The Last Good Kiss Study Guide

The Last Good Kiss by James Crumley

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This novel, written in the style and literary traditions of the so-called "hard boiled" crime novel, tells the story of private investigator CW Sughrue's search for a runaway young woman, missing for ten years. A parallel narrative explores the complex relationship between Sughrue, a wandering alcoholic novelist, and the three powerful women in the novelist's life. Aside from exploring themes common to novels of this genre (specifically, the corruptive potential of money, love, sex, and power), "The Last Good Kiss" also explores themes relating to the layering of identity and an individual's inability to escape his/her past.

The novel begins at the end of Sughrue's search for the missing Abraham Trahearne. Sughrue eventually learns that Trahearne is a famous novelist and respected poet, but when he finds him in a run-down bar in Sonoma California, Trahearne is just another drunk on the run from a domineering ex-wife. A confrontation in the bar results in Trahearne's being slightly injured and put in hospital. While he's waiting for Trahearne to be released, Sughrue is hired by bar owner Rosie to find her beloved daughter Betty Sue, missing for ten years. When he hears of this, Trahearne insists that he accompany Sughrue on his investigation—for a lark, he says. Sughrue reluctantly agrees—against his better judgment, he enjoys Trahearne's company.

Rosie gives Sughrue a list of people Betty Sue was close with before she left—her former drama teacher, her ex-boyfriend, and her best friend in high school. All three provide information that lead Sughrue and Trahearne to eventually discover that Betty Sue briefly worked in the porn industry, that as a result of being in that industry she was at one point thrown in jail, and that after her release she went to a countryside rehabilitation facility. While investigating that facility, Sughrue is told that Betty Sue is dead.

While all of this is going on, Sughrue is also taking care of the frequently drunk, desperately sexual, deeply troubled Trahearne, driving back and forth between the investigations in California and Trahearne's home in Montana. Sughrue is surprised to learn that Trahearne's ex-wife Catherine and mother Edna live together in a house just across the street where Trahearne lives with his current wife, Melinda. He's not so surprised when he discovers that Catherine and Edna both despise Melinda, and want control over Trahearne, his life, and his work. The seductive Catherine manipulates Sughrue into having sex with her, with the clear intent of gaining his help in her attempts to control her ex-husband. Sughrue, however, resists her attempts to control him, partly because he's fallen a little in love with Melinda and partly because he doesn't want Trahearne to be controlled.

Meanwhile, Rosie receives word that Betty Sue is still alive, and sends Sughrue (now a little in love with Betty Sue—or at least the photograph of her given to him by Rosie) back on the trail, where he soon discovers that Betty Sue and Melinda are the same person. When he confronts her, Betty Sue confesses that after getting out of jail she was desperate to create a new life and identity for herself, and so became Melinda.

Sughrue concludes that Trahearne knew about his wife's past, that he couldn't find out the truth himself, and manipulated events so that Sughrue did the legwork for him.

As the result of Sughrue's investigations, the mobsters behind the porn company that Betty Sue once worked for, and from whom she stole forty thousand dollars, track her down and kidnap her. Sughrue rescues her and returns her to her home with Trahearne in Montana, but a confrontation between her and Trahearne leads her to conclude she needs to leave the marriage. Meanwhile, Catherine again attempts to get Sughrue to help her get rid of Melinda, and again Sughrue refuses. As he's preparing to leave, Sughrue discovers that Melinda has been murdered, and while some attempt is made by Catherine to blame the porn mobsters, Sughrue realizes that it was she who committed the murder, and that Trahearne enabled it. The novel ends with Sughrue, grieving the loss of the woman he never really got a chance to love, telling Trahearne to watch out—that someday he (Sughrue) is going to come after him.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

This novel, written in the style and literary traditions of the so-called "hard boiled" crime novel, tells the story of private investigator CW Sughrue's search for a runaway young woman, missing for ten years. A parallel narrative explores the complex relationship between Sughrue, a wandering alcoholic novelist, and the three powerful women in the novelist's life. Aside from exploring themes common to novels of this genre (specifically, the corruptive potential of money, love, sex, and power), "The Last Good Kiss" also explores themes relating to the layering of identity and an individual's inability to escape his/her past.

Private investigator CW Sughrue tracks wayward husband (and sometime writer) Abraham Trahearne across the dry and dusty upper-Midwestern states, following him from down-and-out bar to down-and-out bar, using a list of regular hangouts provided by Trahearne's ex-wife (who's paying Sughrue's expenses and fee) as a map. Eventually, Sughrue tracks Trahearne to a bar in Sonoma California, where Sughrue experiences what he says is his habitual regret that the chase is over. "In my business", he says, "you need a moral certitude that I no longer even claimed to possess, and every time when I came to the end of the chase, I wanted to walk away". Sughrue's attempts at casual conversation result in a drunken regular at the bar losing his temper, gunshots being fired, and Trahearne ending up with a bullet in his ass.

Sughrue and the bar's owner Rosie come up with a story to explain what happened. Trahearne is taken to hospital, and it seems that the police leave knowing they've been snowed. Sughrue and Rosie sit outside drinking themselves into calmness. Sughrue admits he is a PI, Rosie admits she has a missing daughter, Betty Sue. She's prepared to pay Sughrue to find her. She says Betty Sue disappeared ten years ago into the heart of nearby San Francisco, hasn't been heard from since, and still believes Betty Sue is alive. Sughrue shares the revelations that he was dishonorably discharged from military duty in Vietnam, that he (like many other ex-soldiers) tried to disappear into the drug scene in San Francisco, that he made a living there hunting down runaways like Betty Sue, and that he quit when he found a butchered fourteen-year-old boy. Rosie gives Sughrue a list of Betty Sue's friends and some cash. Sughrue agrees to do what he can, but says that he believes Betty Sue is probably dead. Rosie tells him to look anyway, adding that there's more money available if he needs it.

When Sughrue returns to the hospital, he learns that Trahearne is asleep. He places a call to Trahearne's ex-wife Catherine, who tells him to keep an eye on Trahearne until he's out of hospital and then make sure he at least starts on his way home. She also gives him a cryptic message to pass on—that "his beloved Melinda is once again in the fold, throwing pots or whatever it is she does . . ." Sughrue agrees to do everything she asks, and later, when he finally sees a conscious Trahearne, learns what she meant—that Trahearne's current wife Melinda is a sculptor, and is given to sudden traveling.

Trahearne also explains that Catherine lives with his mother in a nearby house—a situation that Sughrue finds uncomfortable to hear about. For his part, Sughrue explains that he's been retained by Rosie, and Trahearne says whatever Sughrue does is fine with him. On his way out of the hospital, Sughrue encounters a friendly nurse, who not only agrees to meet him for a date but reveals that Trahearne is a famous novelist and poet.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

There are three main levels of function to this novel—as an example of its genre, as a mystery, and as a story. On the first level, these opening chapters function well to establish traditional elements of the American "hard boiled" crime novel, the kind of story that also is the basis of the "film noir" in movie terms. These elements include a cynical, sharp witted, hard-living morally compromised (and compromising) detective, the detective's being drawn into a mystery against his better judgment, a vulnerable woman (or, as the narrative eventually reveals, several vulnerable women), the action unfolding within a setting evocative of human desperation, and the constant threat of violence, both emotional and physical.

On the second level of function, that of a mystery, these chapters effectively lay the groundwork for the two mysteries that intertwine throughout the narrative—the Betty Sue thread and the Trahearne thread. At first the narrative suggests, as narratives of this sort must, that the two threads are mostly disconnected. Later it's revealed that the two are in fact very tightly interwoven. It's important, therefore, to examine the beginnings of the narrative with the ending in mind—examining what is revealed at the first in the context of what is known at the last. Specifically, it must be remembered that as the narrative begins, Trahearne has come to suspect that Melinda and Betty Sue are the same person, and that he wants Sughrue to not only prove it, but to find out what Melinda does when she's traveling—is she, like Trahearne, a drunken sexual adventurer? There is some question as to whether Catherine is part of this scheme since it's Catherine who sends Sughrue after Trahearne in the first place. Are she and Trahearne (who, it must be remembered, end up together at the novel's conclusion) in collusion to get the goods on Melinda/Betty Sue? Does she simply know Trahearne wants to find out the truth about his wife and is manipulating both Trahearne and Sughrue into discovering that truth about Melinda/Betty Sue with the intention of using the knowledge of her past to get her out of Trahearne's life? The latter is perhaps more possible, but it must be noted that the novel never explicitly explores Catherine's connection to what's going on, so this is all pure conjecture. In any case, the point is this—that even in these beginning chapters, Sughrue is being manipulated to do what Trahearne wants him to do.

Finally, in terms of story, there are several important narrative elements here. There are engagingly vivid characterizations (particularly of Sughrue and of Rosie) and an evocative sense of atmosphere (with the writing as much defined by the genre as anything else). There is also, as there must be with mystery novels of any genre, an intriguing layering of truth—the defining example here is the unexpected revelation that

Trahearne is a novelist and poet, a piece of information that adds considerably to the mystery surrounding this character. Finally, there are some important foreshadowings, particularly in Sughrue's references to his experience in Vietnam, and his reference to his lack of moral certitude (which gets him into trouble throughout the novel).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Sughrue visits the first person on the list of Betty Sue's friends given to him by Rosie—Charles Gleeson who, when Sughrue visits him in his home, reveals himself to be Betty Sue's former drama teacher. Tense conversation between the two men reveals that Gleeson believed that Betty Sue was an incredible acting talent with enormous potential. Sughrue quickly becomes tired of Gleeson's coy, mannered conversation and, graphically describing the torture techniques he learned when he was a soldier in Vietnam, he bullies Gleeson into admitting that he did consider having sex with Betty Sue, but didn't want to damage their professional relationship—he was, he also admits, planning to ride her possibly famous coattails. Gleeson also reveals that a few years ago he believed he saw Betty Sue in a porn movie in San Francisco—"it looked like her", he says, "except for this . . . ugly scar in the middle of her belly". He vaguely remembers the title of the film, and Sughrue, realizing he's not going to get much more out of him, prepares to leave, recalling as he does so how horrible the torture experience in Vietnam actually was, and how "a few days later" he made the mistake that got him his discharge.

Sughrue tracks down the second person on Rosie's list—Albert Griffith, the young man Betty Sue was with on the night she disappeared. Sughrue's narration describes Griffith as a lawyer desperate to impress but whose pretensions are pathetically easy to puncture. The nervous Griffith confesses he was desperately in love with Betty Sue and still is, in spite of having married and fathered two children. He also confesses that the two of them never slept together and that he searched for Betty Sue for years, even going as far as viewing unidentified bodies at the morgue. He responds angrily when Sughrue mentions the possibility that Betty Sue was in porn, and with equal anger when Sughrue, after being asked to let him (Griffith) know what he finds out, says no.

After leaving Griffith, Sughrue contemplates what he describes as his "mean streak"—the part of him that was deliberately nasty to both Gleeson and Griffith, and also led "the last woman he loved" to refuse his proposal of marriage. When he arrives at his hotel room, he discovers that Trahearne has moved into the second bed, a fact that doesn't stop him (Sughrue) from successfully seducing the hospital nurse. The next morning Sughrue, Trahearne, and the nurse share a playful breakfast, and after the nurse leaves, Trahearne comments on how much he loves naked women. He tells Sughrue about a childhood obsession with a nude woman who appeared at her window every time it rained, about his brief but passionate relationship with a war widow, and about his marriages—the unsuccessful one to the controlling Catherine, and the more successful one to the artistic and understanding Melinda. Trahearne also convinces Sughrue not only to continue the search for Betty Sue, but to let him come along—he's a wanderer, he says, and would like nothing more than to "wander" with Sughrue. They pick up Trahearne's car at Rosie's, where they are joined by Rosie's drunken bulldog Fireball. Together the three of them cross the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

On the first level of analysis, that of the genre, relevant elements include Sughrue's tracking through (trampling over?) suspects in his search for the truth, the beginnings of the descent into the seedier sides of humanity, and the emergence of sex as a powerful, irresistible motivating force. All are commonly found in other narratives of the genre, and all essentially combine to express their generally cynical perspective on humanity.

In terms of the mystery, the narrative (and the detective) begins the process of peeling back the layers of lies and secrets surrounding the truth, of events and motivation, at the core of the story. In terms of the Betty Sue mystery, the visits to Gleeson and Griffith both define important clues (the porn film, the scar, the lack of a body) and, perhaps more significantly, the sense that Betty Sue had an irresistible attraction for men, an attraction that even Sughrue falls victim to. Meanwhile, it must be remembered that Trahearne has already succumbed—he has, after all, fallen in love with, and become obsessed with, the woman Betty Sue became. Another important element to note here, again considered in the context of what is revealed later, is that Albert Griffith is lying through his teeth—he did have sex with Betty Sue, and was in fact in San Francisco with her to arrange an abortion—and this is the reason for his nervousness.

In terms of story, the main element to consider at this point is the relationship between clues, narrative development, and foreshadowing. In mystery novels, and in particular novels of this particular genre within a genre, the line between clue and foreshadowing is indistinguishable. Thus the clues referenced above not only function on the level of developing the mystery, they propel the narrative forward (in that they lead Sughrue into further thought and further investigation) and also foreshadow the truth he discovers at the conclusion of that investigation. There are also important foreshadowings in Sughrue's references to Vietnam, which refers to the later revelation of the traumatic experience suffered there. Finally, there is Trahearne's references to the romance with the war widow and to the nude woman in the window, both of which that foreshadow later revelations of how perverse his relationships with the women in his life truly are.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Sughrue's initial efforts to track Betty Sue in San Francisco end almost entirely in failure. The exception is a meeting with Professor Richter, an academic "expert" on pornography who, after hearing a brief description of the movie referred to by Gleeson, pulls out a film and shows it, commenting that one of the men (Randall Jackson) in the film used to run a nearby porn store and now lives in Denver. Sughrue is upset to see that the woman in the film is indeed Betty Sue, is even more upset to see her apparent enthusiasm, and becomes still more upset when he realizes how fond Trahearne is of Rosie. He therefore tells Trahearne the girl in the film wasn't Betty Sue. They then track Betty Sue's friend from high school, Peggy Bain, to a drug party. While Trahearne, increasingly drunk and stoned, attempts to seduce another guest, Peggy tells Sughrue she hasn't seen Betty Sue since high school, that she'd heard from Betty Sue's father that she had been living on a commune in Oregon, and that all her life people had fallen in love with Betty Sue. She tearfully admits that she's one of those people. Having gotten all the information from the hashish-stoned Peggy that he can, Sughrue tries to get Trahearne to leave, but Trahearne is too determined to have sex with the other guest.

Sughrue and Trahearne track down Betty Sue's father Jimmy Joe Flowers, who meets with Sughrue and reveals himself to be bitter, angry, and volatile. The conversation is short and tense, but Jimmy Joe reveals that after four or five years of silence, Betty Sue called him from Oregon, asking for money so she could leave the commune. Afterwards Sughrue and Trahearne drive out to Rosie's bar, where they tell her the search for her daughter has turned up nothing. Rosie thanks Sughrue for all his work and asks him to call her if he ever finds out anything. He agrees, and then sets off with Trahearne to return him to his home in Montana. Sughrue describes Trahearne's three strangely plotted, misogynistic, sensationalized and very successful novels, and also recounts the story of Trahearne's mother, a single schoolteacher run out of town after becoming pregnant with the child of a member of the school board. She wrote two very successful novels inspired by her experiences, made a lot of money, went home to the town that ran her off, bought the hotel and hot springs, turned it into a successful business, and eventually bought out the entire town. Finally, after a long trip, Trahearne and Sughrue arrive at Trahearne's ranch, where they are welcomed by Trahearne's gracious, rough-handed, but gentle and loving wife Melinda. Later that night, after Melinda and Trahearne have gone to bed, Sughrue contemplates Betty Sue's picture, and realizes he's fallen under her spell. Still later, as he's getting ready for bed, he discovers some of Melinda's sculptures, and sees that they all portray beautiful, fragile, traumatized women. He then goes to bed, knowing that in the morning he will "rise and do what [he] knew he had to do, to pay what [he] owed the women".

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

On the genre level, the narrative in this section continues to explore the dark side of humanity that other genre novels explore, but leavens the darkness with glimpses of more positive values; in particular, the descriptions of Rosie's vulnerability, Peggy Bain's longing, and the descriptions of Melinda's sculptures. There is the sense here that the suffering portrayed in each case echoes, reinforces, and illuminates the other, and awakens in Sughrue the compassion (at times misguided) that drives him to obsessively continue his search for the truth.

On the mystery level, the narrative brings one thread to an apparent close (i.e., the search for Betty Sue reaches a dead end) and brings the second (the relationships between Trahearne and his women) into focus. On this level it's interesting to note Trahearne's reaction to the porn film. Sughrue takes the intensity of his bad feeling to be reflective of Trahearne's feeling for Rosie, but the reality (that is, the truth that has become apparent by the end of the novel) is somewhat different. Trahearne has in fact recognized Melinda, and is upset because his control-obsessed, hypocritical, judgmental suspicions about her sexuality (that she's as much of a sexual animal as he is) are confirmed.

On the story-telling level, the main noteworthy element is the development of the character and history of Trahearne and his home life/situation, specifically the references to his mother. As the narrative continues, as more layers of truth are peeled away to reveal even more layers of twisted-ness, the information revealed here becomes essential to understanding later developments in the world of the variously obsessive Trahearne family. Another key element is Sughrue's reactions to the photo of Betty Sue and to Melinda's sculpture, reactions that propel him to resume his search in the following section.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

The next morning Sughrue tries to make himself go for a run, but doesn't get very far. He's put to shame by Melinda, who leaves him in her athletic dust. Later, he walks through the nearby woods and encounters Trahearne's feisty mother Edna, who bullies him into catching some fish for her. After he's struggled to catch some trout, he then cleans them and takes them up to Edna's house, where she lives with Catherine. The cool, sophisticated and sexy Catherine thanks Sughrue for the fish, and asks him to send her an invoice so he can be paid. She then says she's going in to take a shower, and Sughrue watches her go. Back at the ranch, a drunken Trahearne passes out at the dinner table, leaving Sughrue to make conversation with Melinda. As she tells him the story of her life (she is the wealthy heiress of a pair of life-loving, dead young parents), Sughrue comes to realize that it's time for him to move on and continue his quest for Betty Sue Flowers. Melinda tries to get him to stay, but he insists, leaving that night. He drives for nineteen hours straight and arrives in Oregon. After a good night's sleep, he searches out the commune where Betty Sue lived. He interviews the owner, who's now trying to sell the commune, and learns that Betty Sue was there, was great in bed, was over-weight, and left shortly afterwards with an older man that Sughrue realizes was Randall Jackson.

Sughrue arrives at Jackson's office in Denver, and immediately realizes that Jackson is involved with organized crime (the big bodyguard in the black suit, Torres, is a dead giveaway). At their first meeting Jackson denies knowing anything about Betty Sue, but after Sughrue follows him, kidnaps him at gunpoint, and takes him into the woods, he confesses that he had taken Betty Sue from the commune and prostituted her, but her first night out she was arrested. Afterwards, he says, she wanted nothing to do with him and went to the home of a woman (Selma Hinds) who helped young people get their lives back together. After dropping Jackson off, Sughrue realizes that he's more personally involved in the case than he'd thought. The following day he visits Selma Hinds at her secluded home. When he first arrives, he finds both the place and Selma very welcoming. Selma tells him that Betty Sue was indeed there and that she did recover from the events in her life that were troubling her, but that she died accidentally, was cremated, and had her ashes scattered about the farm. The disappointed Sughrue leaves, and checks the story in the records room of the local courthouse, where he finds Betty Sue's death certificate. "I cursed myself for a suspicious bastard", he says, "cursed the emptiness of my success, the long drive to California before the long drive home" When he returns to his motel room, he finds that Torres and some of Jackson's organized crime partners have arrived to punish him for what he did to Jackson. Sughrue realizes there's no point in fighting back, takes what the men dish out, and as they leave, Torres compliments him on how well he handled the beating.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

On the level of genre analysis, there are several key points to consider. The first is the appearance of Catherine who, in her vivid sexuality and determination to control, is the embodiment of the so-called "femme fatale", an archetype of dark-spirited ruthless womanhood common to narratives of this sort. The point must be made that the inclusion of this archetype, here and in other genre narratives, is not necessarily or automatically misogynist—there are positive portrayals of women here and elsewhere in this type of literature. The archetype is in fact, as all archetypes are, a distillation of a particular aspect of humanity (in this case, the sexually powerful controller), not a condemnatory statement of disgust for all woman-kind. Other genre-relevant elements are the appearance of two other archetypes, the all powerful, ruthless businessman (Jackson) and his bodyguard (Torres) and the archetype of the tough detective who can both dish it out and take it. The "it" in this context is violence, another archetypal element—in many ways, the language of blood and fists is the cynical language of choice in the world as portrayed in narratives of this sort.

On the level of mystery, it's important to note here that Selma Hinds is lying—that she knows full well the truth of what happened to Betty Sue, and is displaying considerable loyalty (perhaps misguided, but certainly idealistic) in keeping that truth a secret. And finally, on the level of story, the hints of sexuality offered by Catherine foreshadow Sughrue's eventual, or perhaps inevitable, sexual submission to her, while the somewhat surprising compliment from Torres foreshadows the perhaps equally surprising reasonable-ness he displays in chapter fifteen.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

When Sughrue tells Rosie that Betty Sue is dead, she refuses to believe it, angrily telling him to leave her bar and never come back. He drives to his acreage in Montana, where he recovers from the beating he received from Jackson's men. A few days later, Trahearne arrives, seeking refuge from what he suggests is too much caring for his welfare. The two men settle into a routine, with Sughrue working on getting his health back and Trahearne working on getting his writing back. Sughrue finds a draft of an overwrought, sentimentally written poem that he doesn't think is very good, but that he keeps anyway. Soon afterwards, Trahearne lapses back into his routine of binge drinking, and a week or so after he arrives, he takes off again.

After Trahearne leaves, Sughrue fills in temporarily at a strip bar he co-owns, and is surprised (and pleased) when Catherine Trahearne comes in looking for him and wanting to know the truth about what he and Trahearne did while Trahearne was gone. As Sughrue tells her the story, she behaves with aggressive seduction, and they end up in a hotel room together. In the aftermath of their sexual encounter, Catherine tells him the story of her relationship with Trahearne, starting with her being a war widow and continuing with how she fell in love with him only a short time after the death of her first husband. Sughrue realizes she's the woman Trahearne described earlier, and Catherine shocks him further by telling him the naked woman he was obsessed with was his mother. She also talks about how consistently unfaithful Trehearne was, how Melinda is just as consistently unfaithful as Trahearne, and that Trahearne has been unable to write since he and Melinda married. Finally, she confesses that she's been determined to have sex with Sughrue ever since they met, and wins over Sughrue's doubts about sleeping with a woman still connected to a man he considers a friend by first having more passionate sex with him, and then moving in for a few days and taking care of him. At the end of their romantic interlude, both she and Sughrue confess to having developed feelings for each other, but Catherine insists that the relationship cannot and will not continue. She tries to say goodbye with a polite kiss, but he kisses her passionately. She calls him a bastard and tells him it's the last one, and leaves without looking back. Sughrue spends the next few weeks trying to kill the pain and loss inside him, but doesn't quite succeed.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The principle genre-related developments in this section are connected to sexuality—specifically, Catherine's single-minded seduction of Sughrue, manipulatively entwined (as sexuality in other genre novels tends to be) with a revelation of what appears to be a vulnerability-based truth. In short, Sughrue falls for the same trick that other detectives in other genre narratives have fallen for—the irresistible combination of vulnerability,

sexiness, and apparent honesty that is in fact a mask for a cold, calculating ruthlessness.

Catherine's seductive appearance here is also relevant in terms of the mystery. The truth of what she's doing is that here, as she does throughout the book, is that she is attempting to manipulate Sughrue into helping her achieve her goal of getting Melinda out of Trahearne's life. Is Melinda as unfaithful as Catherine says she is? Melinda herself later hints that she's not, but in her own way she's as much a manipulator as Catherine, so it's hard to know whether she's lying or not. For his part, Trahearne is also manipulating Sughrue, in that he's still not certain that Melinda/Betty Sue is not having a lot of sex behind his back. He's doing this by sealing his friendship bond with Sughrue so that when the time comes for him to play his next card (the fake postcard that appears in the following section), Sughrue will be inclined to take up the trail again, this time for the sake of the friendship.

In terms of story, it's worth noting the contrast between what appears to be the honest vulnerability of Rosie and the manipulative vulnerability (obvious to the reader, if not to the helplessly horny Sughrue) of Catherine Trahearne. It's also worth noting the way more, and even darker, aspects of Trahearne's character are revealed. While it must be remembered that Catherine is a liar and that some of what she says is truth might just be manipulation, it's also important to consider whether there are important clues here as to why Catherine wants Trahearne back.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

While Sughrue is spending some time doing small jobs, he gets a phone call from Trahearne asking him to come down and visit, since Melinda's gone on one of her trips. Soon afterward, he gets a phone call from Rosie, saying she had a phone call from Jimmy Joe telling her that he had a postcard from Betty Sue. Sughrue immediately packs up the car and heads out to California, determined to talk to Selma Hinds and find out why she lied. As he's pulling into her driveway he sees Melinda's car, and puts two and two together—he realizes that Melinda is Betty Sue, that Trahearne suspected it, and that Trahearne had wanted Sughrue to do the work of finding out the truth. When Sughrue confronts Melinda and Selma with the truth, Selma goes to pieces, crying out that Melinda/Betty Sue is her daughter. After calming her down, Melinda/Betty Sue confesses the truth—that she ran away from home because she was pregnant, and that Griffith panicked because of her botched abortion (which led to infection, which led to a hysterectomy, the cause of the scar on her belly). She also says that after the surgery she disappeared into the hippie community of San Francisco, and that she got into trouble with Jackson and his gang and had to disappear. That, she says, is how she came to be with Selma, who gave her a chance to start a new life by claiming that the woman who died in the car accident, who was in fact Selma's daughter, was Betty Sue. Sughrue convinces her to call Rosie, Melinda/Betty Sue convinces him to come back to see her the following day, and the two of them give in to their attraction to each other and kiss—but go no further. As Melinda/Betty Sue goes back into Selma's house, Sughrue realizes he's in trouble, and in spite of thinking he should just get out of there, stays in a motel and plans to come back the next day as planned.

The next morning, Sughrue is dismayed to find Trahearne has caught up with him. As they drive to Hinds's house to find Melinda, Trahearne confesses that he sent Betty Sue's father the postcard, knowing that it would eventually get back to Sughrue and that Sughrue would go in search of her. He also confesses that he is driven by obsessive curiosity to know who Melinda (Betty Sue) is sleeping with on her trips away from their marriage, and adds that while she was on one of her trips he searched through her things and found a newspaper clipping from her theater days when she was working with Gleeson. He says when she went on the trip before this one he tracked down her mother (Rosie) in the hopes that she'd be able to at least start him on the track to finding her. Finally, he admits that when Sughrue came into the bar, he realized he Sughrue had the investigative skills he lacked.

When the two men arrive at Hinds's home, they're set upon by a shotgun wielding Selma and a couple of angry young people. Sughrue and Trahearne defend themselves and subdue the others, who tell them they were reacting to events earlier in the day—a group of large men wearing masks came to the house, shot the animals, and kidnapped Melinda. Sughrue realizes that one of the men was Jackson, and hatches a plan to get Melinda back. He enlists the help of one of the young people, Stacy, and sets about

trapping Jackson. Stacy, posing as a porn actress, lures Jackson back to a hotel, where he's beaten, tied up, and shot by Sughrue. Jackson tells him Melinda's been kidnapped by a man (Hyland) she swindled out of forty thousand dollars before she disappeared, and that Hyland plans to shoot several porn films with her and then kill her. Sughrue then forces Jackson to diagram Hyland's home, locks Jackson in the trunk of his car, and then heads off with Trahearne and Stacy to rescue Melinda.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

On all three levels of analysis (genre, mystery, story), these two chapters are essentially all about information, the revelation of a layer of truth that to a point answers many of the questions that have gone before. It's important to note, however, the different ways in which that information is revealed, and the various characters' reactions to that information. The first truth revealed is that of Melinda/Betty Sue, and there is the sense that for her it's something of a relief—Sughrue doesn't have to work to get the truth out of her because on some level she's eager to reveal it. It's also a relief for Sughrue, but in a different way. Whereas Melinda's relief is the result of no longer having to be burdened by keeping her past a secret, Sughrue's relief is the result not so much of having accomplished his quest but at finally having the chance to truly connect with the woman he's become somewhat obsessed with. There is some (legitimate) question of why he didn't make the connection between Melinda and the woman in the photograph, a question that isn't quite answered by the narrative's efforts to portray Melinda as having different hair, having lost weight, and disguising her body in baggy clothes. This may, in fact, be a case of veracity being either ignored or shaped in order to create a good story.

The second piece of information comes from Trahearne, when he pathetically admits to his obsession with his wife's sexual activities. For him this revelation is torturous, in that his feelings themselves are torturous—but he knows he still needs Sughrue's help, which is why he makes his pleading confession. For Sughrue, however, the revelation is infuriating, in that he resents being manipulated and lied to. The irony, of course, is that he's willing and able to be manipulated when it comes to the very sexual Catherine, and possibly even Melinda/Betty Sue. In fact, there is a legitimate question here as to why nobody calls either of these men on their hypocrisy. Trahearne is guilty of exactly the same thing (sleeping around while running away from home) he suspects Melinda of, yet seems to expect his women to be okay with it while he's furious if they try it. Meanwhile, as mentioned, Sughrue is furious at being manipulated by Trahearne, but is okay with being manipulated by Catherine. Why? This is where genre comes into play—traditionally, "hard-boiled" detectives are easily manipulated by beautiful, sexually available women partly because of their unavoidable sexual allure and partly because of their desperate need for human contact as represented by that allure. In other words, they're so often painfully alone that even contact under false pretenses is sought after, welcomed, and cherished.

The third important piece of information comes from Jackson, and is obtained by Sughrue through far more violent means than he obtains the other admissions. All three

means of revelation—the eager confession, the pathetic plea, and the violent beating—are all traditionally employed in genre novels, all move the mystery along, and all function as foreshadowing of later truths, confrontations, and complications.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Sughrue and Stacy stage an armed, violent assault on Hyland's home, where they find Melinda, subdue Hyland and his film crew, and shoot Torres (Jackson's bodyguard from chapter ten) into submission. Just as Sughrue is about to negotiate Melinda's freedom, Trahearne rushes in with his shotgun and upsets the entire scenario. In the resulting gunfire, Stacy accidentally kills Hyland and Sughrue shoots off Torres' hand. Trahearne grabs a weepy Melinda and runs back to the car. Sughrue sends Stacy outside to keep watch, and then sits down to negotiate with Torres. They make arrangements that will see Melinda go free, Hyland's death hushed up, Torres in a position to take over Hyland's profitable business, and Sughrue un-pursued—but, Torres insists, the arrangements will only go through if Melinda returns the forty thousand dollars she stole. Sughrue negotiates sixty days for her to get the money, and he and Torres part company. Sughrue rejoins the others, and they drop Jackson off at a hospital, return to their motel rooms, clean themselves up, have some food, and fall into several separate beds. In the night, Stacy experiences a shocked reaction to everything that happened, and wants Sughrue to make comforting love to her. He simply holds her, and she falls asleep—but not before she says that she knows he wants to be with Melinda. A short time later Melinda also wakes up, and Sughrue tells her the deal he made about the forty thousand. She confesses that she used the money to go to university and get a degree, adding that she's got a few thousand in the bank but doesn't know where to get the rest. Sughrue promises to help her find it, and in gratitude she offers herself to him. He gently pushes her away, saying it's because he knows she and Trahearne love each other. She, in turn, tells him she knows he loves her, but tells him he doesn't know her at all. After she goes to bed, Stacy (who seems to have overheard the conversation) invites Sughrue back to her bed. The next morning, they wake to find that Melinda and Trahearne have gone.

Chapter 15 Analysis

On the level of genre, this section embodies and manifests one of the genre's key principles, the previously suggested idea that violence is the only unequivocal means of communication in a world of users and liars, the only language of pure truth, connected to pure intention on both sides. This is the only reason Torres, perhaps surprisingly, proves as negotiable as he does—he knows Sughrue has no inhibitions when it comes to violence, and therefore if he wants to survive he has to be flexible.

On the level of mystery, further layers of secrets are peeled away as Melinda is forced to reveal what happened to the forty thousand dollars and Sughrue confronts both her, and himself, with what he sees as the nature of her relationship with Sughrue. This is the first stage in the development of a fascinating paradox—Melinda and Trahearne, as Sughrue suggests here, seem to truly love each other, but are also profoundly bad for

each other. Trahearne is unable to write when Melinda is around, and because of Catherine's determination to control Trahearne, he has brought forces of destruction into Melinda's life. Thus, the truth of their love for each other, like the truth referred to above, brings violence—not the violence of guns, but the spiritual violence of desire gone bad.

But then there's the character of Stacy, whose honesty, directness, vulnerability and fierceness all contrast vividly (and positively) with the manipulative-ness of Catherine, the lies and confusions of Melinda/Betty Sue, the pathetic desperation of Trahearne, and even the alcohol-sodden self-destructiveness of Sughrue. She is a force of life, where the other characters are a force of destruction and death. Interestingly, the truth of who she is and what she's about also becomes apparent as the result of violence—specifically, the confrontation with Sughrue at Selma Hinds' farm in chapter fourteen and the assault on Hylands here. Again, violence is a catalyst for/manifestation of truth—in Stacy's case, and for a moment even in Sughrue's, opening the door for genuine compassion and vulnerability.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

After a couple of days of takeout food, tender sex, and sleeping in, Sughrue takes Stacy back to Selma's. Selma thanks him for rescuing Melinda, and Sughrue says his goodbyes, heading for home. There he finds Trahearne has again shown up, again drunk and again complaining that he can't work. This time, however, he seems determined to end his life (by walking into the river), and the only way Sughrue can stop him is by punching him cold and taking him to the hospital. A few days later, after Trahearne has sobered up, he tells Sughrue of his determination to help Melinda get the forty thousand dollars by getting an advance from his publisher for a new book. He also says he needs to be sober to write, and offers to pay Sughrue to help him stay sober, adding that he doesn't know whether he truly loves Melinda but that he does know he can't live without her. Sughrue reluctantly agrees to do what he wants, and they drive back to Trahearne's ranch, where they find that Melinda has gone to California to sell some of her sculptures to help raise the forty thousand. As soon as Trahearne goes into the house, Sughrue is confronted by an angry Catherine, jealous because both he and Trahearne are working to help "that slut" Melinda. Later, Trahearne and Sughrue share their horror stories of the war, with Sughrue revealing that he accidentally killed a family of civilians in Vietnam (the "mistake" referred to in chapter four that ended his military career) and Trahearne revealing that he learned during the war how to kill—and how to live. Trahearne reveals his determination to make this novel different from his sentimental poetry and far fetched fiction—he's going to write, he says, about love and forgiveness, having learned about both through his experiences over the last few weeks. Later, Sughrue has an intense sexual encounter with Catherine in the garden, an encounter she wants to repeat the following night—when, instead of having sex with her, Sughrue makes a superficial joke about her age. When she reacts angrily, Sughrue walks away from her.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The main genre element in this chapter is Catherine's continued sexual manipulation of Sughrue, a manipulation broken only briefly by Sughrue's resistance. In chapter eighteen he once again gives in to her allure, again a genre characteristic. As previously discussed, the point must be made that this is not necessarily misogynistic—this sort of relationship suggests a male stereotype/archetype (helplessness in the face of sex) as much as a female one. Meanwhile, in terms of the novel's mysteries, the narrative might almost be described as dormant—that main truths at the core of each mystery (Melinda/Betty Sue's whereabouts, the nature of Trahearne's relationships with his women) are essentially revealed. Perhaps a better word than dormant might be smoldering—tensions resulting from those truths still exist, with the very lack of active narrative development suggesting that even bigger events than those already dramatized are about to come. In storytelling terms, this might be described as

foreshadowing by stillness, by mood and/or tone rather than by event ... the calm, as it were, before the storm.

Also in storytelling terms, the truth of the damage at the core of both the experience and the perspectives of Sughrue and Trahearne becomes apparent in their war stories, both of which make it clear why the two men put so much energy and effort (drinking, sex, etc.) into avoiding themselves. In the context of the cynical world view of the novel as a whole, these stories make the clear existentialist suggestion that life is suffering, and that even the positive aspects of it (the honest love and courage of Stacy, the deeply wounded artistry of both Trahearne and Melinda) aren't enough to bring that suffering to an end.

Chapters 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Summary

Sughrue and Traherne quickly settle into a routine, with Trahearne writing (in longhand) and Sughrue taking care of him. Catherine comes by to pick up the longhand and drop off the typed copy—only she, it seems, can read Trahearne's writing. After two weeks of this, Catherine confesses to wanting to go out, and Sughrue agrees to accompany her into town, where they go for drinks at a bar and then go for an illicit late night swim at Edna's hotel. After having sex, Catherine asks Sughrue whether Trahearne would ever let Melinda go, suggesting that if she stays Trahearne would fall back into his old routines and would be dead in a year and offering an envelope with three checks—ten thousand for his fees, forty thousand to pay Melinda's debt, and twenty thousand to pay Melinda to leave. Sughrue initially refuses, but then agrees to take the money and think about it. A few days later Melinda returns from her trip to California with new clothes, new hair, and a new attitude. As Sughrue drives her back to the ranch, she tells him she's found a gallery to sell her work, that she has five thousand dollars to go towards paying off her debt, that she reconciled with Rosie, and that she's decided to go back to her old name—Betty Sue Flowers.

That night, Sughrue is woken by gunfire and a woman screaming. He grabs his own weapon and rushes upstairs to find Trahearne and Betty Sue struggling over Trahearne's gun. Sughrue knocks Trahearne out, realizing that he smells like whiskey. After she helps Sughrue put her husband to bed, Betty Sue reveals that she had discovered Trahearne about to shoot himself. The police arrive, called by Edna, but between them, Catherine and Sughrue manipulate their way out of the situation. After the police leave, Sugrue finds Betty Sue preparing to go back home to her mother—she knows her presence isn't any good for Trahearne. Sughrue comments that it seems as though Trahearne couldn't handle dealing with "love and forgiveness", and she agrees. He also tells her about Catherine's offer of money but she refuses it, saying she wants to pay her own way. Sughrue tells her he's going to pay the forty thousand to Torres, since he's as much on the hook for it as she is. She thanks him and kisses him goodnight. Sughrue packs up to leave.

As he's packing, Sughrue discovers a piece of one of Betty Sue's sculptures—the tortured face of a beautiful woman. After contemplating it for a moment, he finishes packing and leaves, driving into town to call Torres to say he's got the money. After making the call, he sees Betty Sue's car behind the hotel and goes in to look for her, discovering her body in the pool with three bullet holes in it. He hides Betty Sue's money (the five thousand dollars from the sale of her art) and the checks (from Catherine), calls the police, and winds up in jail for two weeks on suspicion of murder. At one point he's visited by Catherine and Trahearne, and realizes they're probably back together. Eventually he's released, and drives out to California, where he gives Rosie the cash from the art sales and visits Betty Sue's grave. He also takes over for Rosie while she goes to visit family in Oklahoma. "While she was gone," he says, "I tended the bar, ran

the place, and spent my days waiting for him to show up". The "him" is Trahearne, who eventually does come in wanting to by Sughrue a drink, but Sughrue is having none of it, stopping just short of accusing Catherine of killing Betty Sue and of Trahearne manipulating the situation so that it could happen. Trahearne gets the hint he's not welcome and starts to leave. Sughrue tells him to go back home and wait—"some afternoon", he says, "you're going to step out on your front deck after a day of scribble ... and I'm going to put a 175-grain hunk of lead right through your gut." Trahearne laughs him off and goes. Sughrue goes back to work.

Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

Aside from Catherine's third attempt at sexual manipulation and the presence of surging emotional/physical violence, the first main genre-related element to consider in this concluding section is Sughrue's brush with the law. In genre narratives of this sort, the protagonist often ends up in conflict with the criminal justice system, but not always with the same outcome (freedom) as Sughrue—in many cases, when the femme fatale wins out (as she does here) her unwitting male victim is punished for her crime. Not so here. The second genre related element is the ending, in which the protagonist's (and by extension the novel's) jaded, cynical view of humanity and the world turns out to be justified—at the end of genre narratives like this, the world does seem to be a dark, destructive, corrupting, and corrupted place.

In terms of the novel's mysteries, the noteworthy element here is the entwining of the two plots—specifically, the way events of the one trigger events in the other. Betty Sue's triumphant reclamation of her life triggers both Catherine's attempt to re-assert control over her husband and Trahearne's suicide attempt, which in turn triggers Betty Sue's departure and Catherine's determination to eliminate her permanently. It's important to note here that throughout this section that for the most part, Sughrue is reduced to the function of a bystander. Aside from his refusal to participate in the destruction of Betty Sue by taking Catherine's money, Sughrue essentially does nothing as (perhaps inevitable) events unfold around him. This relative inaction could possibly be seen as another manifestation of the novel's genre-based perspective on existence—evil will win out, no matter what. This theory is supported by the fact that Trahearne seems unable or unwilling to write the novel he says he wants to write, about love and forgiveness—a pair of positive values that seem, in this world/genre/novel/perspective, to in fact have no value at all .. except as weaknesses to be exploited.

Finally, in terms of storytelling, this section clearly contains the novel's climax. Everyone's emotions are at a peak of intensity, the characters (other than the reactive Sughrue) take extreme, desperate, last minute actions to achieve what they want, and on a purely technical level, the stories come to a close. Catherine gets what she has wanted all along, so does Trahearne (in that once Betty Sue is out of his life he'll be able to write again), and Betty Sue's life is ended. Only Sughrue goes on—wounded, used, more cynical than ever and more convinced than ever that the world is a dark, destructive, chaotic place ... again, an aspect of the ending that's clearly genre related/defined.

Characters

C.W (Chauncey Wayne) Sughrue

Sughrue is the novel's central character and narrator, a hard-boiled private investigator in the novelistic tradition of Sam Spade, Mike Hammer, and other such characters. Like his literary counterparts, Sughrue has weaknesses for alcohol and beautiful women, simmering anger towards injustice, a flexible sense of morality, an ironic sense of humor, a tendency towards violence, a sharp mind, and a deeply cynical regard for the world and the people in it. Sughrue also has a certain sense of self-awareness that in many ways runs deeper in him than in other such characters—he knows and understands his weaknesses, and even has a clear sense of why they're such a driving, dominant part of him (e.g., his volatile history with his wayward father, with the army in Vietnam, and with women). He also, however, lacks the willpower and/or desire to stand up to and overcome his weaknesses, with the result that they occasionally overwhelm his common sense and get him into trouble. This is particularly true of his weakness for women, his tendency to smart-mouth before thinking, and his penchant for violence, all of which serve to trigger and/or increase the jeopardy he frequently faces throughout the narrative. Ultimately, the complex way Sughrue is portrayed suggests that his drinking, womanizing, joking, cynicism and morality all function as a kind of armor, protecting the lonely, deeply wounded, vulnerable child/man within from the darknesses of the world—there is the traditional belief, after all, that a cynic is in fact a wounded idealist. The irony for Sughrue, and for other such characters, is that the armor doesn't always work—the vulnerability comes through, the need for connection with something good (loving, affirming, just, pleasurable) surfaces, as it does here (i.e., the desire to help the lonely Rosie and find the bewitching Betty Sue), and once again Sughrue gets himself into trouble.

Abraham Trahearne

Trahearne is simultaneously a parallel and contrasting character to Sughrue. Both are attracted to beautiful, mysterious women, both have a tendency to drown their true feelings in alcohol, and beneath their crusty exteriors, both men are profoundly vulnerable. Both men have also been damaged by their involvement in war—Sughrue in Vietnam, Trahearne in World War II. But where Sughrue has at least a degree of professional and personal integrity, a modicum of competence, and a commitment (for the most part) to honesty, Trahearne has little or no integrity of any sort, is generally incompetent, and is a pathological liar. It might not be going too far to suggest that in psychological terms, Trahearne is a manifestation of Sughrue's shadow, his dark side, his rampaging desires unrestrained and un-tempered by ethics and/or integrity. It's important to remember, however, that while Trahearne is a user, he is deep down as vulnerable and as needy as Sughrue—witness the fact that so many women (Edna, Catherine, Melinda) are, in various ways and for various reasons, willing and/or driven to take care of him. Butt again, here can be seen a significant difference between the

two men—Trahearne uses his vulnerability to manipulate, whereas Sughrue never does. One last difference—Sughrue is significantly more self aware than Trahearne, acknowledging the deep-seatedness of his vulnerabilities and his inability to do anything about them. By contrast, Trahearne self-righteously (and delusively) believes his weaknesses are shallow, temporary, and will pass if only he can get down to his writing. Ultimately, Trahearne is weak—powerful and telling contrast to the stronger Sughrue, and the much stronger women in his (Trahearne's) life).

Catherine Trahearne

Catherine is Trahearne's ex-wife, a sexual, powerful, manipulative woman. She sets the action of the novel in motion by hiring Sughrue to find Trehearne, and later complicates both Sughrue's life and the plot first by seducing him and then by asking him to be the go-between in her attempts to bribe Melinda/Betty Sue to abandon her marriage to Trahearne. The novel's final chapter implies that when it seems that her attempts are failing, she shoots Melinda/Betty Sue in order to regain the control over Trahearne she desires. Like Sughrue, she is a character reminiscent of other similar characters in novels of this genre, the so-called "femme fatale".

Melinda Trahearne/Betty Sue Flowers

Melinda is Trahearne's second wife, a free-spirited sculptor who seems devoted to her husband, but at the same time is devoted to preserving her own sense of identity. The reason for this latter devotion becomes clear when, about two-thirds of the way through the novel, it's revealed that she is also Betty Sue, the rebellious, troubled young runaway that Sughrue has been searching for. In other words, after a traumatized youth Betty Sue went through a great deal to create a new identity for herself, and once that identity was created, Melinda became determined to leave the old identity left behind. She is something of a tragic character, in that her determination to live her own life leads ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, to her death.

Edna Trahearne

Edna is Trahearne's strong-willed and domineering mother, fixated on her son and determined to control his life. She allies herself with Catherine against Melinda, in an almost insane pursuit of dominance over a man too weak to resist them.

Rosie

Rosie runs the bar in Sonoma California where Sugrhue finds Trahearne. Desperate to find her long lost daughter, she hires Sughrue to search for her even though he's convinced the trail has long gone cold. Like Sughrue and Trahearne, she covers up her need and vulnerability with a tough exterior, albeit less successfully—there is the very clear sense that her vulnerability, loneliness, and need are actually quite close to the

surface. Ultimately, however, there is the sense at the end of the novel, when she is told that her beloved daughter is dead, that the strength and courage she manifests as armor in fact runs quite deep, and that she will survive the pain of her daughter's death in the same way as she's survived her life—wounded, but intact.

Jimmy Joe Flowers

Jimmy Joe is Rosie's ex-husband and Betty Sue's father, a cruel, selfish, insensitive man. Rosie describes him as no good; when Sughrue finally makes contact with him, that's exactly what he turns out to be.

Charles Gleeson, Albert Griffith, Prof. Richter, Peggy Bain,

These characters are all people interviewed by Sughrue in his quest to find Betty Sue. Gleeson is her old drama teacher, Griffith her old boyfriend, Richter an expert in pornography, Bain a friend from high school, Jackson a pimp and porn producer, and Hinds a friend and mentor. All provide key information that help Sughrue piece together the puzzle of what happened to Betty Sue. Sughrue has to go through varying degrees/types of manipulation in order to get the truth from them, with Peggy Bain being the most easily forthcoming and Randall Jackson being the most resistant. Ultimately, however, Sughrue's capacity for physical and/or verbal violence gets him the information he needs.

Torres

Torres is Jackson's bodyguard, big and tough and connected with organized crime, but when faced with the realities of violence and the possibility of jail, he proves himself a deft negotiator willing to compromise—to a point.

Stacy

Stacy is a young woman encountered by Sugrhue in his quest for Betty Sue. She is initially violent towards him, as the result of her belief that he's one of the men who assaulted Selma Hinds in her home (there is the sense that Stacy, whose background is not explored in detail, is one of the strays, human or animal, that Hinds takes in and rehabilitates). Eventually, however, she becomes a valuable ally in Sughrue's struggle to free Melinda from the clutches of the pornographers, and eventually becomes another of the women drawn to Sughrue's vulnerability and prepared to nurture that vulnerability sexually.

Fireball

Rosie's aged, feisty bulldog. He adopts Sughrue, or Sughrue adopts him, as a companion. Together they travel the Western states in search of Betty Sue, Trahearne, and the truth. Fireball meets his unfortunate end when he's caught in the gunfire that kills Melinda/Betty Sue in the novel's final chapter. He can be seen as representing Rosie's determination to find her daughter and bring her home alive, a determination that (like the dog) accompanies Sughrue throughout his quest and ends with Melinda/Betty Sue's death.

Lester and Oney

These two drunks are regulars at Rosey's bar. Their short tempers trigger the confrontation in chapter one that results in Trahearne getting shot. Later in the novel, their drunken sentimentality leads them to bury Fireball in front of the bar.

Objects/Places

Rosie's Bar

The bar in Sonoma, California is where Sughrue's search for Trahearne ends and his search for Betty Sue begins. Seedy and rough around the edges, it's the kind of place both Sughrue and Trahearne feel at home in and therefore seek out.

San Francisco

The city on the coast of California is the first stop on Sughrue and Trahearne's search fro Betty Sue. In the novel, it has the reputation for being the kind of place where young people could easily disappear, with its community of anti-establishment, drug-using, free-loving free thinkers. By contrast, it's portrayed as a place where young people like Betty Sue get physically, emotionally, spiritually, and sexually lost, with their bodies and or their spirits often destroyed by their experiences there.

Betty Sue's Picture

Rosie gives Sughrue a picture of her daughter to help make finding her easier. In the picture, Betty Sue is beautiful and enchantingly attractive. As a result of both looking at the picture and thinking about it, Sughrue develops feelings for Betty Sue (or at least the idea of her) that, if not love, at least drive him to continue the search for her long after the trail seems cold and her death seems an inevitable fact.

The Porn Film

The film is the first clue that suggests to Sughrue what might have happened to Betty Sue after she left home. He recognizes a woman in the film as the girl in the picture—even though the woman has longer hair, is overweight, is stoned, and seems to be more sexually open-minded than he would like the girl in the photograph (for whom he has strong feelings) to be.

Cauldron Springs

This small town in Montana was, according to narration, built around a hotel that was itself built around a mineral spring. The town, and the Trahearne family homes around it, is the setting for many of the novel's key confrontations.

Trahearne's Ranch

The home Trahearne shares with his second wife Melinda is situated just outside Cauldron Springs. Melinda (a sculptor) has a studio there, Trahearne writes there, and Sughrue stays in one of the spare bedrooms on the frequent occasions when he returns there with Trahearne.

Edna and Catherine's Home

Edna and Catherine Trahearne live in a large house just down the road from Trahearne's ranch. The location gives both women an opportunity to keep a domineering eye on the man they both so desperately want to control.

Melinda's Sculptures

These works in clay, as described by Sughrue, all include portrayals of beautiful women, troubled, proud or both. As such, they can be seen as representing not only Melinda's view of her own personal journey (from troubled soul to created, beautiful identity) but also the novel's perspective on all its women characters.

Sughrue's Acreage

A few hours away from Cauldron Springs, Sughrue has a semi-finished home to which he retreats after a difficult job (such as the pursuits of Trahearne and/or Betty Sue). It's a place of safety, comfort and refuge, even though it doesn't have a proper roof. Other characters (particularly Trahearne and Fireball, the bulldog) take refuge there with him.

The Hotel in Cauldron Springs/the Pool

The hotel was built around the pool, which was fed by hot mineral springs. The hotel was the first thing purchased by Edna in her revenge-driven determination to take over the town that had run her off (chapter eight). This makes the choice of the hotel and the pool as settings for a number of the novel's key confrontations metaphorically significant.

Trahearne's Writing

Trahearne's writing, both in terms of the actual works he's produced and the works he's striving to produce, is a defining aspect of his life and character. The novels from which he made his fortune (see chapter eight) represent the superficial and irrational aspect of his character, while the muddled imagery of his sentimental poetry (see chapter eleven) represents his lack of clarity in his feelings about the women in his life. Finally, his

inability to write the novel about "love and forgiveness" represents his inability to deal genuinely with emotion, his own and that of others.

Alcohol

Throughout the novel, alcohol is the anesthetic of choice for many of the characters. Sughrue and Trahearne in particular protect themselves from their feelings, and the reality triggering those feelings, by drinking themselves into a stupor on almost every conceivable occasion. In terms of other characters, Catherine protects herself from feelings of guilt and responsibility by drinking, Stacy protects herself from feelings of remorse and shock, and Rosie protects herself from grief and loss. Even Lester and Oney, the two drunken regulars at Rosie's bar, protect themselves from reality by drinking. In other words, the prevalence of alcohol suggests the prevalence of an inability to deal with reality, a manifestation of the novel's secondary theme relating to the inability to escape the past—alcohol becomes, in a sense, the only way that such escape is possible.

Themes

Spiritual Corruption

As previously discussed in terms of character, "The Last Good Kiss" has many characteristics in common with other narratives of the so-called "hard boiled" or "film noir" genre (novels, films, television, theater). In terms of theme, this commonality extends to a cynical emphasis on the way lives can be corrupted by power, sex, violence, love, and money, either on their own or in combination. Corruption on all five levels exists in this narrative, but by far the most corrupting is sex. Sughrue's professional and personal integrity is corrupted by his sexual desire for Catherine, a desire she carefully and deliberately manipulates. It could also be argued that he is also corrupted by his obsession, albeit more idealized, with Betty Sue. Meanwhile, Trahearne's creativity is corrupted by his sexual desire and obsession with Melinda, while his sexual integrity is corrupted by his youthful sexual fascination with his mother (although when Catherine, in chapter twelve, makes this suggestion, it's not entirely clear that she's telling the truth). Finally, Betty Sue's innocence is corrupted by her sexual desire for just about anyone. While it's important to note that sexual corruption in "The Last Good Kiss" entwines inextricably with the other forms of corruption, it's also important to recognize the thematic truth at the core of the portrayal of corruption here and in other similar novels. This is the cynical belief that such corruption is inescapable and inevitable, that it's everywhere—a fundamental aspect of being a member of the human race.

Layers of Identity

Most of the novel's principal characters hide their true selves between layers of masks and other identities. The most overt manifestation of this is Melinda/Betty Sue, who conceals the truth of who she is beneath not only a different name and different physical appearance, but as described in most of the novel beneath baggy, ill fitting clothing. It's important to note here that for her the new identity is not false, just different—she completely redefined herself and her life, with the new name and appearance as a manifestation of it. Her eventual return to her old identity suggests that the truth of who she is is ultimately inescapable (an aspect of the narrative that reflects the novel's third key theme, explored below). Meanwhile, other characters also strive to conceal their true (wounded?) selves beneath layers of assumed identity. Sughrue conceals the wounded-ness and vulnerability of both his childhood and adult selves beneath a mask of cynicism, drunkenness, and sharp wit, while Trahearne conceals his failings and ineffectualness in a similar mask. Even minor characters like Gleeson, Griffith, and Selma Hinds conceal the truths in their lives beneath masks of affability, professionalism, and friendliness, respectively. It's important to note, however, that for all these characters the truth beneath the masks proves impossible to suppress, and is inevitably revealed—again, a manifestation of the novel's third theme, discussed below.

All that said, it's important to note the characters who conceal relatively little, either by choice or by inevitability. Catherine temporarily masks her sexual rapaciousness and desire to control Trahearne, but not for long and not successfully. Edna makes absolutely no secret of her gruff desire to control her son's life, in the same way that Torres makes no secret of his opportunism, ruthlessness, and greed. Stacy and Rosie are, in many ways, the characters with the simplest, purest, most honest sense of integrity in the book—they are who they are, they feel what they feel, and they say what they think.

The Inability to Escape the Past

For most of the characters, the truth they're striving to mask is anchored (mired down?) in feelings and incidents from their pasts. Sughrue's traumatized childhood and military service, Trahearne's history with his mother, Betty Sue's sexually exploitative time in San Francisco, Selma Hinds' loss of her daughter, Edna's bitterness at being run out of town, Catherine's fury at Trahearne's infidelity—for all of them, the past defines present. It might not be going too far to suggest that these characters are all trapped by their pasts, with many of them striving, in their own ways, to escape, and with a few (notably Catherine and Edna) living in a kind of twisted celebration of them. In all these cases, however (and even in the cases of minor characters like Gleeson, Griffith, and Jackson), the novel's various narrative lines make the consistent point that the past is ultimately inescapable—that it must be confronted, accepted and dealt with, and not with alcohol, random sexual encounters, a new identity, violence, or simple avoidance. Here again Stacy and Rosie are important characters, serving to illuminate a thematic point by contrast. In this case, both confront their pasts by acting in the present, and both emerge from their confrontations wounded but resolved, stronger, and relatively whole. Might the same be said of Catherine and Edna? Not really—both act to turn the present back into the past, striving to trap others (notably Trahearne and Melinda/Betty Sue) in their twisted vision of a reality that, by rights, ought to have been transcended long ago.

Style

Point of View

The novel, like many of this genre, is narrated from the first person subjective point of view—specifically, that of Sughrue, the central character and protagonist. This point of view is effective on several levels. First, it places the reader in a similar position to that of the narrator, as both struggle to put the pieces of the novel's mystery together. Second, it draws the reader into the narrator's mind, not just in terms of his thought processes as he strives to solve the mystery but also in terms of the feelings, memories, and experiences that he becomes aware of during that process of striving. In other words, it draws the reader into the broader range of Sughrue's experience, making him a much more complex and engaging character than other, often shallowly drawn, detective figures in narratives of this genre. Third, the language and attitudes and perspective of the point of view are immediately and clearly idiosyncratic—there is the very clear sense of an individual telling a story, as opposed to a story simply being told. Finally, the first person point of view adds a degree of intensity and immediacy to the narrative, affording the reader a more visceral experience of both the physical and emotional violence of the narrative. This makes it difficult for the reader to escape, or at least be unaffected by, the novel's cynicism about the way the world works—Sughrue has very little regard for humanity, and by the time the reader has finished the book, it's doubtful that s/he will either.

Setting

The most important element of the novel's setting is its restlessness, with the action moving constantly back and forth between California, Oregon, and various locations in Montana. There is the sense, in fact, that setting echoes character, in that Sughrue, Trahearne, and Melinda/Betty Sue, all experience a profound and irresistible restiveness, a reluctance to stay in one place too long—perhaps a manifestation of their desire to avoid the respective truths in their respective pasts. Another important element of setting is the sense that nowhere in the wanderings of either the characters or the narrative is there a place of purity, of simple honesty, of nature or of integrity. Selma Hinds' home in the woods, initially welcoming, turns out to be a place of both lies and violence, while the hippie commune in Oregon, for all its natural beauty and idealism, turns out to be as much of a home for cynicism (in the avaricious desperation of the commune owner) as anywhere else. Even Sughrue's ramshackle but much loved home in the wilds of Montana turns out to be corruptible, as Trahearne invades with his self-loathing, his manipulations, his fears, and his desperation to escape his life. A final important element of setting is the time in which the action is set. While the narrative never actually sets a specific time, a note on the title page indicates it was first published in the late 1970s, a period of deep cynicism and wounded-ness (as the result of the events of the Vietnam War) in American culture and society . . . both aspects of the life and belief systems of the central character, CW Sughrue.

Language and Meaning

On one level, Sughrue speaks and thinks (and narrates his story) in language that has clear and perhaps deliberate echoes of other narrators in this genre. The cynicism, the edgy wit, the bluntness, and the occasional dark poeticism are all welcomingly familiar, almost archetypal, to readers of this sort of book. It's interesting to note, however, a distinct lack of foreshadowing—where many novels of this genre might include references to impending trouble and/or hints of truths to be later revealed, "The Last Good Kiss" generally avoids them. This lends a sense of immediacy to the experience of reading the book—there is an overall feeling of being drawn into a deepening and unavoidable spiral into shadowy, disturbing human truths. In other words, the reader has no warning of what's coming, making the shock of what arrives that much more intense. That being said, in many ways the use of language here is quite idiosyncratic—the narrator is not a generic private eye dealing with generic evil, he is a clearly defined individual writing and feeling and thinking and acting in response not only to the events of the story but to his own life and experience. Ultimately, both the archetypal and individualized aspects of the narrative's language come together in a clearly definable perspective—human existence is corruptive, destructive, and deadly. In short, the meaning of life, according to the genre of the novel, the specific narrative, and the specific individual defining that narrative, is death.

Structure

"The Last Good Kiss" is structured in a straightforward, linear fashion—event and/or conversation leads to investigation, which leads to discovery, which leads to another event/conversation, which leads to investigation, and so on. This is the traditional structure of novels of this genre, and indeed of mystery novels in general. Within that traditional form, however, there are occasions in which the narrative occasionally takes what seems to be an unnecessary diversion. Examples of this are the section in chapter eight (Sughrue and Trahearne's weekend of debauchery), and the gratuitous conversation between Sughrue and the Cauldron Springs sheriff in chapter nineteen. There are also occasional detours into overly detailed description, which tend to slow down the action. These include Sughrue's visits to Gleeson, Griffith and Peggy Bain, Sughrue's second visit to Selma Hinds, and the assault on the porn producer's home, which are all described with such minute and lengthy specificity that a reader might reasonably want the narrative to "get to the point". Finally, descriptions of drunkenness, traveling and sex tend to become both repetitive and numbing after a while. It may be that the intention here is to give the reader a sense of the numbness at work in the lives of both Sughrue and Trahearne, but the lines between evocative, repetitive and dull can be very fine, and come very close to being crossed here. The result is a certain lack of narrative momentum—yes, there is the sense of spiraling darkness discussed earlier, and the sense that reaching the heart of the spiral is inevitable, but very little sense that the spiral is deepening quickly. In other words, for a crime novel the sense of suspense generated by the narrative is surprisingly languid.

Quotes

"In the years that I had spent looking for lost husbands, wives, and children, I had learned not to think that I could stare into a one-dimensional face and see the person behind the photograph ..." p. 5

"This could just as easily have been my place, a home where a man could drink in boredom and repent in violence and be forgiven for the price of a beer." p. 9

"Even little displaced Okie girls grow up longing to be gone with some far better wind than that hot, cutting, dusty bite that's blowing their daddy's crops to hell and gone." p. 25

"I checked Gleeson's glass. Cranberry juice and a ton of vodka. He was either a secret tippler, a pathological liar, or more nervous about my visit than he cared for me to know." p. 43

"Youth endures all things, kings and poetry and love. Everything but time." p. 51

"I didn't have much of a picture of Betty Sue Flowers yet, but just the mention of her name seemed to drive grown men to drink." p. 54

"'Stories are like snapshots, son, pictures snatched out of time ... with clean hard edges. But this was life, and life always begins and ends in a bloody muddle, womb to tomb, just one big mess, a can of worms left to rot in the sun.'" p. 71.

"... Betty Sue ... seemed to step into the degradation freely, without joy but with a stolid determination to do a good job." p. 78

"[Trahearne] wrote about the things he saw on his binges, about the road, about small towns whose future had become hostage to freeways, about truck-stop waitresses whose best hope is moving to Omaha or Cheyenne, about pasts that hung around like unwelcome ghosts, about bars where the odd survivors of some misunderstood disaster gathered to stare at dusty brown photographs of themselves, to stare at their drinks sepia in their glasses. But he never wrote about home." p. 96

"I was like the rest of them now, I suspected, I wanted her to fit my image of her, wanted her back like she might have been, but I feared the truth of it was that she wanted to stay hidden, to live her own life beyond all those clutching desires." p. 105.

"I had the uneasy impression that [Catherine] had told me she was going to shower not out of politeness but rather so I would think of her tanned and naked body standing under the rush of hot sudsy water." p. 115

"When I shoved the piece in his back ... I had wanted to pull the trigger as badly as I had ever wanted anything, pull it and pull it until I had blown him all over the sidewalk. I

thought about what Peggy Bain had said about me being willing to kill just to stand in line for Betty Sue. I thought about it, but the line just seemed too damned long." p. 130.

"'sometimes I wonder if I haven't topped the last good woman, had the last good drink out of the bottle, and written the last good line ... and I can't seem to remember when it happened, can't remember at all ... I can't remember when it happened, where it went." p. 143.

"[Catherine] still loved Trahearne, still maintained her secret fidelity as if it were a miniature Japanese pine, as tiny and perfect as a porcelain cup, lost in the dark and tangled corner of a once-formal garden gone finally to seed." p. 157.

"When I tell folks I've never been married, I neglect to mention the fact that I've been engaged about forty times." p. 160.

"That crazy, goddamned Trahearne had been leading me around by the nose from the moment I had found him in Rosie's ... he wanted me to look for Betty Sue Flowers, wanted me to nose around in her past, like a hungry dog turning up the buried bones and ripe flesh of her life so he could have an excuse for the bitter taste in his own mouth, the stink of corruption in his nose." p. 163

"I told myself that if I didn't watch out, Trahearne's women were either going to break my heart or change my life or be the death of me." p. 170

"'I used to look forward to the day when I got too old to give a damn about women. I used to think that when that day came, all that wasted energy I spent chasing them would go into my work. I thought I'd grow old and wise, sexless as an oracle ... it came on me sooner than I expected, it drove me crazy ... and when Melinda rekindled the fires, I was so grateful that I married her.'" p. 220

"'I made myself watch, made myself not flinch, and then I knew what the war was about. It wasn't about politics or survival or any of that shit, it was about killing without flinching, about living without flinching ... that's how I've lived ever since that night, and that's what's wrong. If you can't flinch, you might as well be dead.'" p. 225

"Seventy thousand dollars seemed as light as a feather, yet so heavy that my hand could barely hold it up." p. 236

Topics for Discussion

Which of the novel's kisses is "The Last Good Kiss" of its title—Catherine and Sughrue's at the airport? Stacy and Sughrue's after the rescue of Melinda/Betty Sue? Melinda/Betty Sue's and Sughrue's, also after the rescue? Or one of the other kisses? Explain your answer.

Consider the reference to the Cauldron Springs Hotel in "Objects/Places—The Hotel in Cauldron Springs". What is the metaphoric value of setting two of the novel's key confrontations (between Catherine and Sughrue in chapter seventeen and between Melinda/Betty Sue and the person who killed her in chapter nineteen) in this location?

In what ways does the corrupting influence of power and the desire for power play out in the novel? Who has power over whom? Who wants power over whom? How do people go about getting and/or manifesting power? Why do they want it? Also consider in these terms the respective corrupting powers of love, money, and violence.

Discuss the relationships between Sughrue and the three women he becomes involved with—Melinda/Betty Sue, Catherine Trahearne, and Stacy. What exactly are his feelings for each of them? Are any of his romantic feelings genuine? Why or why not? Is he as much a user as they are? Why or why not?

Discuss the possible reasons for Catherine wanting control over Trahearne's life. Is she interested in control for its own sake? Does she, on some level, sense that he's a deeply troubled individual and needs her help in order to simply survive? Does she believe in his work so much that she'll do whatever she has to do (i.e., get rid of Melinda) in order for him to write again?

Study another narratives of this genre (a crime novel of Dashiell Hammett, the films Body Heat and/or The Maltese Falcon, and others). Compare and contrast the basic elements of character, relationship and theme—where are the similarities? Where are the differences? Discuss whether the view of the world/humanity as portrayed in works of this sort is justified.

Early in the novel Sughrue raises the question of forgiveness—more specifically, of being forgiven or of being redeemed. In what way might his actions throughout the novel be considered in this light; in other words, might he be on a search for redemption? What might he need to be redeemed for? If he is on such a search, what avenue does he pursue? Does he achieve his goal? Why or why not?