizes the reader by explaining these words. Instead, the reader comes to understand their meaning through context, and the language of the novel thereby acts as a means for the reader to enter



into the world of the novel. Similarly, the novel ends, not abruptly, but without explanation and a final wrapping-up or summary. The author shows his respect for the reader through his choice of language and style, while remaining true to his characters.

## Structure

The novel is comprised of twenty-six chapters. They cover approximately one year, and it is significant that the novel begins and ends in Thalia High School's football season. Sonny's feelings as the season ends at the beginning of the book, and his feelings as the season begins again at the novel's end, are critical to understanding his development as a character. The main storyline follows Sonny, Dwayne and Jacy through their senior year of high school and the following summer, but through that narrative the author also develops the stories of their parents' generation. In doing so, the author creates interesting parallels between the experiences of the three high-schoolers and the experiences of characters like Ruth Popper, Lois and Gene Farrow, Genevieve, and Sam the Lion.



## Quotes

"Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the town. It was a bad feeling, and it usually came on him in the mornings early, when the streets were completely empty, the way they were one Saturday morning in late November. The night before Sonny had played his last game of football for Thalia High School, but it wasn't that that made him feel so strange and alone. It was just the look of the town." Chapter 1, p. 1

"... with nobody at all on the road or in the cab Sonny sometimes got the funny feeling that he was driving the old truck around and around in a completely empty place." Chapter 1, p. 14

"'Because life's too damn hard here,' Lois said. 'The land's got too much power over you. Being rich here is a good way to go insane. Everything's flat and empty and there's nothing to do but spend money.'" Chapter 5, p. 48

"... life is very monotonous. Things happen the same way over and over again. I think it's more monotonous in this part of the country than it is in other places, but I don't really know that - it may be monotonous everywhere. I'm sick of it, myself. Everything gets old if you do it often enough. I don't particularly care who you marry, but if you want to find out about monotony real quick just marry Dwayne." Chapter 5, p. 49

"It's not the operation at all. The tumor probably won't be dangerous. It's just that thinking about it makes me so lonely I can't stand it." Chapter 6, p. 55

"Loneliness is like ice. After you've been lonely long enough you don't even realize you're cold, but you are. It's like I was a refrigerator that had never been defrosted at all - never. All these years the ice has just been getting thicker. You can't melt all that ice in a few days, I don't care how good a man you are." Chapter 11, p. 126

"When she touched him, drew him into her, it was not that she was trying to have him exactly - she was insisting that he have her. She was not saying 'You're mine,' she was saying 'I'm yours,' and that was almost more troubling. She was completely focused on him; the rest of her life had ceased to matter." Chapter 13, p. 141

"'Is growin' up always miserable?' Sonny said. 'Nobody seems to enjoy it much.'

"'Oh, it ain't necessarily miserable,' Sam replied. 'About eighty percent of the time, I guess.'" Chapter 14, p. 154

"He was just going on, absorbed in himself, moving, nudging, thrusting - she was no more than an object. She wanted to protest that, but before she could she began to lose sight of herself, lose hold of herself. She was rolled this way and that, into feelings she hadn't known, hadn't expected, couldn't avoid. She lost all thought of doing anything, she was completely lost to herself. He played her out as recklessly as he had played the



final ball, and when he did, she scattered as the red balls had scattered when the white one struck them so hard. She spread out, diffused, almost unconscious." Chapter 20, p. 219

"It's terrible to only find one man your whole life who knows what its worth, Sonny. Its just terrible ... When Sam, when Sam ... the Lion was seventy years old he could just walk in ... I don't know, hug me and call me Lois or something an' do more for me than anybody. *He* really knew what I was worth, an' the rest of them haven't, not one man in this whole country ...." Chapter 23, p. 252-3

"A feeling came over him sort of like the feelings he used to get in the mornings, only the new feeling was worse. Then he had felt like he was the only one in town, but standing on the sidelines, holding the chain, he felt like he wasn't even *in* town - he felt like he wasn't anywhere." Chapter 24, p. 260



## Adaptations

The Last Picture Show was made into a 1971 Peter Bogdanovich feature film starring Cybill Shepherd as Jacy; Cloris Leachman as Ruth Popper; Timothy Bottoms as Sonny (and his brother Sam Bottoms as Billy); Jeff Bridges as Duane; Ben Johnson as Sam; and Ellen Burstyn as Lois Farrow. Filmed in black and white, the cinematography was extremely effective in portraying the bleakness of the town, and the plainness of the characters, giving a small-town and diminished feel to the action; only in a scene with Sam and Sonny at a swimming hole does the camera pan away for a moment from the faces of the characters to the stark beauty of the West Texas ranchland surrounding them, revealing that, while there is something of beauty in the environment, it has nothing to do with the town. *Texasville* (1991), an adaptation of *The Last Picture Show*'s sequel, was directed by Peter Bogdanovich; Cybill Shepherd, Jeff Bridges, Timothy Bottoms, Randy Quaid, Eileen Brennan, and Cloris Leachman reprised their roles from the first film; Annie Potts starred as Duane's wife Karla.



## Key Questions

Many young adults may find similarities to their own lives in some of the issues that face Jacy, Sonny, Duane, and their classmates—money, popularity, uncertainty about the future, sexuality, college vs. going to work, etc. Discussion of these similarities may be a good beginning to discussion of the novel as a whole. The town of Thalia is an important part of the work, for it affects all the characters, almost becoming a character itself. The loneliness many of the characters feel may indicate the town's effect on them. Also important to note is the progression of the characters as they make their way through the year; they have graduated from high school—do they have something now to look forward to?

1. How is high school in Thalia in the early 1960s similar to high school now?

What, too, are the differences? Do you think that young people act the same way, in general? If there is a major difference, what do you think has caused that difference?

2. Describe Jacy's goals in life, as far as they are presented in the novel. Are these goals similar to those of young persons now? Note places in the novel where these goals are revealed.

3. Who do you think is the most important character in the novel Sony, Duane, Jacy, or Sam the Lion? Why?

Point to places in the novel to support your conclusion.

4. McMurtry presents a very detailed view of small-town life in the novel. Make a list of at least five places in the novel where he shows us, rather than telling us, what the town looks like or feels like.

How does he show small-town life deadening the people therein?

5. The relationship between Sonny and Ruth Popper is a central one in the novel.

What does Sonny do to Mrs. Popper?

What does he do for her? What does she do for him?

6. How, if at all, have the characters in the novel (particularly Jacy, Sonny, Ruth Popper, Duane) grown through this year?

Are they wiser, sadder, and more intelligent; what have they gained?

Robert Whipple, Jr.



## Topics for Discussion

Are there any purely bad or purely good characters in the novel? Discuss Lois Farrow and her traits and actions in the book. Would you say she is good, bad, both or neither?

Compare Sonny and Dwayne's road trips to Mexico and Fort Worth. How do these trips change the way the boys think about and look at Thalia?

Discuss the significance of the picture show in Thalia.

Lois says Joe Bob Blanton's father is responsible for the trouble Joe Bob gets into with Molly Clarg. Do you agree? What other factors could have caused Joe Bob to kidnap Molly?

How are Jacy and her mother alike and different? Discuss the effect of these similarities and differences on their relationship and the effect on the men of Thalia.

What does it mean to be a football player or a football coach in Thalia? What do you think the author thinks about that state of affairs?

Discuss McMurtry's word choice and use of dialogue in the novel. Do you like the way he writes?

## Literary Precedents

While J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951; see separate entry) is a literary precursor to *The Last Picture Show*—both have the theme of disaffected youth searching for something with meaning, realizing that their current lives are either wasted or insignificant—Holden Caulfield is a much more intelligent character than the Thalia trio of Sonny, Duane, and Jacy. He sees the falsity of his world right away; that he must suffer it throughout the novel in an aware state may be why he ends up emotionally broken, while Sonny is still confused and drifting.

In addition, Thomas Landess notes that the portrayal of the fundamentalist religion, hypocrisy, and social stratification of Thalia is reminiscent of the small towns (such as Gopher Prairie) of Sinclair Lewis; Landess notes that Lewis "did for the Midwest what McMurtry does in the 1960s for his native state."

## Related Titles

The Last Picture Show is one of the "Thalia novels," the first two of which are *Horseman, Pass By* (1961) and *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963). The novel was followed in 1987 by a sequel, *Texasville*, which recounted the lives of the main characters, and some of the collateral characters, as well as introducing new ones. In *Texasville*, Duane is a once-wealthy oil man now losing his shirt in the mid-1980s oil bust; with big house and trappings, he seems disconcertingly like Frank Farrow, Jacy's father, in the earlier novel. Sonny is losing his mind; Jacy is an actress with a thoroughly unhappy life. Ruth Popper seems the only happy person in the novel, running for her health every day and seeming to have accepted what her life had to give her. The characters seem, as middle-aged adults dealing with contemporary problems such as mental illness, the oil bust, and middle-age craziness, removed from their "original selves" shown in the first novel. While *The Last Picture Show* shows youths in a timeless setting, *Texasville* is a mid-1980s novel of (often bad) manners.



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