

# **The Life-Writer Study Guide**

## **The Life-Writer by David Constantine**

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# Plot Summary

Note: This study guide specifically refers to the October 2016 Second Biblioasis Paperback Edition of *The Life-Writer* by David Constantine.

*The Life-Writer*, a novel by David Constantine, is about moving on in life after loss. A widowed Katrin seeks to write about her deceased husband's life. As she tells his story, she is learning about every step that he took along the way. Katrin's purpose for writing her husband's biography is to help her move on with her own life.

When the novel begins, Eric is dying of cancer. Katrin, much younger than Eric, thinks that her husband's death is unfair. She wants Eric to fight as long as he can. Eric makes Katrin promise him that she will not give up on writing or fall out of touch with their mutual friends. In other words, Eric wants Katrin to go on living when he is gone. She agrees to do so. Katrin, a university professor, focuses on giving recognition to obscure, unknown, or overlooked figures in the European Romantic movement through her writing.

Before Eric dies, he begins to recount the time when he went backpacking across France to meet up with friends, including Daniel. However, Eric never finishes the story. After Eric's death, life seems pointless to Katrin. She is heartbroken, sad, and lonely. Intrigued by how little she knows about his past and realizing it is the only desire she currently has in life, Katrin decides that she will write about Eric's life. She begins by reaching out to everyone, from Daniel to Eric's ex-wife, Edna, to Eric's son, Thomas, and so on. Katrin desperately wants to know about Daniel's past because so much of it occurred before she was even born, and she feels as if she is always playing catch-up.

At the same time Katrin undertakes her project, she sees Dr. Liz Gracie, a therapist, who helps her deal with her grief over Eric. Gracie is also supportive of Katrin's undertaking, urging her to use it to help her move on. As Katrin works, she comes to discover that Eric and Daniel were both restless in college, which is what led them to France. It was during this visit that Daniel introduced Eric to a gorgeous French girl named Monique with whom Eric ended up having a relationship (something Katrin finds herself very jealous of), and it was during this visit that Eric caught a ride with a kind old French gentleman who gave Eric a handful of silver coins.

As Katrin works, she realizes that her research and writing are what are keeping her going, and keeping Eric close to her. She also comes to learn that Eric was very much human, and made mistakes. After Monique, Katrin learns, Eric began dating Edna – whom he forced to have an abortion which Edna in turn held over his head through their brief marriage (from which Thomas was born). As Katrin works, she sends away all of the books belonging to Eric, and decides to have the house remodeled as a physical step toward moving on. Katrin also learns that Gracie has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and she dies not long afterward.

As the novel comes to a close, Katrin decides to travel to France with Daniel, where she meets Monique. Monique, herself married to a much older man, fills in some of the missing pieces of Eric's story. She and Monique agree to meet again in the near future so that Monique can finish telling her story. It is then that Monique gives Katrin the silver coins, for they were given to Monique many years before by Eric.

# Chapters 1 – 4

## Summary

Chapter 1 – Eric and his much younger wife are discussing the future. Eric says he does not want to end up like his friend Dennis, doing nothing else but trying to find ways to cling onto life to avoid death. Katrin says she does not want Eric to be like Dennis, but she also does not want Eric to give up. Eric says he has not, and promises he will not. Eric also worries that his diagnosis (terminal cancer) will age Katrin prematurely. Katrin hates that Eric smokes cigarettes, but Eric doesn't feel as if it matters anymore that he does. After dinner, Katrin, a writer, goes up to her study to work, but can only think about Eric. Talking with Eric again, Eric explains he has seen the future and knows it cannot be avoided, but he will try to fight. They come to an understanding in which Eric says he will fight and Katrin will leave him with his outlook on the future. Eric makes Katrin promise him that she will not abandon her writing after his death. He also makes her promise him that she will keep in touch with their mutual friends.

Katrin will get everything, while Eric's payments to Edna will stop. Time passes, and Eric grows weaker. Katrin spends all the time she can with Eric, and the two read aloud to one another. It causes reflections on how Eric would spend his Thursday afternoons in the past reading Proust to Anton, a former surgeon suffering from motor neuron disease. Friends and family call for updates. Sometimes, they visit. Among the visitors is Eric's lifelong friend, Daniel. One night in February, Katrin awakens to give Eric his dose of morphine, only to find him already awake, saying he has been waiting for her. He explains there were four of them –Smithy, Vince, Daniel, and himself, and Daniel will soon be the only surviving member of the group. Eric explains that when he was younger, he set off for Vizille in the south of France based on an inner vision, seeking to begin by taking the ferry from Dover.

Chapter 2 – Eric's funeral comes. Katrin is heartbroken over Eric's death, but she does her best to be gracious at the funeral. Eric's forty-five year-old son, Thomas, is present, as is Eric's brother, Michael. Daniel speaks with Katrin, asking her if she invited Edna. Katrin explains Edna never responded. A woman named Monique, speaking French, arrives late and apologizes, saying she had gotten lost. She tells Daniel it is good to see him again. Monique gives Katrin a gift of a fired black bowl decorated with a rose inside and cherries outside. After the funeral, Monique and Daniel leave together. Katrin then sets her mind to staying busy, cleaning the house, but spends the next week doing nothing. She begins to feel badly, thinking she should have helped Eric along in his philosophy regarding the end of his life. She decides to honor Eric and live up to her promises of continuing to work, keep up with friends, and live.

Chapter 3 – Katrin, known professionally as Dr. Katrin Szuba, is a writer of short lives as Walton and Johnson did before her, but she chooses to focus on unknown figures in European Romanticism. She finds the ambition, talent, and work of these figures to be wonderful, though they never gained the fame or recognition they deserved. Katrin feels



for them, and through her writing, hopes to give them the credit they never had. Katrin seeks to assemble nine such figures, and to call the book *Nine Lives*. Preparing to work, Katrin cries and becomes sick to her stomach. In the corner of the attic is Eric's old wooden trunk and carrier bags. They are full of old letters and other things relating to his life. Katrin goes into the trunk, knowing Eric never asked her not to read or go through anything inside. She can hear Eric's voice urging her not to go into the past, but Katrin has a desire to learn more, and does not want to live a life without desire.

Chapter 4 – Katrin pulls out the oldest letters at the bottom of the trunk, first. They date from 1962, and some of them are postmarked from France. Katrin then goes to Eric's desk downstairs, where he had laid out their finances while he still could. He also left notes regarding finances, such as to stop payments to Edna and that Thomas does not require any financial help. Katrin then sends an e-mail to the university, saying she will resume work once she is able. She decides she will deal with the living rather than the dead, all relating to Eric.

## Analysis

Life is about more than trying to avoid death –or to live life around death. To move past grief, one must move on in life. Eric's philosophy (and the thematic argument that David Constantine makes) is clear when Eric tells Katrin that he does not want to live his life revolving around trying to just stay alive. He worries that Katrin may also dwell on his death rather than her own life. For that reason, he encourages her to keep living by making her promise she will keep to her writing and will keep up with mutual friends.

At first, Katrin can only dwell on Eric's death. Human emotion, the author contends, is the primary motivator in life. This is why Katrin dwells on Eric's death: she is utterly and totally in love with him, and losing him has left her life empty and cold. Reason tells Katrin she needs to move on, but emotion tells Katrin life will never be the same without Eric, and so she is in mourning.

As the novel gets underway, the reader is exposed to the structure of the novel. Much of it will be narrated in third-person, while some will take the form of letters and Katrin's own first-person considerations through her writing. This weaving back and forth between narrative modes (such as stream-of-consciousness and present-tense speaking) and narrators will demonstrate Constantine's thematic argument that every person's story deserves to be told –not merely Eric's, but Katrin's as well as all those lives touched by Eric, and whom Katrin will come to ask about the past. This is exemplified through her decision in Chapter 4 to deal with the living rather than the dead, meaning that she will, seek out the help of those people associated with Eric's life in an effort to learn more about Eric. The funeral demonstrates how little Katrin knows about Eric's past –from Monique's mysterious appearance to the story Daniel begins to tell of a journey made during his youth, but does not finish.

Katrin begins her journey with the idea that everyone's story does need to be told. She herself is a life-writer of short biographies, focusing on obscure, unknown, ignored, or



overlooked figures in European Romanticism. It is not that these people did not have skill, talent, or lives worthy of consideration, but they simply never gained the recognition they deserved for one reason or another. Katrin sets things right by writing about them. Her latest work is to be called *Nine Lives* –a pun on a cat having nine lives and there being nine figures she will write about, meaning that cats cheat death, and those Katrin writes about will cheat death in a way by being resurrected in her book all these years later. In a way, she wants to resurrect Eric as well through learning about his life.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Eric's opinion on his impending death? What is Katrin's opinion? Why do the two disagree?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Eric urge Katrin to do after he dies? What is Katrin's response to this? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Eric's funeral demonstrate to Katrin regarding Eric's life? What does it prompt her to do? Why?

## Vocabulary

lurid, mused, efficacious, ineluctable, anguish, interlude, astute, diminution, rapturous, solemnity, estranged, conjuring, exaltation, colloquy, admonishing, existentially, propitious

# Chapters 5 – 8

## Summary

Chapter 5 – In a letter to Daniel dated April 7, 2012, Katrin explains the progress she has made on her work, and wants to know if Daniel has any of his own letters so that Katrin could see what he and Eric wrote to one another. She explains that just before his death, Eric spoke of meeting Daniel in Vizille, but only got as far as heading to Dover. Katrin also directly asks Daniel for help in filling in the pieces of Eric's life. After sending the letter, Katrin considers how 1962 seemed to be a seminal year in Eric's life, for it is 1962 that seems to be the entry to the truth of his life. She works to put everything into a chronology, including not only letters, but photos, records, and other documents she finds around the house. She knows Eric was born in 1943 and married Edna in 1964. She also does her best to remind herself to be objective, and remain focused on 1962 as the single most important year. Katrin also has a bundle of letters from Monique, and considers what she knows about Monique. She knows Eric met Monique in Paris in September 1962, and that they met for the last time in early 1963. She knows Monique was born in Nevers, France, in 1944, and worked as a potter among other creative jobs. Beyond this, Eric did not want to talk about that part of his life, because it was over and he had Katrin now.

Chapter 6 – Katrin meets with Dr. Gracie, fifty-two years old and in remission from breast cancer. Gracie is Katrin's doctor, and urges her to eat healthy. Katrin reports some pain in her ribs. Katrin does not want to live anymore without Eric, but her work propels her onward. She realizes she is not upholding her promise to Eric very well. She is barely continuing work, and barely keeping up with friends. She wonders what Eric would think of her present line of work. She writes again to Daniel after he responds to offer what help he can. She asks Daniel to e-mail her a time when they can meet up in London. She then decides she will go through the Monique letters. As Monique's letters are in French, Katrin will have to translate them as best she can. Daniel e-mails back, saying he would be happy to do the traveling instead of Katrin. Katrin insists, knowing she needs an excursion, and knowing Dr. Gracie has recommended it. On the way to London, Katrin reads through Monique's letters. She also goes through the information she has compiled on her laptop. In London, Katrin and Daniel have lunch at an Italian restaurant. Katrin loses her nerve to talk about the past, but Daniel is kind and patient with her, telling her it is alright.

Daniel explains it was exciting to arrive in an arbitrary place such as Vizille, and that at the time, Eric was working for Kellogg's and enjoyed cycling. Daniel also goes on to explain that Eric related his travels to him, and that Eric did indeed take the ferry across the Channel to France from Dover. He recounts that Eric met a World War II veteran who had evacuated at Dunkirk, and was now going back to see the place with his wife. Daniel explains he himself can recall so much of that trip to Vizille clearly. He says that Eric considered himself something of a vagrant, and his travels by hitchhiking and hiking both disgusted and excited him depending on the situation. Daniel then sees Katrin to



the train home, telling her he will tell her more when she asks. Katrin tells Daniel that some of Monique's letters are unopened. Daniel tells Katrin she must get through things however she must get through them. He reveals it was he who introduced Daniel to Monique, as Daniel needed a place to stay during the trip.

Chapter 7 – Katrin meets with Dr. Gracie. She explains that only when she is learning about Eric does she feel alive, even if parts of the past hurt her because she is not a part of them. She even says she wants his cancer. Two weeks pass. Katrin wears Eric's jacket as she sorts through Daniel's old photographs. She feels as if she will never catch up to him in life. She goes through her chronology of Eric. She notes he arrived in Paris in April, met Monique between the 15th and the 23rd, arrived in Vizille on August 28, then went around France until returning to Monique's in September, and by October, was back at Oxford. When Katrin opens a sealed letter from Monique, she discovers a semi-nude photo of Monique, who is gorgeous and who Katrin believes she does not compare to. It makes her want to smash the bowl Monique gave her, but the doorbell rings. Katrin does not answer, but she does not smash the bowl, either. Instead, she returns to work. Katrin reads another letter from Monique to Eric, dated November 24, 1962, in which Monique talks about how much she misses Eric, talks about her bad financial situation, and encourages both his love and his return to Paris. In another letter dated December 3, Monique agrees to come and visit Eric at school. Katrin also sees that Monique sent him more photographs of herself in states of undress taken by a man named Jean-Luc she slept with to torment Eric.

Still, Katrin is jealous, and this makes her sense of loss for Eric worse. Daniel calls Katrin a short while later, sounding drunk and wanting to tell her the rest of the story. Daniel confirms the photos were taken by Jean-Luc, who committed suicide in 1964. Daniel explains that Eric's trip south progressed slowly or quickly depending on the situation, and that he loved experiencing new places and meeting new people. He says Daniel would sometimes sleep outside overnight on his journey, and one morning awakened to be at perfect peace with nature around him. Katrin falls asleep listening to Daniel talk about Eric. The next morning, she feels stronger, gets back to work, and calls Daniel that night to apologize for falling asleep on him. Daniel continues on where he left off, including a hitchhiking encounter with a very kind elderly man named Claude Bresson who showed Daniel an abandoned estate he visited with an elderly friend, and how with age came a kind of clarity not had in remembering before. When Bresson dropped Eric off, Daniel recounts, Bresson gave him a handful of old silver coins that Eric showed to Daniel when they met up together.

Chapter 8 – Katrin reports little progress with Dr. Gracie, and says the pain her ribs remains. Gracie explains that sorrow will always be with her, and that it must be consciously battled against sometimes. Sorrow, Gracie explains, will eat away strength. Katrin later returns to work, writing about the past and tracing Eric's steps to Paris and to Monique's door. There, Katrin falters, unable to continue writing. She returns to the letters to gain courage to continue writing as the relationship between Eric and Monique begins to unfold.

## Analysis

Every person's story deserves to be heard, and so Katrin undertakes the task of learning more about Eric's past with gusto. She reaches out to friends and family members in the attempt to learn more about Daniel, and to fill in the missing pieces that are not filled in by the letters he kept in the attic. The year 1962 catches Katrin's attention, for these are the oldest letters Eric felt important enough to keep, and because 1962 therein seems to be the single, watershed year in Eric's life. She believes this year will be the year that helps unfold Eric's life story as a result, and will bring her closer to the man she loved. Readers should note that part of Katrin's desire to know more about Eric comes because she is so much younger than him, and because she was not even alive when some of these events occurred. Because of that, learning about them will bring her closer to Eric in the sense that she will be, in effect, a part of the past as well. She does not feel as if she had enough time with Eric when he was alive, and so now she seeks more time in the past.

Katrin, as a biographer, already knows that the past is relevant to the present. To determine how one arrived in the present, one must retrace or recount the steps that led to the current situation. This is why it is so essential that Katrin fill in the missing pieces and learn more about Eric through those who he loved, and who loved him. Of central importance to all of this will be Daniel, as Daniel was not only Eric's closest friend, but the other primary player in the trip to France in 1962. Back then, Katrin realizes, death was the last thing on Eric's mind. All Eric wanted to do was to experience the world and live life to the fullest it could be lived. His adventurous spirit took him over to, and across France by backpacking. It makes sense that Eric should want Katrin to find love in life as he did after he passed away. Here again, human emotion proves to be the primary motivator in human life.

Readers should also note the poignant scene in which Eric accepts a ride from an elderly French gentleman who fondly recalls memories of his own past. Here, Eric is confronted with an aged representation for Daniel: the old man, Bresson, recalls memories only he is around now to speak about, just as in fifty years, only Daniel will be around to speak about certain memories. Bresson gives Eric some antique silver coins, which in turn come to symbolize not only the past, but love –love of life, love of friendship, and love of romance, all things which Eric will soon be in possession of. Indeed, the silver coins themselves come to represent Eric's love, and these will play a crucial role by the end of the novel. Katrin herself becomes jealous of the relationship Eric had with Monique, despite how old that relationship was. But, it is the kind of sorrow that Gracie insists must be battled –and which Katrin will do her best to battle in the future.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Katrin seek out Daniel's help in researching Eric's life? What important information does Daniel have to offer her?



## Discussion Question 2

Why is Katrin jealous of the relationship between Eric and Monique, even though it is half-a-century old? Do you believe Katrin's jealousy is understandable? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does 1962 stand out as a seminal, watershed year in Eric's life for Katrin? Why did 1962 seem to be so important to Eric?

## Vocabulary

expertise, gusto, evicted, balk, arbitrary, dereliction, dispirits, bereavement, calyx, cognizance, forfeiture, inviolably, effrontery

## Chapters 9 – 12

### Summary

Chapter 9 – Katrin travels to Manchester, then to Buxton where she meets with Eric's younger brother, Michael. Michael and his wife, Sheila, have recently retired. They have an early dinner after which Sheila heads out to choir practice she cannot skip. Katrin can already see that Michael, three years younger than Eric, is still deeply affected by his death. Michael explains he has no interest in the France trip Eric took except that it ended with Monique, and he did not like Monique or Daniel. Michael explains he lost Eric when Eric went to France. Michael explains things were rough with their father after Eric went off, because their father became stricter with Michael. Katrin realizes as well that Michael is not only grieving for Eric's loss, but also suspects Katrin in her desire to write about Eric. The next morning, Katrin goes out for coffee with Sheila, knowing that Sheila must have been told by Michael what was going on. Sheila recounts being eighteen and being invited to Eric's wedding to Edna. She explains it was as if it was Eric, Edna, and Daniel against the rest of the Swinton family. She explains that Edna was always scornful and critical. Katrin decides she will ultimately leave her visit with Michael and Edna early, as she is feeling anxious and cannot shake it.

Chapter 10 – Katrin e-mails Thomas, asking for a picture of his mother. She decides she will continue with her life-writing because it keeps her near Eric. She does not know if this is good or bad, but knows it is the only thing she desires to do. She asks Daniel about this, who tells her to carry on but not forever. He tells her he will have her back in pursuit of her project. As Katrin writes, she talks about how Eric and Daniel both felt restless and alone studying at school, and so wanted something else besides it. Eric's absence from school, Katrin writes, prompted angry letters from his father in which he worried about Eric messing up and getting some girl pregnant –meaning Monique. Daniel tells Katrin that Eric and Monique were in love. Katrin at last writes to Monique, seeking her input on things. She also asks Daniel for more about Monique. Daniel explains that Eric wanted Monique invited to the funeral to ensure he died at peace with everyone. Katrin wants to know what things Daniel and Eric spoke of, especially regarding Monique, before Eric died. She explains in an e-mail it is because she believes Eric wanted to be with Monique again, and by recounting the past –and Daniel filling in the pieces –they have both ensured Monique could return to Eric's bed.

The next morning, Katrin even feels pity for Eric and Monique. By that afternoon, she has e-mails from Daniel and Thomas, and a letter from Michael. Daniel explains that Katrin has a duty to see the story through. Thomas is touched that Katrin has asked about his mother, but that he is at odds with her because she can't get at his father anymore. Michael talks in his letter about how quickly life can change, and that it felt like Eric deserted him for Monique and Daniel. Michael writes that he used to spend so much time with Eric, especially out in nature and finding new local places to explore, including trekking to Axe Edge, right before Eric began working at Kellogg's and took time away from college for France.



Chapter 11 – At the end of his first term at Oxford, Katrin learns, Eric was doing bad in many of his classes and told to improve quickly. Katrin learns that it was then that Eric went to be with Monique in Paris. To Eric, Katrin relates, Monique was surprising and adventurous, and relates that her father was part of the Resistance during World War II. Katrin writes that the Café Amyot became their regular place, and Monique promised to come and visit at Oxford. Katrin writes that Eric then returned home to England for Christmas.

Chapter 12 – Katrin goes to see Dr. Gracie, whose look reveals Grace is dying. Despite this, Gracie does her best to continue to encourage Katrin, while Katrin does her best to be supportive of Gracie. Katrin will now be seen by Dr. Jefferson, as Gracie explains it will be their last appointment. On the way out, Katrin encounters a large man who credits Gracie with giving his wife back to him, and now he feels horrible Gracie is poised to lose her own life.

## Analysis

No one is perfect. The idyllic journey Eric seemingly took is beset by drama and difficulties afterward, as Katrin soon learns. She discovers that Eric's family hated Monique, each for different reasons. Michael's jealousy of Monique has to do with the fact that she seemed to end the close brother-brother relationship that Michael and Eric had. It is also discovered that Eric's marriage to Edna, which did not occur long after the relationship with Monique ended, was also met with scorn and disdain by Eric's family. Edna is written off as scornful and critical, and this seems to be a firm foundation for why the family did not like her. However, as readers will remember, every person's story deserves to be told –and the stories Edna and Monique have to share will be told in coming chapters.

The past continues to be relevant to the present, Katrin sees –but she also knows it does not have to determine the future. For example, by the time Eric married Edna, Monique was the past. While with Monique, it appeared as if Eric's future would indeed be one with Monique in it. Here, whereas Katrin previously envied Monique and Eric, she now feels badly for Monique and Eric. Their relationship did not last, just as Katrin's marriage with Eric did not last. Eric left too soon. Human emotion is the primary motivator for people –and here, Katrin's sympathy is motivated by relevance and knowing what it is like to lose someone –Eric –who means so much. Indeed, everyone's stories deserve to be told.

In a plot twist, Gracie ends up with terminal cancer, and only a short time left to live. Gracie does her best to focus on her patients before she steps down from her practice. Gracie's diagnosis is a startling reminder that loss is central to the human condition – which in turn now manifests itself in ways like never before as a theme. Michael loses his relationship with his brother; Eric's family loses its closeness with Eric; Monique loses her romance with Eric; Gracie is set to lose her own life; and Katrin has lost Eric to death. Nothing ever stays the same, and loss is one of the few assurances in life.



Indeed, there is a sad irony in Gracie committing her life to helping save the lives of others when she is unable to save herself.

## Discussion Question 1

When speaking with Eric's family, what does Katrin learn about Eric's life, relationship with Monique, and marriage to Edna? Explain Eric's family's feelings toward Edna.

## Discussion Question 2

What surprise news does Gracie have for Katrin? How does this affect Katrin? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Loss becomes a major theme through this section of the novel in a way it has not before. Select three characters from this section of the novel and explain the loss they have experienced. Why did these particular characters seem to handle loss in the way they have?

## Vocabulary

impelled, obliterated, conurbation, sardonic, omniscient, leitmotif, congenial, sauntering, dithered, volition, exculpated, elegy, nostalgia, disconcerted, discreet

# Chapters 13 – 15

## Summary

Chapter 13 –When Eric saw Monique at Oxford, Katrin writes, he felt as if she needed him and he could not live without her. Katrin recounts how Monique and Eric made love and wandered around Oxford in the snow. Katrin later receives a postcard from Tideswell, signed by Liz Gracie, thanking Katrin for the suggestion about where to visit. Seeking comfort and worried about sleeplessness that night, Katrin calls Daniel to ask him about Monique's visit, and to hear his voice. Daniel explains he was with them twice during Monique's visit, such as when they visited Fred's room where everyone was hanging out the night before Monique left. Daniel explains everyone was drinking, smoking, and talking while Fred played guitar and sang. Daniel reveals Monique joined in afterward, and the next day was the last time Eric saw Monique when she got on the train.

Chapter 14 – Katrin calls Eric's regular bookseller to come to the house to look at some of Eric's books, as well as her own father's. The bookseller explains he won't be able to sell them, but Katrin tells him he can have them for free. He arranges to have the books taken away. Katrin, meanwhile, traces the demise of the relationship between Eric and Monique to the late winter/early spring of 1963. As Katrin works, she begins to consider the spirit has gone out of the project. She decides the place left open in the attic by the absence of her father's books will be filled by Eric. She will also begin to dismantle the library shelves so that she may begin remodeling work on the house in an effort to move forward in life.

It is now November. Katrin receives a call from Liz Gracie. She says she is having a few good days and wants to get together. Katrin immediately agrees. When they meet, Gracie looks much older and thin, but still manages to get around. Gracie and Katrin want to know how the other is doing. Katrin confesses that she has no desire to write anymore about Eric's life because the last fifty do not compare to the first twenty. Katrin reveals she met Eric when they were both teaching at the same university in Poland, and that they fell in love there as Katrin's one-year contract came to an end. Gracie reveals that she has never grieved for anyone like Katrin has for Eric, and that Gracie's husband, Rob, will be the one to have to do it. Their children, both married, will be alright. Gracie passes away three weeks later. She decides to attend the funeral, and asks Daniel to be at her house when she gets back.

Chapter 15 – Daniel is waiting for Katrin when she returns home from the funeral. Katrin thanks him, saying she did not want to come back to an empty house. She shows Daniel to the guest room, then shows Daniel her office where she has been working. She asks Daniel about the last letter Eric received from Monique that he ever opened, dated May 23, 1963. She wants to know whether or not Eric was already sleeping with Edna, but Daniel does not know. They go to dinner, during which time Daniel explains that, upon their return from Paris, he knew he would be seeing less of Eric. He explains



at the time that Eric had to work to pay off debts to his parents, and that he and Vince often went to bet to make quick money. Katrin is happy to let Daniel talk, because she realizes it is helping him to handle his own sadness over Eric's death.

Daniel later relates that he learned Edna had become pregnant by Daniel, that Edna did not want to have an abortion but had to have one for obvious reasons, though Daniel did not know what that meant. The night of the procedure, Daniel recalls Eric coming to him to ask him for help because Edna was still bleeding from the abortion. An ambulance had to be called, Daniel explains. In the present, Daniel prepares to leave for home in London. While waiting for the train, Katrin tells Daniel about her work, including on Marianna Levetzow, who died young in Paris between the ages of 25 and 30. Marianna, Katrin explains, had only one published volume of poetry, short monologues, and songs. Studying Marianna differs, Katrin explains, as some days she is very close and very real, and others she is very distant and seems unknowable. Katrin asks if Daniel has the silver coins, but Daniel says he does not.

## Analysis

Life is about more than trying to avoid death. Eric is continuing to live his life as best he can. It is revealed that Eric believed his future could indeed include Monique, and her visit to Oxford was a demonstration of that belief. This coincided with loss—that Monique ended up not being a part of Eric's life in the end after all. It appears as if distance—both emotional and physical—as well as Edna turned Eric away from Monique. While it appears as if Eric eventually got over Monique, it is plain that Monique never got over Eric. At the time, it appeared as if Edna would be Eric's future—as Eric had no idea at that point that he would ever come to know Katrin. As Katrin continues to write about Eric, for she is still learning about the past—and getting to know Eric through the past—she continues to recognize that everyone, including Eric himself, has a story that must be told. Readers will note that the narrators continue to shift depending on the situation—ranging from Katrin writing in first-person to the third-person narrator speaking in third-person.

Loss remains central to the characters of the novel, as Gracie dies and Daniel fills in more of the past for Katrin. Katrin feels a sense of loss when she must accept the fact that Eric is not a perfect person, as he seemed to be the locus for Edna's abortion. Indeed, the abortion—in keeping with the thematic argument that everyone's stories deserve to be heard—would indicate why Edna was always so bitter and critical toward Eric. While Daniel and Eric had grown distant after France, the night of the abortion—in which Edna had to go to the hospital—seemed to be the catalyst for the demise of the friendship between them, as it exposed Eric at his very worst, and demonstrated a kind of vulnerability to Daniel. If France was the high point of the friendship between Daniel and Eric, then the night of the abortion was the low point. Learning the darkness about Eric helps Katrin to begin to move on, symbolized by her desire to remodel the house—beginning with the dispensing of Eric's books. Also, as the reader will remember the silver coins from earlier in the novel, so too now does Katrin, who asks if Daniel has the silver coins.





## Discussion Question 1

Why does the relationship between Eric and Monique end? Why did Eric seem able to get beyond the relationship, whereas Monique did not?

## Discussion Question 2

What seems to be the final straw for the erosion of the friendship between Eric and Daniel? Why was this the last straw?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Eric's part in Edna's abortion compel Katrin to confront regarding Eric's character as a person? Does this change Katrin's opinion of Eric? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

predatory, sylvan, irrepressible, discerning, disgorging, ghastly, sinister, implausibly, redundant, practicalities, interlinear

# Chapters 16 – 18

## Summary

Chapter 16 – Katrin wonders if Eric sold the silver coins to pay for the abortion. Katrin continues to write about Eric, saying she doubts the families ever learned of the abortion. Eric's family did not know about Edna until he announced their marriage in late February, 1964. Katrin admits to hating having to write these things down because it shows the man she loved behaving badly, and shows how much it hurt a lot of people. Still, she continues to write about how the police questioned Eric and Edna over the abortion, after which Edna demanded to be married, after which it took three years to conceive and birth Thomas (which Edna blamed on the abortion). Katrin reveals that Monique's letters during this time were of anger and rage over Daniel getting married, and letters declaring her undying love.

Over time, Katrin writes, Eric even slowed in answering Daniel's letters while Edna did things like getting a vasectomy to picking up smoking again. Katrin also jots down a memory from a time when Eric had a conversation with a young French teaching assistant in French without changing to English for Katrin's sake. Katrin calls it the meanest thing Eric ever did to her. Katrin then takes a break from writing and goes to look at the river. She later calls Daniel to say she is going to try to stop writing, so that she can live in the truth. She doubts she will ever finish the work. That night, Katrin can only hear silence.

Chapter 17 – Katrin receives a letter in the mail from Monique inviting her to Paris. Katrin agrees to go. Patrick comes to pick up the shelves with his wife, Ellie, who is pregnant. Patrick tells Katrin the shelves will look good in their new place, and will be the color they belong to be.

Chapter 18 – Daniel reminds Katrin that Monique's husband, Fortunatus –who is also much, much older –is jealous of Monique's past, and so he reminds Katrin to be careful. Katrin travels to Paris to see Monique. She is accompanied by Daniel, who guides the way. When they meet up with Monique, Monique goes on ahead with Katrin, showing her different places and different sights. Monique asks why Eric ever married Edna in the first place, but Katrin admits she does not know. Katrin explains that so far as she knows, Edna never had any lovers until she and Eric had mutually agreed to divorce. She also explains she is confident Eric never had any affairs either, and that he only had a few relationships before marrying her. Katrin goes on to tell Monique about her remodeling. She also talks about Liz Gracie. Monique tells Katrin that, when they next meet, she will go into more detail about her past with Eric. She then gives Katrin the silver coins, telling her that Eric gave them to her to do with what she will. She then tells Katrin to write, and to prepare for their next meeting.



## Analysis

Loss is central to the human experience, Constantine contends through the end of the novel –just as much as he argues that human emotion is the primary motivator for people. It is human emotion that helps to convince Katrin to let Eric go –and to endure the sense of loss that will come with abandoning her project to write about Eric's life. This is because it will help her better cope with the truth relating to Eric's life. Katrin still loves Eric, despite his flaws, but knows she needs to let him go. She cannot allow her life to revolve around his story and his past, not only because she has to live her own life, but because she promised Eric she would do the same.

Life is about more than dwelling on death, Katrin decides. Eric did not mince words when he told Katrin to focus on her writing and their mutual friends –because it would ultimately help her to move on and begin a new path in life. The past is relevant to the present, but does not have to decide the future. Just because Eric is gone does not mean Katrin's life is also over. Katrin is able to accept life as it is and will be, and no longer dwells on how it was –and is able to make peace with Monique to the point that she actually visits Monique. Even her story deserves to be heard, Katrin decides, and so she agrees to return to visit her again. Interestingly enough, it is Monique who has the sought-after silver coins. She gives them to Katrin even when Katrin protests. The coins symbolize both the past and Eric's love. At long last, Monique is surrendering these things to Katrin, who has come to be the guardian of them.

## Discussion Question 1

What information does Katrin uncover relating to the abortion and the families of Eric and Edna? What effect does she believe this had on Eric's family, in particular, regarding Edna? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Katrin decide to abandon her writing project about Eric? After making this decision, what is she able to do? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Monique give the silver coins to Katrin? Why does Katrin protest but then, ultimately, relent?

## Vocabulary

incomprehension, hectic, simultaneity, intricate, ineffectual, intimacy

# Characters

## Katrin

Katrin Szuba, a Polish native and wife of Eric Swinton, is a university professor and biographer of obscure European Romantics. Several years younger than Eric, Katrin is very much in love with him and devastated when he dies. To help cope with his death, she sees Dr. Gracie for therapy. Katrin also commits to writing Eric's biography.

By going through old letters and reaching out to Eric's family and friends as Katrin writes about him, she learns that there is much that she did not know about her late husband. She wishes she had known him earlier in their lives. She accepts that he was not a perfect person, but Katrin still loves him. Eventually, she accepts the truth, abandons the writing project, and moves on with her life

## Eric

Eric Swinton is the husband of Katrin, father of Thomas, and a university professor. His death from cancer sets Katrin off on a quest to write about his life. Eric, who is much older than Katrin, has a past that he says little about before his death.

Eric's college years were filled with high and low points in his life –from his trip to France to meet Daniel to his relationship with Monique to the abortion he forced on Edna, followed by his and Edna's decision to get married. After he and Edna divorced, Eric went on to teach school in Poland. While in Poland, he met and fell in love with Katrin. He and Katrin married and made their home in England. Years later, Eric succumbed to cancer.

## Daniel

Daniel is the best friend of Eric from college who becomes a good friend to Katrin. After Eric's death, Daniel becomes Katrin's primary source of information regarding Eric's life. Daniel is kind, supportive, and encouraging as Katrin works on Eric's life story. Daniel meets with her several times, speaks with her by phone several times, and even journeys to France with her when she meets Monique. Daniel is instrumental in helping Katrin to begin to move beyond Eric, and to confront life without him.

## Monique

Monique is a French woman who, as a girl, had a relationship with Eric when the two were introduced by Daniel in France. Monique was in love with Daniel. After many years, she still has feelings for him. Monique herself married a much older man with whom she has a family. Early in the novel, Monique attends Eric's funeral early in the

novel. At the end of the novel, she begins meeting with Katrin to tell her story and to tell Katrin what she knows about Eric.

## **Michael**

Michael is the younger brother of Eric and the husband of Sheila. Michael has long resented Eric for growing distant from him when they were younger, and he has blamed Monique and then Edna for this happening. Michael especially hates Monique because Eric's relationship with Monique meant that Eric was no longer around as much to hang out with Michael.

## **Sheila**

Sheila is the wife of Michael. It is Sheila who fills Katrin in on what there is to know about Edna. It is Sheila who explains that Eric's entire family disapproved of Edna and the marriage.

## **Thomas**

Thomas is the son of Eric and Edna. Seemingly, Thomas has been financially dependent upon Eric for a long time, but that is no longer true. While Thomas seems to have good regards for his father, he does not feel the same toward his mother, who has been taking out her continued anger about Eric on Thomas.

## **Edna**

Edna is the ex-wife of Eric and the mother of Thomas. Forced to have an abortion by Eric, Edna later blames her difficulty in conceiving on Eric. Edna's anger and her criticism of Eric result in Eric's family's opposition to the marriage. Edna and Eric later divorce, but Eric continues to send money to Edna until he dies.

## **Dr. Gracie**

Liz Gracie is the therapist that Katrin sees as Eric dies. Gracie, a mother and a wife, is also a survivor of breast cancer. She thrives on helping other people. It is Gracie who encourages Katrin to do her best to mourn and then move on while continuing to battle sorrow whenever it approaches. Unfortunately, Gracie's cancer returns, and she dies. As such, she proves to be a character who has dedicated her life to helping others, although she is unable to help herself.

## Claude Bresson

Claude Bresson is an elderly, French gentleman whom Eric meets while backpacking through France. Recognizing in Eric a kindred spirit and seeing in Eric himself when he was younger, Bresson gives Eric a lift. Bresson shows Eric an abandoned estate. Then, he gives Eric a gift of old, silver coins. Bresson explains that memories can become sharper with age and that he remembers visiting the estate ruins with his friends as a youngster.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Nine Lives

Nine Lives is symbolic of Katrin's fascination and sympathy toward unsung human lives. Nine Lives is to be a collection of nine short biographies of unknown, obscure, or insignificant European Romantics. It is this work that Eric urges her toward, as Katrin feels bad for those who created such beautiful works and never received the recognition they deserved.

## Eric's trunk

Eric's trunk, which is kept in the attic, is symbolic of the past. It contains old letters. After his funeral, Katrin decides to go into the trunk to see what she can learn about his life through the letters. By going into the trunk, Katrin undertakes the symbolic act of going into the past.

## Letters

Letters symbolize Eric's life. He has kept a trunk and several bags full of old letters in the attic, all from his past. To learn more about Eric, Katrin reads and goes through the letters. Dating back to 1962, the letters seem to be the entry to the truth of Eric's life because they meant so much to him.

## Katrin's project on Eric's life

Katrin's project on Eric's life symbolizes not only his life, but a reason for living hers. Without Eric, Katrin is devastated and no longer wants to live. It is only her desire to write about Eric and learn about his past that keeps her going and gives her the will to live. Eric's life therein becomes very important, and the project on his life is essential to her own life. Eventually, Katrin abandons the project to live the truth of Eric's life and move on, rather than writing about it and dwelling in the past.

## Katrin's promise to Eric

Katrin's promise to Eric symbolizes the importance of life. Before Eric dies, he makes Katrin promise him that she will keep up with her work and their friends. In short, he wants her to continue living life. Katrin takes the promise seriously, though she struggles to live up to it upon his death. It is her writing project on Eric's life that helps to fulfill her promise.



## Unopened letters

Unopened letters from Monique symbolize uncertainty. Since Katrin was much younger than Eric, she was not alive yet when Eric was living the life described in the letters. Since Katrin is very much in love with Eric, the letters make Katrin feel irrelevant in Eric's life. After learning about the past events in Eric's life, Katrin desperately wants to be a part of that past to have had more time and more love with Eric. Each letter she opens represents uncertainty because it something new about the past she does not know.

## Monique's funeral gift

Monique's funeral gift symbolizes regret and remembrance of the past. Monique's funeral gift is a bowl decorated with cherries on the outside and a rose on the inside. Katrin regrets the past that Eric had with Monique and hates to remember that there was such a past. This almost leads to her destroying the bowl. Instead, she comes to terms and makes peace with the past—including Eric's relationship with Monique.

## Books

Books symbolize the past. As Katrin writes about Eric, she endeavors to move on in life. To do so, she takes a dramatic step of clearing away all of Eric's old books so that she can do some remodeling in the house. It will be a fresh chapter in her life.

## Remodeling

Remodeling symbolizes the future. In an effort to move on in life, Katrin gets rid of all the books that belong to Eric and her father. After this, she disassembles the library for the purposes of remodeling—a physical manifestation of her desire for a new step in her life.

## Silver coins

Silver coins symbolize both the past and Eric's love. When Bresson sees a kindred spirit in Eric, he gives silver coins to Eric. The coins are a reflection of Bresson's past. Eric, in turn, gives the coins as a memento and symbol of his love to Monique. Eventually, Monique gives the coins to Katrin, for Katrin has become the final guardian of Eric's past and his last love.



# Settings

## Vizille

Vizille is a small town in southeastern France. Eric, Daniel, and their friends visit Vizille during a college break. Vizille becomes a watershed in Eric's life. During this trip, Eric meets Monique, and his life takes a new direction.

## London

Eric's friend Daniel lives in London. Katrin goes to London to talk to Daniel about Eric's past. For Katrin, London represents a place of learning and understanding.

## Paris

Paris is where Monique lives. It is while traveling in France that Eric stays in Paris with Monique after Daniel introduces them. In Paris, Eric and Monique begin a relationship that lasts several months. Then, Eric returns to visit Monique in Paris around Christmas. Years later, Katrin visits Monique in Paris to learn more about Eric's past.

## The library

The library is one of the most important rooms in the house that Katrin and Eric share. It is in the library that Eric keeps the books that are such a core part of his life. In an effort to begin moving on, Katrin decides the library must be remodeled. She gives away the books and dismantles the shelves. The library becomes a point of change as Katrin seeks to move on in her life.

## Katrin's office

Katrin's office, located upstairs in the house she and Eric share, is where Katrin spends most of her time after Eric dies. It is in her office that Katrin begins to piece together the life of Eric, as she gathers her research and commits to writing. Katrin's office becomes her world. It is only when she seeks to learn more about Eric or when she has unavoidable commitments that Katrin leaves the office. Eventually, this changes when Katrin abandons writing about Eric.

# Themes and Motifs

## Loss is central to the human experience.

Loss is central to the human experience. Loss comes in many forms, such as heartbreak to death. Loss is one of the few things guaranteed in life, and it affects people in immense ways.

When the novel begins, Katrin is losing Eric to cancer. When Eric dies, Katrin is devastated. She feels as if her life no longer has meaning in it without Eric. This propels her to write a short biography of Eric's life. In turn, this will put her in touch with a large number of people who knew Eric. She will hear their stories about their connections to Eric..

In addition to Katrin, other women suffer loss through their relationships with Eric. Monique, Eric's Parisian girlfriend, also endures a loss in the novel when she and Eric break up. Monique's love for Eric haunts her for decades. Edna, Eric's first wife, must endure the loss of a baby when Eric insists she have an abortion. Her loss eats away at Edna forever, creating a cruelty in her that she unleashes on Eric.

Eventually, Edna and Eric have a son named Thomas. When his father dies, Thomas feels a loss because he loved and looked up to Eric. After Eric's death, Thomas must face his mother's wrath and bitterness alone.

Michael, Eric's younger brother, suffers great loss when he loses Eric to a relationship when Eric becomes involved with Monique. Michael had spent much of his life in Eric's company,. Though it is expected that siblings grow up and live their own lives, the degree to which Eric separated from Michael left a bitterness in Michael that lasts through Eric's death.

Sheila, Michael's wife, explains that the entire family felt a sense of loss and bitterness toward Eric when he married Edna. This caused a strain in Eric's relationship with his family for years – a strain which evidently began to diminish when Eric married Katrin. Katrin is warmly greeted by members of the family when she is doing her research.

## Moving forward helps to overcome grief.

Moving forward helps to overcome grief. Early in the novel, Eric tells Katrin that he does not want to end up like a mutual friend who spent his final months focused only on keeping alive. It is natural that Eric would be grieving for a life that he would never live to experience because of his terminal illness. However, he intends to move on by finding the joy in every day of his remaining life, rather than grieve for what would never be.



When Eric speaks to Katrin about his coming death, he also makes her promise to continue on with her work and to keep up with their mutual friends. She should continue to move forward in her life. Katrin promises Eric these things, but his death does not make anything easy.

Katrin deeply loves Eric, so keeping her promise to him is something she finds both difficult (because she is devastated by his death) and necessary to keep. Katrin decides that she will write about his life. She realizes that this is her only desire in life and it keeps her focused on moving from day to day. It also brings her in touch with family and mutual friends. Thus, she is fulfilling another promise that she made to Eric.

As Katrin works on the project, she comes to realize that she is coping with Eric's death. She decides to remodel the house –specifically beginning with removing Eric's books and transforming the library. Katrin decides to abandon the project before it is complete, knowing she will live with the truth rather than write it all down about Eric. Katrin realizes that her promise to Eric was meant to help her continue on with work and friends. Thus, the foundation from those relationships would allow her to move beyond the grief to the next phase of her life.

## **The past is relevant to the present, but it does not have to decide the future.**

The past is relevant to the present, but it does not have to decide the future. Much of the novel is spent in pursuit of the past as Katrin wants to learn more about Eric and his life before they met. Katrin, who already studies historical figures, knows how important the past is to the present in a person's life. However, this takes on new meaning when Katrin learns about Eric's past.

Katrin's pursuit of Eric's past comes because she misses him and because she wants to learn about a part of his life for which she had not even been born yet to experience. This brings along bouts of jealousy, heartbreak, and understanding. She accepts that Eric was not a perfect person, but she still loves him anyways. For the first time, she learns about someone's life from people who are still alive to recall it – rather than relying on written words of people long dead.

Katrin learns that Eric and Daniel went to France out of restlessness. She learns that it was during this trip that Eric met Monique, and at the time, the two thought the future would be theirs, together. Despite their romantic past, Eric and Monique ended up breaking up –something neither could have predicted in the past. But rather than reuniting or becoming friends, Eric went on to marry Edna leaving a bitter and heartbroken Monique behind. Rather than making peace with Monique over the past, Eric simply ignored her.

Bad feelings between Eric and Monique, and between Eric and his family over his marriage to Edna, also did not portend the future. Eric and Edna divorced. Then, Eric met and married Katrin. Despite the past being rocky, the present and the future with

Katrin are not rocky. Eric's family warmly receive Katrin – including the time after Eric's death. Even though they had remaining feelings of disagreement with Eric, they did not let this affect their future with Katrin. This is demonstrated in how welcoming Eric's family is to Katrin as she undertakes her project. Katrin realizes that life is a series of choices and decisions –and that the present, determined by the past, does not mean the future also has to be determined by the past.

## **Human emotion is the primary motivator for people.**

Human emotion is the primary motivator for people. Human emotions –feelings of love, loyalty, compassion, heartbreak, sadness, anger, bitterness, and so on – motivate people in the novel. They help to explain the unfolding of the plot itself through the actions of the people.

When Eric dies, Katrin is absolutely devastated. She is heartbroken, sad, and feels as though her life is without meaning without Eric in it. Her desire to be close to him, to remember him, and to honor him, as well as her emotions surrounding his death, compel her to begin her research and writing on his life. Katrin's emotions bring her into contact with the other people in the life they shared.

Each person Katrin meets also proves to be motivated by emotion of some kind. For Monique, it is an undying love for Eric that brings her to his funeral, but previously caused her to react with jealousy and anger toward news Eric had married. For Edna, it is anger and bitterness over the abortion Eric forced her to have that prompted sarcastic and critical behavior toward him from her. This in turn ultimately helped lead to a divorce.

At the same time, bitterness from Michael over Eric's relationship with Monique causes a continued strain with Eric for years. Liz Gracie's concern and compassion for her patients causes her to reach out to them until she dies of cancer. Daniel's sense of loss over his best friend, and his desire to help Katrin deal with her own loss, compels him to reach out and assist Katrin as she attempts to put together a biography of Eric's life.

## **Every person's story deserves to be heard.**

Every person's story deserves to be heard. Each person is unique, with his or her own set of experiences and a past that have defined them and their lives. Each life matters, and each life ultimately affects another.

When Katrin begins her quest to learn more about, and write about Eric, she feels as if she is alone without Eric. Her world revolves around Eric and writing about him, and it is his story she feels deserves to be told –just as she wishes to tell the stories of obscure European Romanticists. Katrin's research ultimately brings her in touch with the friends and family of Eric.

As Katrin meets the friends and family of Eric, she learns that each has their own story as well –all stories that deserve to be told or listened to in conjunction with Eric's. Their lives touched Eric's life, and Eric's life touched theirs in turn. A sense of loneliness and restlessness first led Eric and Daniel to France, for example, while Monique's poverty allowed her to focus on important things like love –which helps explain why she fell so deeply in love with Eric.

Katrin also comes to learn that Eric was not a perfect person, as he goaded Edna to have an abortion before they got married –which in turn led to Edna's difficulty in conceiving and Edna's harsh attitude toward Eric. Edna's hatred of Eric continues after his death, as she now takes her anger out by harassing her son, Thomas. Even then, Edna's story deserves to be told, otherwise what motivates her would never be known. The same is true of all of the characters in the novel, Katrin herself included.

# Styles

## Point of View

David Constantine tells his novel *The Life-Writer* from several points of view. An unknown narrator tells most of the novel from the third person point of view. The narrator often ventures into stream-of-consciousness territory as the thoughts and ideas of characters are laid out in real-time, with one thought progressing to the next and the next. This allows readers a privileged access into the minds of characters –specifically Katrin. It also allows readers to see how the characters determine a course of action and how they transform. This is especially important for Katrin as she begins to move beyond Eric's death.

Parts of the novel assume a first-person narrative mode as well, coming by way of Eric's personal letters and actual material from Katrin's writings on Eric. Eric's letters are from Monique, Daniel, and other people who were part of Eric's life. This allows those characters to have a voice in keeping with the thematic argument that everyone's story deserves to be told.

The reader is also given a first-person view into Katrin's own thoughts, which prove to be so crucial in terms of her motivation for writing about Eric and for getting to know Katrin herself. Katrin's own life story, is told from the first-person point of view later in the book.

## Language and Meaning

David Constantine tells his novel *The Life-Writer* in language that is reflective and educated. This is done for a few different reasons. First, the reflective language comes from the fact that so much of the novel is written in stream-of-consciousness. Stream-of-consciousness writing in this story entails that the thoughts, considerations, and feelings of the characters take priority over their actions.

The reflective language is also in response to the fact that so much of the novel is about Eric's past and present-day considerations of that past. Consider, for example, in Chapter 10 on page 112 where Katrin considers her work on a biography of Eric and its potential consequences: "Is that good or bad? She cannot say. But good or bad, it is the only thing she desires to do, so she will do it."

The educated aspect of the language – the use of words like disgorging, ghastly, and sinister, when common-use words like thrown up/thrown out, scary, and evil will do - are reflective of the fact that Katrin, Eric, Daniel, and some of the other characters are all well-educated. For example, Katrin and Eric are professors. Therefore, the language creates a sense of realism and makes these characters believable.

## Structure

David Constantine divides his novel *The Life-Writer* into numbered, untitled chapters ranging from 1 to 18. The chapters tend to be long. They consist of lengthy paragraphs (due to stream-of-consciousness) that are separated by small breaks in spacing. Transitions in the chapters occur when a situation plays out, a letter begins or ends a chapter, or Katrin's writing is presented.

This back-and-forth mode narrative allows the novel to dip back and forth between the past and the present frequently, with one bleeding into the other. Sometimes, the change in tense happens without warning due to the stream-of-consciousness technique. This demonstrates just how important and relevant the past is to the present, especially given how the present has turned out.

## Quotes

I don't call that living when all you think about is staying alive.

-- Eric (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** Early in the novel, Eric decides he cannot avoid fate. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, Eric knows what awaits him. Katrin urges him to fight no matter what. Eric agrees to fight only to make her happy, but even Katrin knows the future is unavoidable. Eric explains that he does not want to live a life where all he does is think about staying alive, because there is much more to life than merely staying alive. Katrin will learn much more about this in the coming chapters.

And all that benevolent admonishing worked futilely on the fact that he, the admonisher, was necessary to her doing what he asked.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2)

**Importance:** Here, Katrin considers what the next step will be in life following Eric's funeral. Prior to his death, Eric had always gently pushed her to do things, but now, without him, Katrin does not know what she will do without him. Still, she resolves to do her best to keep on living, as Eric made her promise prior to his death. That includes keeping up with work and friends.

Katrin –Dr. Katrin Szuba –was a writer of brief lives, rather in the manner of Walton or Johnson but her subjects were insignificant figures of European Romanticism.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator reveals what kind of writing Katrin does for a living. It is the work that Eric wanted her to keep up with. Katrin enjoys writing about obscure and/or unimportant figures in the Romantic movement. In them, she finds people who did beautiful work, but were never recognized for it. Through her writing, Katrin seeks to recognize them.

You will do this for me, won't you, as his friend and now my friend too?

-- Katrin (Chapter 5)

**Importance:** Here, Katrin writes to Daniel seeking his help in learning more about Eric as a young man. She needs Daniel's help to fill in missing pieces of Eric's life, and to help complete the record of letters Eric has left behind.

At heart Katrin does not want to live. Only her work, her life-writing, enlivens her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** As Katrin begins her work in earnest –to learn about Eric's life –she becomes depressed with the knowledge that he is not around anymore. He was the love of her life, and without him, she does not want to live anymore. Only her focus on





the work at hand keeps her going. It is therefore very important work, not only to the legacy of Eric's life but to the very survival of Katrin herself.

Is that good or bad? She cannot say. But good or bad, it is the only thing she desires to do, so she will do it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 10)

**Importance:** As Katrin continues her writing and research into Eric's life, she realizes that she is doing it because it keeps her close to him, and him closer to her. She does not know if this is doing her more harm or more good, but she refuses to stop doing it. It is the only purpose she has right now in life, and she will not give up the one purpose she has right now.

The spirit has gone out of it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14)

**Importance:** As Katrin works, she begins to piece together Eric's life but seeks to move on in the process. Some of this includes removing her father's old books from the house, and some of Eric's things as well. The house feels emptier, and the project seems less full of spirit because so much of Eric's spirit has been put into it.

She removes the shelf.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14)

**Importance:** In an effort to continue to move on, not only does Katrin sell off the books belonging to her father and to Eric, but she begins to disassemble the room they used as a library. Her desire to remodel is a physical manifestation of her desire for change and a new step in life. A new look to the house will help put Katrin in the mood for a new change in life. The simple act of removing a shelf is a major step towards the future.

I shouldn't have liked to come back to an empty house.

-- Katrin (Chapter 15)

**Importance:** When Katrin attends Gracie's funeral, she asks Daniel to come to her house to wait for her return. She tells Daniel that this is because she did not want to come home to an empty house. It is also so Katrin can learn more about Eric, and so Daniel himself can deal with his sadness by speaking about the past.

In some ways it distresses me more to write these things down than anything else I have had to write. I don't like to watch the man I love behaving badly...

-- Katrin (Chapter 16)

**Importance:** As Katrin works on her biography of Eric, she begins to learn about unfortunate situations, such as Edna's abortion and how Monique drove Eric's family away. Katrin explains she hates having to write these things down, but it is necessary for understanding.



I'm going to stop it.  
-- Katrin (Chapter 16)

**Importance:** Katrin tells Daniel that she is going to cease writing about Daniel. She explains this is because she prefers to live the truth rather than writing about it. Yet, it is also because she now has the strength to get on in life –as she has been transitioning from the past to the present by way of uncovering the past and remodeling her house in the present. Eric's goal –that Katrin be able to move on –is now quite possible.

But most of all, Katrin, write to me, write me letters in French and I will write to you and that will be a help, and whenever we can we will meet.

-- Monique (Chapter 18)

**Importance:** As the novel ends, Monique has given Katrin the silver coins –symbolizing both the past and Eric's love –that Eric once gave to her, to Katrin. This is because Katrin is now the guardian of Eric's memory and his love, so to speak. It is also because Monique is also moving on in life –and looking forward to a friendship of sorts with Katrin.