Mao II Study Guide

Mao II by Don Delillo

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Plot Summary

This complex, multi-faceted narrative tells the story of reclusive novelist Bill Gray's ill-fated attempt return to public life. In language rich in both ideas and imagery, and following a plotline incorporating several historical events and places, the book also explores the metaphoric relationship between terrorism and writing, the power and influence of dictatorship, and the tension in relationships between the need for connection and the need for isolation.

The book begins with a Prologue fictionalizing actual historical events - a mass wedding of thousands of his followers by cult leader Rev. Sun Myung Moon. A middle-aged businessman, ignoring the restless complaints of his wife, searches the crowd of brides parading through Yankee Stadium in New York for a glimpse of his daughter Karen. Meanwhile, as the narrative shifts point of view, Karen pushes aside thoughts of her parents as she focuses on the symbolic commitment to Moon embedded in her marriage.

In Part One of the main narrative, world traveling photographer Brita Nilsson (tired of taking pictures of tragedies, now focusing her time and energy on photographing writers) is met in the heart of bustling New York City by Scott Martineau, Bill Gray's personal assistant, who takes her out to Bill's isolated home in the country. There, Brita shoots dozens of pictures of Bill, their conversation threaded with sexual tension and covering several topics, including the novel Bill has been constantly revising for several years (which Brita says he should publish) and Bill's contemplation of the similarities between terrorism and writing novels. Brita also tells Bill that his editor and publisher, Charles Everson, wants to talk with him about a matter of serious importance. Meanwhile, Scott spends time with Karen, now free of the cult and also working for Bill. Scott comments that if Bill wants to preserve his reputation, he should never publish the new novel. A tense dinner conversation between the four of them eventually leads to Bill losing his temper and withdrawing into his work room. The next day, Scott takes Brita back to her apartment in New York and eventually seduces her. Karen, meanwhile, engages in what seems to be something of a habit - making love with Bill behind Scott's back.

A few days later, Bill travels to New York and meets with Everson, who asks him to help publicize the case of a young poet being held hostage by terrorists. Bill evades the watchful Scott and, after a night with his estranged daughter, travels with Everson to England, where a press conference publicizing the hostage taking is to be held. While he's gone, Karen leaves the house and disappears into the city's homeless community. While she's gone, Scott becomes even more immersed in bringing order to Bill's life. Brita, meanwhile, travels out of the country on assignment.

A narrowly escaped bombing in London brings Bill in contact with George Haddad, a mysterious intermediary with the Lebanese terrorists responsible for both the kidnapping and the bombing. Haddad lures Bill to Greece with the promise of an opportunity to meet terrorist leader Abu Rashid. Karen, meanwhile, becomes even more

deeply involved in the lives of New York's homeless, Scott discovers secrets about Bill's past, and Brita returns home, completely exhausted. An escape from being run over by a car leaves Bill in a considerable amount of worsening pain, but that doesn't stop him from striving to meet Rashid. Eventually, however, as Bill is on a ferry to Lebanon for the meeting, he succumbs to internal injuries and dies. Back in America, Scott and Karen discuss the possible repercussions of Bill disappearing for good.

In an Epilogue (like the Prologue written in present tense) Brita, no longer photographing only writers, is taken to meet Rashid. There she is witness to his particular brand of terrorist dictatorship, confronts his son (and almost loses her life) and, from the balcony of an apartment in a bombed-out building, watches a wedding procession being led by a tank make its way down a nearby street.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

This complex, multi-faceted narrative tells the story of reclusive novelist Bill Gray's ill-fated attempt return to public life. In language rich in both ideas and imagery, and following a plotline incorporating several historical events and places, the book also explores the metaphoric relationship between terrorism and writing, the power and influence of dictatorship, and the tension in relationships between the need for connection and the need for isolation.

"At Yankee Stadium" Businessman Roger and his wife Maureen sit among crowds of people in the bleachers at Yankee Stadium, all there to witness the mass wedding of thousands of followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Roger, unprepared to accept that his daughter is a part of what he feels to be a profoundly disturbing situation, scans the massive crowd of couples gathering on the playing field, hoping to glimpse his daughter Karen. As he looks through the crowd, Maureen makes plans for the rest of their day, suggesting they book tickets to see a play that evening.

Narrative of the wary, worried, hopeful crowd is intercut with descriptions of Moon, his history and his influence, of the longing in his followers for what he seems to be providing, and why they long for it.

Narration also shifts intermittently into the point of view of Karen, about to marry a Korean man named Kim whom she has only known a short while and who was chosen for her by the Reverend Moon. Narration comments on the intensity of her devotion to Moon, and the extremities of behavior (minimal sleep, obsessive street preaching, an overreaching commitment to sell enough flowers to reach the fundraising goal of the day) that devotion leads her to undertake. Narration also comments on how well she's able to mimic patterns of speech, particularly those of Moon.

Unable to catch sight of Karen, Roger vows to Maureen that he is going to find out everything he can about Moon and the religion he preaches. The more cynical Maureen comments that he's a little late (given that Karen is already fully absorbed into Moon's preaching), and again proposes that they attend a play that evening.

As the Prologue concludes, Moon leads the crowd in a chant of victory. Karen daydreams about the number of "Kims" she knew in her previous life. Meanwhile, narration describes how out in the world, people go through their regular routines, "knowing there is something they've forgotten to do. The future", narration concludes, "belongs to crowds."

Prologue Analysis

This remarkably complex novel is, in many ways, a mass of entwined contradictions. Intellectual and poetic, cynical and affirming, at times written with layers upon layers of images and at other times with a clear, powerful simplicity, the narrative of "Mao II" is as an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of stark clarity, whispering implication, and oblique mystery.

Within that kaleidoscope, real-world events such as the mass wedding described here become the anchors for a sometimes satirical, sometimes frightening, often wrenching analysis and commentary on the violence (physical, emotional, intellectual) that members of the human race seem unable to stop inflicting upon one another. In this case, that violence is seen in Karen (her choice to cut herself free from her parents), Moon (his cutting off his disciples from free choice), and Karen's parents (each one cutting the other off from his/her deepest feelings and fears). The novel's violence becomes more physical as the narrative progresses, often becoming particularly apparent (in both physical and emotional manifestations) when crowds appear. Those appearances and the violence with them are foreshadowed by the comment at the Prologue's conclusion, which refers to several other instances in the narrative portraying how large groups of people manifest, react to, and exponentially multiply, passionate and intense emotions.

Other motifs or images introduced for the first time here and which repeat throughout the narrative include the leadership of dictators (such as the spiritual dictator Rev. Moon), discussions of the ways and influences of that particular kind of leadership, and the reasons why so many people allow themselves to succumb to it. Another repeated motif is the search for/examination of faces, here manifested in Roger's search for his daughter's face and later in the narrative in Brita's consideration of Bill's face as she photographs him, Scott and Karen's consideration of her photographs, and Brita's determination to see the face of Rashid's son in the Epilogue.

Finally, it's important to note that both the Prologue and the Epilogue contain weddings, each on the surface very different from the other but in some thematically significant ways, quite similar.

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Chapter 1 - A young man browses a bookstore crowded with both books and customers, eventually finding copies of the two novels written by Bill Gray and witnessing a quiet altercation between a poorly dressed street person and security. The young man, eventually identified as Scott, leaves the bookstore and makes his way to an art gallery, where he browses works by pop artist Andy Warhol, paying particular attention to representations of the face of Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao). After leaving the gallery, Scott makes his way to the lobby of a hotel, where he keeps an appointment with photographer Brita Nilsson. He pays only partial attention as Brita tells him how, after too many years of taking too many pictures of too many kinds of suffering, she focused on taking pictures only of writers, making "a planetary record" of their existence. Their conversation reveals that Scott (watching a group of young people playing on the beams of an under-construction skyscraper across the street) is to take Brita to meet secretive writer Bill Gray. Eventually, Scott announces he's ready to go. He and Brita leave the city, Brita commenting that she feels like she's being taken to meet "some terrorist chief" and both of them driving mostly in silence.

Chapter 2 - A man looks out his window, waiting for the sight of the headlights that will announce the arrival of his guests. He promises himself that he will go back to his writing ("the scant drip, the ooze of speckled matter, the blood sneeze, the daily pale secretion, the bits of human tissue sticking to the page") if they don't show up within a certain time limit, but remains watching anyway. When he actually sees the headlights, he goes to his desk and reaches for his cigarettes.

Narration describes how, after their arrival, Scott takes Brita on a tour of Bill's house. She is shown through a hallway lined with shelves holding analyses of, and commentaries on, his two novels, and later down into a room (that she can't help thinking of as a bunker) where Bill, she is told, keeps all the material relating to his current projects - notes, sketches, rewrites, first drafts, second drafts. After showing Brita to her room, Scott goes to the room he shares with Karen, goes to bed, and falls quickly asleep. Karen stays awake a while longer, watching the news on television with the sound turned off - "it was," narration comments, "mainly the film footage she wanted to see ... it was interesting how you could make up the news as you went along by sticking to the picture only." The images on the news that night are of a massive crowd of people pressed against a fence during a soccer match, some of the faces shown on the screen indicating that the people behind the faces know they are trapped and desperate, dead and dying, "bodies piling up behind [the fence], smothered, sometimes only fingers moving...".

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

On almost every page of this narrative, in almost every paragraph, there is an image of importance, a piece of foreshadowing, or an element of character/relationship reflecting and/or illuminating another. In this section, this interweaving of narrative moments begins with the reference to Bill's two books, an important piece of information in that the reader is eventually asked to believe that Bill's status and reputation rests on this apparently small body of work. There are, however, writers whose reputation has been built on even fewer publications - Harper Lee, for example, became a renowned and respected author after publishing only one, "To Kill A Mockingbird". Then there is the reference to the homeless man, whose insistence upon not being touched foreshadows Bill's determination to remain "untouched" by the world, and Scott's visit to the library, with its references to Chairman Mao (which introduces the thematic presence of dictators). The reference to the portrait of Mao foreshadows the passing reference in chapter five to Scott giving Karen a copy of that same portrait, and introduces two repeated motifs ... the impact of faces (also commented upon in Brita's discussion of why she's photographing writers) and the idea of how dictators promote and build upon their power through image. Scott watching the young people playing on the skyscraper foreshadows the danger and risk, both physical and emotional, into which all four of the main characters place themselves throughout the narrative, while Brita's reference to meeting a "terrorist chief" introduces one of the book's primary themes, the likening of novel writing to terrorism.

In chapter two, the writing contains a vivid example of one of the novel's most important stylistic elements, the multi-faceted aspects of a particular image or experience. Chapter two also introduces another recurring motif, that of Bill's third book, in its incompleteness a metaphor for his uncompleted life. A repeated motif, albeit in another manifestation, is a reference to the power of the visual image, referred to in the description of how Karen prefers to watch the news without sound. This, in turn, foreshadows other occasions in the narrative when she does the same thing - in particular, how she watches, and is affected by, the coverage of the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini in chapter twelve. At the end of the chapter, Karen's contemplation of the crowds at a soccer match (a narrative image based on a real-life incident of crowds crushed in just such a way at just such a match) repeats and develops the motif of the emotional power, potential danger, and loss of identity in crowds.

On a stylistic level, there is an intriguing sense of mystery about the writing in this section, of narrative technique drawing the reader in. Specifically, the author delays the use of names (in Scott's first appearance and in reference to "the man" at the end of chapter one). Then, Karen is introduced just as Karen without making it clear that she is the Karen of the Prologue and, at the same time, implying that she is, making the reader wonder how/when/why she got where she is and what's the connection with Bill.

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3 - As Brita sets up her camera and lights, she nervously chats with Bill, who responds with thoughtful, numerous, and varied comments about the similarity of what they do (i.e., capturing moments of truth). Their conversation, at times bantering and at other times intense, evolves and deepens as Brita continues to shoot and Bill continues to comment on his experience of being a writer and the relationship he experiences between his work and his own identity. As the shoot continues, Bill refers to the third novel, saying he doesn't want to have it published - it feels, he says, forced and wrong, dead and untrue to himself. Conversation also reveals that Bill is aware of somehow being changed by Brita, both her taking pictures and her conversation. Finally, Brita, believing she's gotten the best picture she can, reveals that Bill's former editor, Charles Everson, wants to talk with Bill about a very delicate matter that "couldn't be seen or heard by anyone else". Their conversation turns back to whether Bill should publish his book, with Brita commenting bluntly that the book is finished, it's time for Bill to stop revising (which he's been doing to avoid publishing), and that it's time for him to take what comes. Narration describes how Bill's face changes as he considers this idea, and Brita quickly snaps a string of shots, catching "the starkness of a last prayer" in his eyes.

Chapter 4 - Over lunch the following day, Scott tells Brita about his life before he met Bill, specifically about his (Scott's) drug-fueled journey through Europe (beginning in Athens) and then through American retail. He also comments on his belief that Bill's new book falls "woefully" short of what Bill can do, how Bill obsesses about rewriting it and getting it right, and that Bill is as famous as he is because he hasn't written and because he hasn't shown himself. Scott then shows Brita his attic office where he keeps the latest version of Bill's new book, with narration commenting that as they come downstairs, they can hear Bill typing revisions in his office. The narrative then shifts focus to Bill, in a stream-of-conscious narrative that includes references to his desire to have sex with Brita, the appeal of a life of domesticity with her in the city, the distaste with which he views the book he's working on, and the despair each perceived mistake awakens in him.

Back down in the kitchen, Brita is ready to depart when Karen comes in, asking pointed questions about why Brita is bothering to take Bill's picture and saying she can sense the calm order of the life she and Scott share with Bill being cracked open. Meanwhile, Scott comes in with groceries and, as all three sit with cups of coffee, tells how he came to be Bill's assistant. He describes how his life changed by reading one of Bill's books, how he wrote a series of letters trying to get Bill's attention, and when he didn't get a response saying "go away", tracked Bill down to the town near where he had taken refuge in his country house. He then describes an encounter he had with Bill on the street, in which he convinced Bill that he (Scott) would and could be a useful secretary.

Scott concludes his story with the comment that as he accepted the idea, Bill's face changed. "A great man's face," narration comments, "shows the beauty of his work."

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Several of the narrative's thematic considerations and motifs are developed further in this section. First there is further thematic consideration of the relationship between terrorism and writing, commented upon here in Bill's conversation with Brita about how terrorists and novelists, in his opinion, share a determination to effect both personal and societal transformation. Then there is the motif of faces, evident throughout all of chapter three as Brita examines Bill's face for truth and takes pictures of what she finds and commented upon further at the end of chapter four. There is also the motif of the unfinished book, with Bill's comments on how it feels so wrong to him reinforcing the idea that it is a metaphoric externalization of his internal spiritual condition, and the introduction of the different ways the book is viewed by Brita and Scott. Specifically, there is the sense that Scott has a significant personal investment in the book remaining incomplete, in that his relationship with Bill (specifically, the reliance Bill has on him) is essentially defined by Bill's need for Scott to keep his life in order while he (Bill) is working on the book. There is also Scott's need (evident in the story of how he essentially stalked Bill) to be associated with someone so famous, a need further illuminated by Scott's comments on just why Bill is famous. For her part, Brita's investment in Bill is less personal, but no less intense - as someone who has moved beyond phases of her life which she realizes no longer serve her (i.e., photographing tragedies), she seems to feel it's important for other artists (i.e., Bill) to make the same sort of realization and take the same sort of action.

Important elements of foreshadowing include the reference to Everson, which foreshadows events later in the narrative that change the course of Bill's life, re-awakening him to a sense of purpose that, at this point in the narrative, is manifesting as intense satisfaction with what he believes his current purpose to be (i.e., the third novel). Another piece of foreshadowing can be found in the brief conversation between Karen and Brita, in which the eventual reshaping of the living arrangement with Bill, Karen and Scott is hinted at. Finally, there is the passing reference to Athens. Scott's brief commentary that Athens was the place where his journey into a new life began foreshadows the fact that in later chapters, exactly the same sort of thing happens for Bill, as he takes the first (fatal) steps into his new life in the world in that same city.

Part 1, Chapters 5 and 6

Part 1, Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5 - Karen (in the room she shares with Scott) contemplates a present he brought her - a print of a pencil sketch drawn of Mao Zedong drawn by an artist with a pale face and a shock of white hair whose name she cannot immediately remember, but then recalls as Andy.

Down in the kitchen, Bill and Scott argue over whether Bill should go back to work, with Bill saying he wants to take a walk with the women while the light is good and Scott insisting Bill should go upstairs and get started.

Brita goes into Bill's workroom to look for a cigarette. Bill comes in, and their conversation reveals that Brita is to leave that evening (after dark, so she can't see where she is) and that she has an intuition that she will die before she reaches sixty. Later, in a scalding hot bath, Brita contemplates her habit of restlessness and her awareness that Bill is somehow off balance because of her. She listens to the chopping of wood outside, realizes it's Bill, and goes to the bathroom window to watch him.

Later that evening, Bill, Brita, Karen and Scott eat a lamb dinner. Several different conversations go on at the same time, with no one apparently listening to the other but with Scott watching Brita intently, Karen being particularly attentive to the increasingly angry Bill, and Brita becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Eventually, the lack of real conversation combines with Scott's needling comments about the poor quality of the book to trigger a loss of temper in Bill, and he furiously swipes a butter dish off the table, its top hitting Scott in the face. Bill then goes up to his workroom.

After dinner, and just before they leave, Scott takes Brita into a shed filled with even more papers related to Bill's latest book. As they leave, Scott tells her to look up at Bill's window. She does, and sees "the faintest trace of silhouette centered in the window, man-shaped and dead still".

Chapter 6 - As he drives Brita into New York, Scott recounts (in considerable detail) the story of how, shortly after he became Bill's assistant, he met Karen in a nearby small town. She was, he says, on the run from an attempt made by her parents and a cousin to deprogram her (i.e., remove her from the influence of the Reverend Moon). Meanwhile, back at the house, Karen visits Bill in his bedroom where, as a prelude to having sex, they discuss whether Scott knows about the intimacies of their relationship. Karen attempts to assure Bill that Scott does, but Bill is not entirely assured. Back in New York, at Brita's apartment (which has an impressive view of the World Trade Center), Scott attempts to seduce Brita, but falls asleep on her shoulder. Brita gently slips out from under him and gets into bed, but is unable to sleep, all too aware of the many things going wrong in her body and her reluctance to go to a doctor to have them named. Eventually, as dawn is breaking, she gets up to go look out her windows,

listening as her telephone rings and her answering machine picks up. The caller turns out to be Bill, who speaks poetically of the various circumstances of the moment of his call (including his decision to quit drinking), none of which are why he's calling. Eventually, he admits he's calling because he believes they're friends and that she would enjoy hearing him describe the sunrise. Just as he's finishing his poetic description, the machine runs out of tape and stops. At that moment, Scott comes up behind Brita, touches her sensually and seductively, and they go to her bed together.

Part 1, Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The first part of chapter five marks a significant stylistic shift from the previous chapters, in that incidents are narrated in a series of short scenes (as opposed to the lengthy, flowing narratives of previous chapters and most of the chapters that follow). There is the sense here that the author is building up a sense of tension, exploring individual agendas, feelings and experiences that build to the cross-purposed conversation, and eventual emotional explosion, of the dinner scene. Within those brief, individual scenes, the author repeats several motifs, each commenting upon aspects of the relationships of the people within the house. The scene with Karen and the Mao portrait, for example, illuminates how she is under the dictatorial thumb of both Scott and Bill. Meanwhile, the argument between Bill and Scott indicates just how invested Scott is in Bill continuing to spin his creative wheels and, at the same time, indicates how Bill is becoming increasingly restless in the life he has established for himself. The scenes in chapter five featuring Brita portray her as awakening to feelings, triggered by both physical and intellectual stimulation, that she seems to have long suppressed and which, eventually, seem to lead her to a return to the more risky sort of photography she undertakes in the Epilogue. This idea of Brita's awakening is reinforced by the narrative at the end of chapter six, in which she is literally awakened (or, more specifically, is kept awake) by long-restrained contemplations of her health, her spirit (through Bill's message) and her sexuality (through her encounter with Scott).

The dinner party scene continues to build upon the tension established and defined by the differing experiences and perspectives of the four characters, with Bill's explosion of temper essentially serving as a cathartic release of feeling for all four. It's interesting to note here that in the aftermath of that release of tension, the various couples pair off and experience sexual intimacy (although not with the partners the reader might reasonably expect). There is, in this cross partnering, the sense that for at least a moment or two, the characters both feel the need to break their rules of behavior - Scott and Brita for the first time, Karen and Bill for what seems to be the most recent of a string of times. Finally, the image at the end of chapter five can be seen as a manifestation of what Brita believes to be Bill's general state of being, and what Bill feels about himself.

The story in chapter six of how Scott came to be with Karen functions on a number of levels. First, it is simple exposition, explaining how Karen came to be in the household. Second, it explains how Karen came to leave the influence of one sort of dictator (Reverend Moon) and came under the influence of two others (Scott and Bill). In this,

the story is a manifestation of the novel's primary thematic consideration, that of the nature of dictatorship. More specifically, it is a narration of how needy souls can allow themselves to be influenced and ultimately controlled by stronger, more dominant personalities.

Finally, it's interesting to consider the presence of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in the narrative. The first thing to note is that the novel was written and published in the early 1990s, several years before the attack on the Towers on 9/11. The second thing to note, however, is that the portrayal of the Towers here (as a cold, monumental, finance-oriented manifestation of oppression, the effects of which are explored through Karen's experiences with the homeless in subsequent chapters) seems to foreshadow and/or echo the apparent reasons for the attack. In other words, the reference to the Towers in "Mao II" combines with the book's thematic focus on terrorism to create an almost eerie sense of foreboding, not to mention the sense that the issues commented upon in the novel continue, almost twenty years after its initial publication, to be a source of conflict in the contemporary world.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter 7 - After a shouted conversation on the street with Scott, Bill goes into a large office building, is handed a visitor's badge, and is shown upstairs into the office of his old friend and editor Charlie Everson. After reminiscing about the glory days of their friendship, Charlie explains why he wanted Bill to contact him. There is, Charlie says, a young poet being held hostage by a group of terrorists in Athens. An international group of free speech advocates (of which Charlie is a leading member) has been working to achieve the poet's release, and is close to doing so. In the meanwhile, Charlie has been planning a public, media-oriented presentation speaking to the value of both free speech and his group's work, with an announcement of the poet's release serving as the event's climax. He then asks Bill to be present at the event, to read some of the young poet's work and to metaphorically represent and/or embody the spirit of artistically communicated rebellion Bill has, for so long, believed writers as a group to represent. When Bill is silent, Charlie goes on to promise certain conditions (no electronic media, no questions after the presentation), speaks forcefully of wanting Bill to hand over his new book for publication, and then says he wants an answer that night - the presentation is to be held in two days, in London. He concludes his attempt at persuasion by reminding Bill that if the poet is released, it will mean "one less writer in the hands of killers." After leaving Charlie, Bill returns to the street, where he sees Scott keeping an eye on him, smokes a cigarette ... and tears off his visitor's badge.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

The events of this chapter mark a turning point for Bill, and by extension for the narrative. The primary element at work here is the re-emergence of the novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between writing and terrorism, with Bill essentially being asked to be a kind of literary terrorist - take a stand and fight for an issue of social justice which, as Bill has said earlier, is a basic description of what terrorists do. As the rest of the narrative clearly indicates, it is the means of taking that stand, the method of fighting that he ultimately comes to disagree with, but as his later desire to communicate with terrorist leader Rashid suggests, he continues to believe in the principles behind both literary and political "terrorism". To look at it another way, Bill is in the process of re-discovering both meaning and purpose, becoming so involved in the actualization of both (as seen in Part 2) that he becomes unable and/or unwilling to pay attention to any other aspect of his life, including his health. Here, it's interesting to note his relationship to the long-struggled-with third novel. As of this chapter, he essentially leaves it behind, in the same way as he is leaving his old lost-ness, his old dis-engagement from the world, behind him. This aspect of his transformation is externalized by the way Charlie keeps bringing the book up and Bill keeps avoiding the subject. From now on, there is no turning back. Bill, for better or for worse, is becoming more himself than he has been in years. Here, perhaps ironically, he begins the process of re-becoming the idealistic

firebrand that Charlie claims, at the beginning of this chapter, to have so intensely admired.

Part 2, Chapters 8 and 9

Part 2, Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

Chapter 8 - The first part of the chapter is a stream-of-conscious narrative of the experience of a prisoner, Jean-Claude Julien, held captive in a Christian/Muslim war zone (the implication is that he is the prisoner spoken about by Charlie Everson in the previous chapter). Reactions to the sounds of war, the various mental exercises undertakes to keep himself sane, fantasies about women and sex, memories of his kidnapping and of seeing a man impaled on razor wire, imagined conversations with his father ... all, as narration portrays them, move through his brain randomly and intensely. This section concludes with commentary on how the prisoner despairingly comes to believe he'd been forgotten - by his government, his employer, his family, and even the people who kidnapped him.

In the next part of the chapter, Bill has temporarily moved in with his semi-estranged daughter Liz and her partner Gail. After he and Liz discuss Bill's complicated, troubled relationship with his family, Bill calls Charlie, with their conversation revealing that neither Charlie nor Scott knows where Bill is, and that Bill intends to go to London for the press conference. After Liz has gone to bed, Bill makes notes for more revisions on his book.

Back at Bill's house, conversation between Scott and Karen reveals Scott's angry frustration that Bill has gotten away from him. For her part, Karen believes that Bill is with Brita (an idea that Scott completely rejects), and that any action about the workroom (or any action about Bill at all) should wait until he calls, which she believes he will. Conversation also reveals that Scott has a sense that there are times when Karen and Bill connect with each other when he's not around, with the chapter's closing narration revealing that Scott envies Karen's essential optimism.

Chapter 9 - In London, Bill settles in at a different hotel than the one Charlie is at, touching base with Charlie by phone and learning that the original setting for the press conference is in the process of being secretly changed to avoid a potential terrorist attack, threatened by a series of anonymous phone calls. The next day, after a half-bantering, half-angry conversation about Bill's book (in which Charlie reiterates how intensely he wants to publish it and Bill continues to insist it's not ready), the two men make their way to the new site for the conference, but are forced to evacuate the building after another phoned in bomb threat. This one proves to be accurate, but both Bill and Charlie are a safe distance away when the bomb explodes. That night, as they're having dinner in a restaurant, they are approached by a man named George Haddad, known to Charlie and who knows Bill by reputation, and who warns them that there will probably be another bombing, this one even more serious. Later conversation between Bill and Charlie reveals that one of Charlie's contacts in the military has received information that the terrorists holding the imprisoned writer intend to replace him with Bill, whom they believe will be a better, more powerful bargaining tool. Bill

urges Charlie to go ahead with the press conference, and Charlie again says that he's desperate to publish the book.

Following a brief diversion to New York (where Brita encounters Karen at a gallery exhibition by an artist who has adopted the techniques and style of Andy Warhol), the narrative returns to Bill who, after a night of restless dreams, receives a surprise visitor - George Haddad who, after saying that there is no way the hostage is going to survive this situation, invites Bill to Athens. There, Haddad says, they can really talk freely and perhaps make a real difference. After Haddad leaves, Bill has breakfast, packs up, leaves the hotel, and gets into a cab. "For the first time," narration comments, Bill "thought about the hostage."

Part 2, Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how the experiences of the imprisoned poet parallel and/or echo those of Bill Gray. Both feel trapped (the poet by terrorists, Bill by his book and self-imposed exile), both feel abandoned (by the world at large and by the artistic community in particular), and how they keep their consciousness going through a string of seemingly random mental exercises. In the case of the poet, these exercises involve memory, in Bill's case they involve revisions on the book. The image of the man caught in razor wire is, in this context, an important metaphoric representation of both - not only being caught, but being shredded. Interestingly, the conversation between Bill and his daughter reveals another aspect of what has trapped him - his sense of responsibility, of being called to the world, life and experience of being a writer, said responsibility also being defined by a sense of obsession. These ideas, in turn, foreshadow events later in the narrative when he becomes obsessed with the idea of communicating with Abu Rashid. In the same way as his relationship with his daughter is essentially destroyed by his obsession/calling to write about truth (with, it's important to note, the passion for and commitment to justice of a terrorist), his actual life is destroyed by his obsession to experience truth, ironically enough through contact with a terrorist. Meanwhile, the conversation between Scott and Karen reveals just how obsessed Scott is with maintaining the status of his relationship with Bill, with the narrative revealing that he is perhaps even somewhat pathological about it.

Important points to consider in chapter nine include the repeatedly expressed tension between Charlie and Bill about the new book which, as previously discussed, is a metaphoric representation of the tension between Bill's old life (defined by his sense of being as lost and empty as his book feels to him and Charlie's determination to perpetuate that life) and his new one (defined by his re-emerging sense of personal, artistic, and social mission). At the same time, the narrative continues its thematic consideration of the parallels between writing novels and terrorism, with novelist Bill acting out, as discussed above, his mission, and the bombers acting out theirs. The narrative's brief detour to New York, with its reference to Andy Warhol (an artist whose work, it could be argued, was all about manipulation of image as opposed to any sort of meaning), is a metaphoric suggestion that in pursuing the path he is, Bill is just as interested in restructuring and redefining his image as he is about redefining his truth.

Finally, there is the reappearance of George Haddad who is clearly a manifestation of the plan to exchange Bill for the poet/prisoner ... clearly so, that is, to the reader, not to Bill. At least, the narrative doesn't suggest that he makes the connection, even though he is arguably too intelligent not to. It may be, however, that in omitting any reference to Bill's being aware of this aspect of his relationship with Haddad, the narrative is making a comment on just how obsessed Bill is with his reinvention of his life. This idea is reinforced by the comment at the end of the chapter - specifically, the reference to how for the first time, Bill thinks of the prisoner, the implication being that up to this point, he has been thinking of himself.

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

Chapter 10 - Scott sits in Bill's office and contemplates reorganizing the reader mail. At the same time, he studies the various maps and diagrams of Bill's novel on the wall, and considers the relationship between having Bill's having his photo taken and his disappearance. His thoughts contrast Bill's perspective with that of Chairman Mao (who used photographs to affirm his presence in the world, rather than his absence). He also considers Bill's habits as a writer, and as he methodically cleans Bill's typewriter, reflects on Karen's absence (particularly on how she seems adrift and aimless when Bill's gone) and on how he (Scott) simultaneously loves and resents her. After finishing with the typewriter, Scott goes through the drawers in Bill's desk, discovering family letters, army documents, and Bill's birth certificate, identifying him as Willard Skansey Jr.

Karen, meanwhile, wanders through New York City, temporarily using Brita's apartment as a home base while Brita is gone on another leg of her "photographing writers" world tour. Karen finds herself drawn to homeless people, eventually making her way to an open park with a bandstand where several homeless people do what they can to create for themselves what passes as a home. She finds herself collecting bottles and other returnable items, discarded construction materials, empty plastic bags, and taking them to the park so the people there can use them, sell them, do whatever it takes to improve their lives in whatever way they can. Narration comments that in many ways, the intensity and selflessness of activity is not all that different from what she used to do as a follower of the Reverend Moon.

Chapter 11 - In Athens, Bill debates the relationship between writing and terrorism with George Haddad who reveals that the plan to substitute Bill for the kidnapped poet was canceled out of concern for Bill's eventual well being. Haddad also suggests that Bill meet the sect's leader, Abu Rashid, adding that terrorism is an important act of defending the defenseless, in the same way as Chairman Mao did in China. Their argument climaxes in Bill's angry assertion that terrorism, no matter where it comes from, is destructive of the sort of pure, clear democracy that novel writing is an essential manifestation of. Back in his hotel room, Bill attempts to imagine himself in the position of the prisoner - the details of his physical and mental state of being, his routine, the war-torn outside environment, putting his thoughts on paper in writing that he senses has more energy and passion than anything he put into the book. Later, while urging Bill to try working with a word processor, George continues to persuade him of the value of terrorist causes and activities, again comparing them to the positive aspects of life in China under Chairman Mao. As Bill begins to consider meeting Rashid, George tells him that if he did, he would be substituted for the captured poet, who would be released and then probably killed, photographed at every stage, all in the name of gaining "the maximum attention".

As she flies in a plane to somewhere unspecified in narration, Brita's thoughts wander from concern about Karen (whom she left with responsibility for her cat and home without even knowing her last name) and to guilt about having sex with Scott (which she thinks happened because she really wanted to have sex with Bill but couldn't). She also considers how much of her life, impressions and experiences seems to have made its way into public art and public consciousness. "...the world was so intimate that she was everywhere in it."

After receiving scrapes and bruises after being run over by a car, Bill considers the writing he did about the hostage and realizes he's recapturing a sense of energy and excitement about working that he hasn't had in the years since he's been working on his novel. Later, George (who again urges Bill to get a word processor) reveals that Rashid is not going to be able to get out of Lebanon to meet him, meaning the exchange is off and the hostage is probably going to die. After a sleepless night, Bill packs and leaves the hotel, searching for a taxi but getting himself lost in an Athenian suburb.

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

The narrative's explorations of the relationships between the experiences of the four central characters take on a different angle in this section. Rather than conducting those explorations with the characters in the same room, the narrative looks at each character and his/her situation individually, leaving it to the reader to draw conclusions about how their experiences relate each to the other, and to the overall themes of the narrative. Thus, the narrative considers the self-absorbed, obsessive Scott who, in his particular circumstances, is as self-absorbed and as obsessive as Bill. Karen becomes as drawn to and obsessed with the plight of the disadvantaged in much the same way as Bill is. Her obsession is less physically self destructive than his, but is more spiritually so - the narrative comment likening her experience to that of her time with Rev. Moon makes this quite clear, in that both circumstances lead her into a submergence of self-identity in the face of the demands/needs of others. Meanwhile, Brita's experiences of the pervasiveness of her artwork, of the intimacy she feels she shares with the world, echoes and defines Bill's experience of feeling that his previous work belongs as much to the world as to him, that he in his celebrated identity as a recluse belongs to the world as much as his work, and that the mission that he is embarked upon will bring them (him and the world) into an even more intimate, more widespread relationship.

Meanwhile, the narrative's thematic consideration of the power and nature of dictatorships continues in the references to Chairman Mao and to Rashid, while the almost-in-passing reference to Bill's injuries foreshadows his eventual (inevitable?) death in the following section. Finally, the reference to Bill's being lost in Athens can be seen as a metaphoric reference to his being "lost" in his beliefs about his physical invincibility (i.e., in his being able to ignore his injuries) and in his beliefs about his "mission".

Part 2, Chapters 12 and 13

Part 2, Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

Chapter 12 - Karen continues her involvement with the homeless people of New York, with narration commenting that she repeatedly hears the situation being described as just like Beirut (the capital of Lebanon). She makes friends with unpredictable, street-smart, fourteen-year-old drug dealer Omar, who helps her sell some of the re-sellable goods (pop bottles, recyclables) and who one day accompanies her to an art gallery. There, her curiosity about the texture of a food-encrusted spoon leads her first to touch it, then to accidentally pull it off the burlap canvas to which it's attached. Horrified by what she's done, fascinated by the meaning of both the spoon and the accident, she takes it to Brita's loft (where she still spends her nights) and keeps it in a safe, almost sacred place. Also at the loft, she works her way through Brita's earlier photographs (that is, her photographs of suffering) and watches a lot of television, paying particular attention to newscasts showing thousands of Chinese marching together while being watched over by giant posters of Chairman Mao and eventually being suppressed by the military.

When Brita comes home, the conversation between her and Karen focuses first on Bill, on Scott (with Brita suggesting that Karen return to their relationship) and on Karen's marriage (as portrayed in the Prologue), with Karen commenting that she believes her husband to still be in Europe somewhere.

After a brief diversionary comment on Scott's determination to re-file Bill's reader correspondence, and his self-congratulatory determination to keep Bill's name change a secret, the narrative returns its attention to Karen - to her gradual return to the mindset of her time devoted to Reverend Moon. One day, she becomes obsessively, almost traumatically absorbed in the television coverage of the funeral of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and in particular in the way in which the nation of mourners refused both to let his body rest and to believe he was dead. Soon afterward, she returns to the park with the bandshell, telling the people there that the Master has a plan for all mankind.

Chapter 13 - In Athens, waiting for a ferry to take him to Lebanon, Bill struggles to write, tender and bruised in the wake of his accident, frequently lost in the streets and unable to find his hotel. He thinks of Charlie with affection, wondering how Charlie managed to stop drinking and recalling how he often spoke of how he would end his life - in a wheelchair, tended by a silent nurse, being taken to sit in the sun. Memories of his father emerge, images of hair caught in his typewriter appear, and in the meanwhile he struggles to avoid the blank page that seems to be waiting for him to settle down and write.

Narration then returns to the prisoner who, in the midst of continued flashes of memory (about his capture, about the man on the razor wire), believes for a while that "only

writing could soak up his loneliness and pain. Written words could tell him who he was ... the only way to be in the world was to write himself there."

Back in Athens, Bill approaches a group of visiting British veterinarians and asks whether they'd be able to help him with some medical research for a new book. After assuring them that it doesn't matter that their experience is with animals, he describes his own symptoms and circumstances (sore upper right side, sore shoulder) and receives a diagnosis of a lacerated liver, a condition that should prohibit whoever has it from traveling. After a night partying with the veterinarians, Bill wakes feeling fairly well, unhappy about how his life seems to have become both repetitive and narrow, and having decided he's going to see a doctor. On impulse, however, he checks to see if the ferry to Beirut is running. When he finds that it is, he goes to the dock and buys a ticket. On board, he makes plans for getting into the troubled, corrupt city, with narration commenting at one point that he "wanted devoutly to be forgotten". As he settles in for the night, he experiences flashes of memory about his father, with the motion of the sea, and "the ship sailing morningward toward the sun" heralding his death. The next morning, his body is discovered by an old man who takes his passport and other pieces of ID, planning to sell them to the militia in Beirut.

Part 2, Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is chapter twelve's intense, multi-faceted re-introduction of the motif of crowds - specifically, the crowds marching in China and the crowds at the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. The first point to note here is that both sets of images are based on actual events. The Chinese section is a portrayal of the before, during and after the notorious Tianenmen Square Massacre, in which pro-democracy demonstrators were slaughtered by the governmental dictatorship in numbers that remain a mystery even today. The Khomeini section is a portrayal of the real-life events surrounding the death of the real-life Khomeini, the longtime religious leader/dictator of Iran. Both incidents are manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in the nature of dictatorships, specifically how they inspire intense emotion in those who live under them. In the case of the Chinese dictatorship, that emotion is the determination to resist and to break free, emotion which the dictatorship eventually crushes. In the case of the Khomeini dictatorship, that emotion is devotion, encouraged and manipulated by those determined to see the dictatorship continue. Finally, the motif of crowds also manifests in the portrayal of the homeless who, it could be argued, are portrayed as being the victims of the dictatorship of capitalism (as represented throughout the novel by the city of New York in general, and by the Twin Towers in particular). The emotion at work there is that of hopelessness and despair which Karen, with increasing determination, strives to relieve ... in the same way as Bill, in his efforts to get in touch with Rashid is, on one level, striving to relieve the despair of both the individual poet and anyone else who the terrorists might potentially, eventually, attempt to oppress.

Then, in the same way as the narrative diversion to Brita (briefly interrupting the narrative's focus on Bill) illuminated the experiences of the other characters, so too does the diversion to Scott in this section illuminate the experiences of Karen and Bill.

Specifically, the portrait of Scott's deepening obsession reflects their deepening obsessions - Karen's devotion to the New York homeless (with its clear echoes of her devotion to Reverend Moon), and Bill's devotion to his ideal of meeting Rashid and, in doing so, being the sort of terrorist/novelist he believes he must be. In both cases, as the narrative makes clear, the obsessions of both are leading to a sort of destruction - of Karen's identity, and of Bill's life.

For Bill, the life destroyed itself has several aspects - his physical life (as evidenced by the final moments of chapter thirteen), his creative life (referred to in the narrative's comment about the blank page awaiting him), and his mental life (in that the line between memory and reality seems to be becoming blurred). Perhaps most importantly, however, or at least more relevantly to the narrative, is the destruction of his identity which has, throughout the novel and for better or for worse, has been his primary focus. His reclusivity, his desire to be photographed, his decision to take on the challenge of representing the dead poet, his passionate arguments about what a novelist is meant to do and/or be - all are manifestations of his determination for his identity, both personal and public, to be both known and sustained. This aspect of his character and of his story is what makes the final moments of his life (and the final moments of chapter thirteen) so profoundly ironic ... every easily accessible aspect of his identity is removed from him. His obsession with identity has drawn him to the point where that identity becomes lost.

Part 2, Chapter 14

Part 2, Chapter 14 Summary

Chapter 14 -Scott is washing dishes when he hears Karen return. She finds him in the kitchen and, filling his silence, apologizes for leaving at a bad time. Later, after Karen has cried and they've taken a long walk (during which Karen reveals that she has brought the contact sheets of Brita's photographs of Bill), they spend the night together, sometimes talking, sometimes sitting in silence, sometimes making love, sometimes sleeping. They then spend the next day studying Brita's pictures and considering what she may have been trying to do with them. Narration comments on Scott's intent to catalog them all, based on the (often very subtle) differences between the frames.

The next morning, Scott tells Karen they have to prepare themselves for the likelihood that Bill will not be returning. He explains that their financial circumstances are secure, but they may have to face a legal challenge from Bill's family. Karen imagines that they'll be able to stay where they are and retain custody of the pictures and the manuscript of the last novel. Later that day, Scott sits alone in Bill's office, contemplating the fact that he knows the secret of Bill's real name, and that he has both the photographs and the manuscript, and how he plans to keep Bill's name and memory alive, all the while without actually publishing his last book. "The nice thing about life," narration comments, "is that it's filled with second chances. Quoting Bill."

Part 2, Chapter 14 Analysis

This brief chapter has several noteworthy aspects. First, there is the reiteration of the narrative's motif defining and exploring the power and/or meaning of faces, here developed through narration of Karen and Scott's examination of, and commentary on, Brita's pictures of Bill. Second, there is a reiteration of the motif commenting on how dictators (cultural dictators like Mao, domestic dictators like Bill) keep their power alive through presentation and/or maintenance of, image. This idea is further developed by Scott's ideas for keeping Bill's image alive through planned distribution of his photographs. The dictatorship at work here is perhaps more metaphorical than literal - the dictatorship of memory, perhaps. His idea is not without precedent - consider, in contemporary culture, how the images of iconic individuals like Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, and yes, Chairman Mao, keep the memories, influences, meanings, and associated feelings, alive.

Another noteworthy point about this section is the description of the night Karen and Scott spend together, which has clear (and apparently deliberate) echoes of the night they spend together while Karen is deprogramming (see "Chapter 6"). The implication of this similarity is that Karen is being deprogrammed from either her experience in New York with the homeless or her experience with Bill, or both. The irony is that there is, at this point, the very strong sense that she is becoming even more deeply involved in the

dictatorship of Scott - for whom, it's important to note, not much has changed as the result of Bill's disappearance. He is still the custodian of Bill's legacy, as responsible as he has always wanted to be (and as he has made himself) for securing his fame, now more than ever simultaneously needed and associated with greatness, and therefore to some degree great himself.

Finally, for consideration of the ironic value of the chapter's final reference to second chances, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the final lines of Chapter 14 ..."

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

"In Beirut" Brita is driven through bombed-out Beirut, unhappily listening to stories of how violent the city has become (see "Quotes", p. 228). As narration, written in the present tense, reveals that Brita is there to take photographs of Abu Rashid and that she has also given up photographing only writers, it also comments on the various large placards and signs she sees - advertising soft drinks, advertising bombs, advertising Khomeini, advertising movies.

Eventually, Brita is taken to a collapsed building, past hooded guards and into a room with Rashid and his interpreter, both eating spaghetti. As she sets up, she sees through a window into a school playground, and notices a group of male schoolchildren, all wearing t-shirts with Rashid's picture on them. As she snaps pictures, she asks about the shirts. Rashid, through his interpreter, tells her that the shirts define the boys' identity and, indeed, the identity of the nation. "They don't need their own features or voices," she is told. "They are surrendering those things to something powerful and great." When she comments that the greatness being talked about is the result of violence, she is told that violence is another part of the boys' identity (see "Quotes", p. 234). Rashid also talks about how Chairman Mao led from a place of advocating thought reform, how he regarded "armed struggle as the final and greatest action of human consciousness", and how death in the service of struggle gave death weight and meaning. Brita, frustrated and angered, sweeps the hood of the guard (previously revealed to be Rashid's son) and takes his picture. He responds with violence and she fights back, protecting her camera and prepared to be assaulted again. Rashid, however, halts the assault, and Brita is allowed to leave.

That night, in a blown-out apartment, aware of the violence and passion around her ("she wants", narration comments, "to stand inside it), Brita contemplates how Beirut, and the life lived there, is defined by violence and destruction. After briefly falling asleep, however, she awakens to an approaching rumble, and watches with increasing amazement as a fully armed tank leads a joyful wedding procession down the street. She raises a glass of liqueur to the bride and groom, who toast her back. After the party passes, the city falls silent. Brita notices bright flashes of light coming from a checkpoint and at first assumes they're from weapons fire, but later realizes that because they are not accompanied by sound, the flashes are those of cameras.

"The dead city photographed one more time."

Epilogue Analysis

The first point to note about the Epilogue is that, like the Prologue, it is written in the present tense. For further discussion of this aspect of the book, see "Style - Point of

View". The second important point is the irony of Brita, who views the encounter with Rashid much more objectively and less personally (socially?) important than Bill viewed his potential meeting with him, actually achieving such a meeting where Bill didn't. The third noteworthy point is the reiteration of the "image is essential" motif, in fact explored throughout this section in ways that define the importance of its exploration to the novel as a whole, and specifically to its thematic consideration of the nature and function of dictatorships.

A fourth point to note here relates to Rashid's comment explaining the value of death in service to terrorism - or, as he puts it, in the service of an idea greater than the self. This can be seen as a narrative comment on the nature of Bill's death, which was (the narrative seems to be suggesting) in the service of a greater social/community goal than that of an individual. The irony, of course, is that for Bill, his goal was defined by both community and individual concerns - the community of writiers, and his individual concern with his image and identity. Meanwhile, Brita's determined (and dangerous) action, taken to see the face of the hooded bodyguard, can be seen as metaphorically echoing Bill's determination to see Rashid's face, with again the ironic comment that his more personal goal was never met, while her more dispassionate goal (of getting a good picture) actually is. Also in this moment, there is a repetition of the narrative motif relating to the importance and value of faces - in this case, Brita's actions echoing the novel's suggestion that only through seeing and examining the face is a realization of true identity possible.

Finally, the Epilogue contains the first and only real description of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon and, for many real-life years, the scene of a great deal of death, destruction, and cross-cultural violence. The city is portrayed throughout the narrative as a place of destruction and despair. The secret world of the homeless encountered by Karen during her stay in New York is, for example, frequently compared to Beirut. Late in the narrative, reaching the city becomes Bill's primary goal, as he acts upon his determination to return to / make a difference in the world by playing a role in the release of the imprisoned poet. Given the portrayal of Beirut throughout the narrative, therefore, Bill's determination and actions can be seen in metaphoric terms as an effort to transcend violence and realize/achieve at least a degree of human dignity, freedom and truth. But by contrast, as Brita travels through Beirut (in the apparent hope of putting amore human face to the terrorism and violence Bill seeks/sought to transcend) she encounters not only the violence of terrorism. She also encounters and/or participates briefly in the life affirming joy of a wedding ... a moment of non-violence and happiness in a community that, throughout the entire narrative to that point, has embodied both violence and misery. In short, throughout the novel Beirut is a symbol of despair, embodied and/or manifested most (poignantly? vividly?) in Bill's death. In the novel's final moments, however, it becomes a profound symbol of transcendent hope, the only such symbol in the entire book.

Characters

Bill Gray

Gray is the character around whom the action of the narrative (with the exception of the Prologue and Epilogue) revolves. After becoming internationally renowned, critically acclaimed, and academically studied following the publication of two novels, he withdrew from public life and became something of a hermit, or recluse. Events of the narrative are initiated, triggered, and/or defined by his emerging, increasingly irresistible desire to return to the world, with initial attempts focusing on the photographs he arranges to have taken or talk of publishing the new novel he keeps endlessly revising. Events of the narrative suggest, however, that both these two possibilities feel, to Bill, unsatisfactory. It's only when editor/publisher Charles Everson offers him the opportunity to take a public position against terrorism that he finds himself emotionally engaged in his re-emergence, there being the sense that the first two attempts were good ideas, nothing more - nothing passionate, nothing personal, nothing truly real.

That said, there is something tragic about Bill and his desires, something noble about his desire to be known. There is a sense that his desire to be noted and notable has less to do with ego (although there are certainly strong whiffs of self-importance about him) and more to do with wanting to be recognized for not just acting to make a difference, but believing in humanity enough to WANT to make a difference. The tragedy, in its classical sense (i.e. a noble character brought to destruction by a fatal flaw) is that Bill has the capacity to become so single minded and obsessive that he undermines his own good intentions. In becoming obsessed with making his new book perfect and constantly revising it, he destroys its publication-defined potential for triggering the recognition he desires. More importantly, his determination to become known for taking a stand on the release of the imprisoned poet leads him to ignore the obvious symptoms of his physical lack of ability, and eventually to his death. In other words, there is something of the moth and the flame about him - in the same way as a moth is irresistibly drawn to destruction in a candle flame, Gray is drawn to his own destruction by the candle flame of renown.

See "Topics for Discussion - Consider the character of Bill Gray ..." and "What do you think is the metaphoric value ..."

Scott Martineau

Scott is Bill Gray's personal assistant. In his mid-thirties, he is portrayed throughout the narrative as a somewhat obsessive and controlling personality. His strength, commitment and skills come in undeniably useful for someone as lost in himself as Bill is. As narration reveals, however, Scott seems to see himself almost as more important in Bill's life than Bill's own desires, drives, and nature. Scott, it seems, is determined to save Bill from himself, defining himself and his identity almost entirely in terms of what

he self-righteously believes to be what's best for the man and the work he obviously reveres with idealism bordering on the worshipful. This self-righteous aspect of his personality also manifests with Karen (whom he tries to dominate and control, albeit in a somewhat gentler way than he does Bill). It's intriguing to note that Scott's last name, "Martineau" is similar in construction and sound to the word "martinet", which means someone who likes to be in charge ... in short, a dictaor (see "Themes").

Brita Nilsson

Assertive, persistent photographer Brita Nilsson is brought to Bill's isolated home by Scott Martineau, presumably at Bill's request, to take pictures of him for her collection of portraits of renowned writers. What none of the inhabitants of the house realize is that Brita is herself an artist, driven at this stage of her life (after years of photographing almost every conceivable kind of human suffering) by a desire to get to the truth of what makes a writer who and what s/he is. It's important to note that while the narrative never makes it explicitly clear why, exactly, she chose/chooses to focus on writers, it's possible in its overall context to come to what seems to be a logical conclusion. After so many years of focusing on what amounts to death, Brita seems to view writers as representative of life, or at least of an interest to examine and question what life means. Death, to her, is just death. Her contact with Bill is both artistically and personally satisfying, in that she is able to get a sense of his life and, through him, is reawakened to a sense of her own. The irony is that that new sense of self is indulged with Scott, rather than with Bill. In the Epilogue, meanwhile, narration reveals that Brita has changed focus yet again - no longer taking pictures only of writers, she has become a photo-journalist for hire, a sort of mercenary truth seeker. She is still seeking artistic insight into life, but has expanded her search into other people. The fact that the subject she documents in the Epilogue, Abu Rashid, is in fact a bringer of death is a significant irony - but the further fact that after taking his picture she is a witness of, and glancing participant in, a wedding reaffirms her core self-identification as someone who celebrates, rather than destroys, life.

Karen

Karen first appears in the Prologue, as a willing, happy participant in a mass wedding ceremony led by cult leader Sun Myung Moon (see below). She reappears in the main body of the narrative as Scott's partner, in both life and in devotion to Bill Gray. That devotion, it seems, is as defining for her as her former devotion to the Reverend Moon. In other words Karen is a follower, easily and willingly led by stronger personalities - or, in the case of the troubled community of homeless with which she becomes involved in the middle of the novel, a stronger sense of need. the sort of person who, when gathered into a crowd of like minded persons (such crowds being glimpsed throughout the novel), allows his/her individuality to be suppressed by, subsumed into, and/or identified with a group mentality rather than self-determination (see "Themes - Dictatorships") ... in short, much of society. As such, she is a powerful contrast to the strong personalities around her - Scott, Brita, and particularly Bill, the sort of person that

all three (but again, particularly Bill) believes must be led by people like himself, encouraged to think, to realize, to feel, and to understand, but in her own way - in other words, led to independence, not submission.

Charlie Everson

Everson is Bill Gray's editor and publisher and, as narration portrays him, also an old friend. He is, in many ways, representative of the pushy, grasping, materialistic side of the world that Bill, in his increasing seclusion, seems determined to reject (Everson, for example, is constantly pushing Bill to allow the new novel to be published, knowing full well it means a great deal of both publicity and money for his firm) . At the same time, however, Everson seems to have retained a basic sense of justice, of faith in the right way of doing things. That sense of fair play, it seems was the basis of his friendship with Bill in the past and which, in the narrative's present, seems to be one of the reasons Bill agrees to help him win the release of the imprisoned poet. It's interesting to contrast the characters of Scott and Everson, in that to some degree the lives of both are clearly defined by their relationship with Bill, but that Everson's relationship with Bill seems to be more defined by genuine compassion than that of Scott, who both uses and dominates him.

Roger and Maureen

Roger and Maureen are Karen's parents, and appear principally in the Prologue. Roger appears briefly in the narrative's description of Karen's de-programming in Chapter 6., a circumstance that fits with his determination in the Prologue to understand everything he can about Karen's situation, to find her, and to rescue her. Maureen, by contrast, only appears in the Prologue and is absent from the de-programming sequence, perhaps fittingly since in that Prologue, she seems to have given up on her daughter, to accept the fact that she has become lost to the crowd of Moonies. Here again can be seen metaphoric representations society at large - those who react and accept (Maureen - like mother, like daughter), and those who act and refuse to accept. Roger is clearly an example of the latter, his appearance in the Prologue foreshadowing the later appearances of Everson, Rashid and Haddad, all individuals determined to make a change and who, in one way or another, influence Gray to become that way himself.

The Reverend Sun Myung Moon

Reverend Moon is the real-life founder and leader of an international religious group officially called the Unification Church, but which is referred to by most as a cult. The goals of the organization, and of its leader, are to bring a particular understanding and/or perception of God and faith to the world. He demands complete devotion and submission from those who follow his teachings, and as such can be seen as one of the novel's several metaphoric representations/explorations of the theme of dictatorship (see "Themes")

The Imprisoned Poet (Jean-Claude Julien)

This is the individual whose captivity and imprisonment Charlie Everson wants Bill to help achieve. Portrayed by Everson as a young idealist, as interested as Bill (used to be?) in awakening people to broader truths of being human, narration portrays him in imprisonment as losing that sense of idealism, his mind and experience reduced to immediate, day to day survival and retention of sanity.

Liz

Liz is Bill's daughter, appearing in only one chapter. Her presence is the catalyst for narrative revelations of Bill's self-absorbedness, an apparently fundamental characteristic of his nature that he, according to Liz, has carried with him all his life. This self-absorbedness is a fundamental component of his obsessive-ness (see the commentary above on Bill's character).

George Haddad

The mysterious George Haddad is Lebanese, an intermediary between the terrorist organization headed by Abu Rashid and the rest of the world. A smooth talker and advocate for terrorism, he lures Bill into a sense of intellectual (if not physical) security and intrigue that draws him into what ultimately proves to be a life-ending trap. Meanwhile, Haddad and Bill engage in a series of intense arguments over the similarity in intent of terrorism and writing novels, a similarity that Bill had himself commented on (see "Quotes", p. 41-42) but which, as the result of his conversations with Haddad, he angrily rejects.

Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao)

The leader of the Communist Revolution, Mao has for decades been regarded as one of the most oppressive dictators of modern history, if not all of history. The details and scope of his regime are the subject for another analysis, but in terms of "Mao II", there are several key aspects - the intensity of devotion he triggered (whether imposed or genuinely felt) in those who followed him, the large numbers of those followers, and his maintaining popularity and control through use of his public image (i.e. photographs).

Andy Warhol

The nature, source, and accessibility of the work created by this American celebrity / artist gave rise to the term "pop art". Warhol made his name and reputation for, among other things, taking photographs of well-known public figures, celebrities as well as politicians, and reproducing their images with unusual, generally very intense, colors. He and his work were, in other words, intrigued and/or defined by manipulations of

image, with the references to both in the narrative manifestations of the novel's metaphoric consideration of image as a tool of maintaining popularity and/or control.

Ayatollah Khomeini

The former supreme leader of Iran was, during his life and political career, one of the most intensely followed, and intensely resented, dictators of the 20th Century. Again, the nature and scope of his regime is a subject for another analysis, but the relevant point in terms of "Mao II" is the size and emotional intensity of crowd his presence inspired (or, in this case, the presence of his dead body). In other words, Khomeini is portrayed with characteristics similar to those of the other dictators who appear in the book - as a dominating presence whose control extended to the emotions and ideas of the crowds of followers he inspired.

Omar

Street person Omar becomes a kind of guide for Karen once she leaves Bill's house and submerges herself in the street life of New York City. He protects her with both advice and with action, and becomes an ally in her quest to give people living the street life a little something better. In short, he helps her realize the little personal ambition and/or drive she has the capacity to act on.

Abu Rashid

Abu Rashid is the name given to yet another of the narrative's dictator figures/characters. While it is not entirely clear whether he, like other such characters (Moon, Mao, Khomeini) is biographically based on a particular individual, it is certainly clear that he shares important characteristics with both those other characters and similarly motivated real-life terrorist leaders. These are, primarily, determination that the socio-political cause of his people (in this case, Lebanese) be recognized, and insistence that his word and leadership be followed unquestioningly. In Part 2 of the narrative, Bill Gray is determined to meet Rashid, but never actually does so. In the Epilogue, Rashid is met and photographed by Brita Nilsson, who both challenges him to be honest and faces down his desire to control.

Objects/Places

Yankee Stadium

This large baseball stadium in New York City is the setting for the action of the novel's Prologue, a mass wedding ceremony for thousands of couples led by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

New York City

This world renowned city is the setting for much of the novel's action, its high intensity and aura of success (as embodied, albeit sometimes regretted, in the lives of Brita and Charlie) contrasting vividly with the shabby, abandoned lives of the people who live below the radar of that success (as embodied by those encountered by Karen during her disappearance).

Bill Gray's Estate

Some distance outside of New York, reclusive novelist Bill Gray lives and works in an isolated house where he is attended and supported by his assistant Scott and Scott's partner Karen. Several large rooms in the house are devoted to Bill's writing, both the work he has published and the masses of notes, drafts and revisions relating to the work he hasn't. The house has, in some ways, the atmosphere of a tomb, or mausoleum - the work and life he's trying so desperately to keep alive seems, in many ways, to be dead.

Bill Gray's Published Novels

Bill's fame and reputation are based entirely on the successful publication of two novels, the content of which is never revealed but which is portrayed as insightful, passionate, and unexpected.

Bill Gray's New Novel

For the last several years, since his withdrawal from the world, Bill has been obsessively focused on the writing and rewriting of a new novel. The walls of his workroom are papered with notes and sketches for it, and (as mentioned above) at least two rooms of the house are filled with boxes of material (drafts, revisions) relating to it. The novel can be seen as reflective and/or a manifestation of Bill's sense of his life being unfinished, of lacking a purpose or sense of closure. He addresses this lack by leaving everything that defines him behind and taking off for London, with the fact that

Scott seems determined to leave the novel unpublished metaphorically representing the fact that Bill's death also leaves his vision of his life unfinished.

The Mao II Print

At the beginning of Chapter 5, Karen considers a gift from Scott - a print of an Andy Warhol interpretation of a portrait of Chairman Mao. The gift seems to suggest that Scott is, on some level, aware that Karen is someone whose life and ways are defined by dictator-like personalities, of which he (consciously or not) is one.

Brita's Apartment

When at home in New York City, Brita makes her home in a loft apartment overlooking the World Trade Center. She and Scott make love there after her visit to Bill's house, and Karen takes refuge there when she leaves Scott, returning there every night after spending her days helping the city's homeless. As such, it can be seen as being a refuge from the realities that, perhaps ironically, the characters staying there are trying to change.

London

The capital of Great Britain is Bill's destination once he leaves New York. It is the setting for what he believes will be an important statement on the power and sanctity of art in general, and of the written art in particular. The statement is postponed, however, by a bomb attack that plays an important role in sending Bill to a world city that plays an even more important role in defining both his life and death - Athens.

Athens

The capital city of Greece (and, as tradition has it, the birthplace of democracy) is the setting for much of the action of the novel's second half, once Bill leaves London on the promise of George Haddad that he will be allowed to see terrorist leader Rashid. There Bill receives the internal injuries that ultimately end his life. Athens, interestingly enough, is also the city in which Scott, according to narration, finds himself in the middle of a drug-and-party induced separation from the world, a separation he is eventually inspired to leave by the work of Bill Gray.

Beirut

The capital city of Lebanon, bombed out and almost entirely destroyed after years of various wars, is referred to throughout the narrative in negative terms, but is portrayed positively (and as such is the setting for a declaration of hope) in the Epilogue.

Karen's Stolen Spoon

On a visit to a New York art gallery with her friend Omar, Karen's curious touch of a piece of avant garde art leads to a spoon coming off in her hand. Embarrassed and afraid, she takes it away with her and puts it in a place of safety and importance in Brita's apartment where she's staying. The spoon can be seen as representing her desire/determination to help others (i.e., "feed" them), while it being treated so sacredly in Brita's apartment (which, in many ways, is a symbolic representation of capitalism) can be seen as a powerful metaphoric statement of the need to be compassionate within the context of prosperity.

The Park with the Bandshell

In Part 2, after leaving Bill's house and taking refuge in Brita's loft, Karen spends her days exploring the lives of the homeless in a large park in the heart of New York City. Widely acknowledged to be a portrait of the real life Tompkins Square Park, the park in "Mao II" is the setting for profound experiences of despair and emptiness .

Themes

Dictatorships

The origins and impact of dictatorships, whether they be at home, in the city, or in a nation, are among the most predominant of the novel's many themes. The main characteristics of all the dictatorships considered by the narrative is that each is led by a particularly strong, self-righteous personality, and each sees the followers of that personality experience and/or manifest deep emotional and psychological attachment to that personality (to the point where the followers' lives are defined by that personality's will). Other common characteristics include how the personalities at the head of the dictatorships under consideration make use of and manipulate their image, and how violence (emotional, physical, psychological) plays a role in both the maintenance of authority (i.e., the manipulation of the followers) and the manifestation among the followers of that previously discussed attachment.

The book's title is a manifestation of its multifaceted exploration of the nature and function of dictatorships. "Mao II" is much more than the name of the Andy Warhol print given to Karen by Scott (a profoundly ironic gift). It also can be seen as referring to a second Mao, a second dictator of the status, authority, and destructive capacity of the original. Obvious Mao II's portrayed in the narrative include Reverend Moon, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and Abu Rashid. More subtly portrayed second Mao's include Bill Gray (who is passive-aggressive, but inspires devotion and controls those who follow him to a similar degree) and Scott Martineau (who only has one follower, Karen, but who dictates to her in a very Mao-ist way).

The Relationship between Terrorism and Writing

This is one of the narrative's more interesting themes, in that it draws comparisons between the purpose of writing a novel and the purpose of terrorism. As Bill Gray himself suggests , both are, to a significant degree, defined by the intention of awakening public awareness of uncomfortable truths, often related to questions/issues of human suffering. It may be, in fact, that Bill undertakes what might be described as his Quixotic mission to Beirut at least in part because, in the core of his (idealistic? naïve? arrogant?) being, he believes this intention, which he believes is shared by Rashid and other terrorists, is ultimately a good one, affirming and positive for all of humanity. What he doesn't realize, however, until his encounter with the terrorist bomb in London, is that there is a profound difference between the ways the two different groups (novelists and terrorists) manifest that intent. That difference is quite simple - novelists don't intend to kill anybody. They have no intention of making their points about human life at the expense of other human lives. Novelists may be angry, they may advocate violent protest and/or violent change of socio-political-economic circumstances, but they do not advocate the actual killing of another human being. To terrorists, lives are expendable. To novelists, only ideas are expendable. This belief is at

the core of Bill's angry resistance to the calm, self-assured reasonings of George Haddad, and if he (Bill) had not also been blinded by his obsessive self-righteousness, he would have realized the difference between his and Rashid's belief and not essentially ended his own life by attempting to meet Rashid. As it is, his death is, in fact, a manifestation of what could be argued is the terrorism of writing - that the urge to write, to defend and illuminate human truth, is so overwhelming that, like terrorism, it will stop at nothing to manifest, not even compromising the life of the writer.

The Tension between Isolation and Connection

Throughout the narrative, characters experience the dynamic push/pull tension of being alone, and being with other people, whether it be a group or just one or two. Explorations of this dynamic manifest on several different levels. Bill Gray, for example, wants to be left alone, but finds himself relying on the company of Scott (for organization) and Karen (for sex) and, eventually Brita (for intellectual stimulation). In other words, even in his solitude, he craves connection. The same is true for Karen who, even while she seeks escape and independence from Scott, finds herself reaching out for, and learning more about herself from, connection with the poor and homeless of New York City. Even terrorist leader Rashid, powerfully righteous in his isolation from the rest of the world, seeks out connection with that world through the photographs taken by Brita. On a larger scale, the theme also plays out in relation to the book's primary theme, its focus on dictatorships. As suggested by the novel, at the core of every individual's experience of living under a dictatorship (either the larger scale dictatorships of Iran, China or the Moonies or the smaller scale dictatorship of Bill Gray's home), is the individual experience of wanting to feel connected, part of a community, part of something larger, something important, something spiritual. This is an important component of the relationship dynamic between passive-aggressive domestic dictator Bill, as well as in the relationships of every individual who willingly submits to the will of a cultural dictator.

Style

Point of View

The main body of the novel is written from the third person, past tense, omniscient point of view, which in general means that the narrative can, and does, explore the action from the perspectives of more than one character. In this particular case, the experiences of Bill, Brita, Karen and Scott are all investigated, recounted, and commented upon by the narrative in relatively equal measure, with Bill being the central perspective. It's important to note that the narrative stays within the experiential framework of those four characters - the perspectives of even significant secondary characters (Everson, Habbib, Rashid) remain unconsidered on their own merits, but are filtered through those of the four main protagonists. The only exception is the character of the prisoner, whose personal experience is explored in the same sort of depth as those of the main characters. In any case, the main benefit of the choice of this particular point of view is that it enables the author to consider his themes, and the ideas arising from them, from a variety of perspectives, which in turn manifest through the variety of experiences lived through by the characters. In other words, the reader is presented with a broad spectrum of stimuli (feelings, insights, attitudes) with which s/he can identify and/or be moved or triggered by.

Meanwhile, the Prologue and the Epilogue are also written in third person omniscient point of view, but in the present tense. This awakens in the reader a greater sense of event, of incident, and of scope. While the main body of the novel explores, for the most part, incidents and encounters in which the primary experience is intimate and personal, the incidents in the Prologue and Epilogue are larger in scale. The choice of different point of view reinforces this, specifically pointing up the sense of individual-in-a-crowd that, throughout the narrative, is an important factor in the development of the characters and of the book's themes.

Setting

In the same way as the narrative's point of view allows for expansive, detailed exploration of the internal experiences of a range of characters, its wide ranging, international setting allows for similarly expansive exploration of the book's themes in a variety of circumstances. New York, London, Athens, Beirut - all are major international communities with cosmopolitan sensibilities. All, it must also be noted, have a darker side, an underbelly of inequality and discrimination that the narrative and its characters seem fully aware of and eager/determined to transform, or at least engage in, albeit to varying degrees. At the same time, however, much of the action (particularly in Part One) takes place in Bill Gray's secluded home, set apart from both the positive and negative sides of life in the world and, in particular, of life in those sorts of urban centers. There are several points to consider here. First, this particular setting is a manifestation of the will and ways of the central character. While Bill is something of an

idealist and activist, he is also mostly a theoretical one, developing his ideas about the nature and purpose of his work without necessarily acting on them - that is, until the second half of the novel when, interestingly enough, he leaves the isolation of the house to engage fully with both world and ideas. The second point about the house relates to the character of Scott who, unlike the other characters, doesn't really engage in the world in any meaningful way at all. Even on the occasions when the narrative portrays him as stepping outside the comfort zone provided by the house and his work there, he is only superficially engaged with his environment (even the narration of his lovemaking with Brita while in New York is focused almost entirely on her, rather than on him). He's more concerned with the people he's with, with getting back to the house, or both. In short, his essentially isolated and limited existence is embodied/represented by the isolated/limited circumstances of the setting in which he lives that existence ... the house and life of Bill Gray.

Language and Meaning

The novel's use of language is easily one of its most intriguing elements. On virtually every page, at times in more than one paragraph on those pages, the author explores an image, metaphor or experience from a variety of different perspectives, using language to illuminate and/or define the often very slight differences in meaning, emotion and interpretation possible in any given narrative moment. The author employs this technique for virtually every character in virtually every situation, and in doing so suggests that there are or can be, in life and in art, no clear or ironclad perspectives. Every event, the author seems to be suggesting, is defined by shades of gray, rather than stark outlines in black and white. Interpretation and reaction depend upon layers of echoed experiences, hopes and dreams rather than by a single, present time set of circumstances.

Buried within the pages of this richly textured and layered work, however, is an ironic comment upon the writing of Bill Gray that has the potential to be laugh-out-loud funny to any reader. This is the comment quoted on p. 140 that Bill is not a "list making writer". Bill, according to this quote, is precisely not what the author of this novel very definitely IS. The author frequently, regularly, and perhaps a bit indulgently, makes lists of possible meanings at what seems like every possible opportunity. In fact, it might not be going too far to suggest that at times, the multiplicity of possible interpretations the author enumerates in a given moment is, perhaps, intended to obscure meaning rather than illuminate it. This idea is supported by the narrative fact that Bill is constantly revising and rewriting his novel, perhaps evading, perhaps avoiding, perhaps obscuring a truth he doesn't particular want to face. In other words, it may be that in both novel and novel-within-the-novel, words and not the truths they evoke are the ultimate point.

Structure

The narrative consists of a Prologue, an Epilogue, and a main central section broken down into two parts, each of which is further broken down into several chapters. In the

main body of the narrative, the division between the two parts is defined by a shift in focus, from Bill's more internally defined encounters (with Scott, Brita, and Karen) to his more externally defined encounters (with Charlie, Habbib, and indirectly with both Rashid and the poet he is keeping prisoner). In other words, the first half is defined by Bill's awakening desire to re-engage with the world, the second half by what happens when he acts on that desire. Within those two parts, the narrative essentially moves in a straightforwardly linear fashion, from event/circumstance to event/circumstance with a clear sense of character/narrative cause and effect. Occasionally there are flashbacks in time and flash-outs to other settings, all of which serve to illuminate the present circumstances more specifically and deeply.

The Prologue and Epilogue serve as bookends to the main action. Aside from the values outlined in "Point of View" above, the structure-related value of these two sections is to define the main body of the book by contrast, setting it apart, highlighting it. This structural sense of setting apart is reinforced by the fact that Bill Gray is not mentioned and/or does not appear in either the Prologue or the Epilogue. This suggests that both sections are, to some degree, manifestations of life going on around and/or without the somewhat self-important, somewhat self-indulgent Bill.

Quotes

"This is a man who lived in a hut made of U.S. Army ration tins and now he is here, in American light, come to lead them to the end of human history."
p. 6

"[M]any people in the grandstand are taking pictures, standing in the aisles and crowding the rails, whole families snapping anxiously, trying to shape a response or organize a memory, trying to neutralize the event, drain it of eeriness and power."
p. 6

"It knocks him back in awe, the loss of scale and intimacy, the way love and sex are multiplied out, the numbers and shaped crowd ... it is like a toy with thirteen thousand parts, just tootling along, an innocent and menacing thing."
p. 7

"When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith ... they follow the man because he gives them what they need. He answers their yearning, unburdens them of free will and independent thought. See how happy they look."
p. 7

"They are gripped by the force of a longing. They know at once, they feel it, all of them together, a longing deep in time, running in the earthly blood. This is what people have wanted since consciousness became corrupt ... they feel the power of the human voice, the power of a single word repeated as it moves them deeper into oneness."
p. 16

"'The writer's face is the surface of the work. It's a clue to the mystery inside. Or is the mystery in the face? Sometimes I think about faces. We all try to read faces. Some faces are better than some books ... we are writers of earth.'"
Brita Nilsson, p. 26

"[I]t is like a fresco in an old dark church, a crowded twisted vision of a rush to death as only a master of the age could paint it."
p. 34

"'When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear.'"
Bill Gray, p. 36

"Here was the old, marked, and melancholy head, the lost man of letters, and there was the early alphabet on the wall, the plan of his missing book in the form of lopsided boxes and felt-tipped scrawls and sets of directional signs like arrows scratched out by a child with a pencil in his fist."
p. 39

"She liked working past the feeling of this is it. Important to keep going, obliterate the sure thing and come upon a moment of stealthy blessing."
p. 41

"'Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before ... we're giving way to terror, to news of terror ... news of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative.'"
pp. 41-42

"'What am I giving up to you? And what are you investing me with, or stealing from me? How are you changing me? I can feel the change like some current just under the skin. Are you making me up as you go along? Am I mimicking myself?'"
p. 43

"'Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it and the writer learns how to know it when he finally gets there ... I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence.'"
p. 48

"'I saw myself. It was my book. Something about the way I think and feel. He caught the back-and-forthness. The way things fit almost anywhere and nothing gets completely forgotten.' 'Yes. Sentences with built-in memories.'"
p. 51

"'I have no trouble talking, But in this house it's not so easy. I think there's an intensity that makes certain subjects a little dangerous. And we don't have the camera between us.'"
p. 65

"[S]he wanted to get out of here, run down the dark road away from this killing work and the grimness of the lives behind it ... she expected to feel the bystander's separation from a painful scene, the safety and complacence, but it wasn't working that way. She felt guilty of something, implicated in something, and could not face saying goodbye to Bill."
p. 75

"It was like something out of Bill Gray and he should have seen it earlier. The funny girl on the tumbledown street with an undecidable threat in the air, stormlit skies or just some alienating word that opens up a sentence to baleful influence."
p. 77

"'The point of mass marriage is to show that we have to survive as a community instead of individuals trying to master every complex force ... we've learned to see ourselves as if from space, as if from satellite cameras. All the time, all the same. As if from the moon, even. We're all Moonies, or should learn to be.'"
p. 89

"A man's voice, sounding completely familiar, sounding enhanced, filling the high room, but she couldn't identify him at first, couldn't quite fix the context of his remarks, and she thought he might well be someone she'd known years before, many years and very well, a voice that seemed to wrap itself around her, so strangely and totally near."
p. 91

"'We used to come out of a bar at three a.m. and talk on a street corner because there was so much we still had to say to each other, there were arguments we'd only scratched the surface of. Writing, painting, women, jazz, politics, history, baseball, every damn thing under the sun. I never wanted to go home, Bill. And when I finally got home I couldn't sleep. The talk kept buzzing in my head.'"
p. 96

"'We think the Mythical Father used writing as an excuse for just about everything ... we think writing was never the burden and the sorrow you made it out to be but as a matter of fact was your convenient crutch and your convenient alibi for every possible failure to be decent.'"
p. 114

"Karen ... was thin boundaried. She took it all in, she believed it all, pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air. Scott stared at her and wanted. She carried the virus of the future. Quoting Bill."
p. 119

"'The point is control ... they want to believe they have the power to move us out of a building and into the street. In their minds they see a hundred people trooping down the fire stairs.'"
p. 125

"'[I]sn't it the novelist, Bill, above all people, above all writers, who understands this rage, who knows in his soul what the terrorist thinks an feels? Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark.'"
p. 130

"Bill was not a list making novelist. He thought sentences lost their heft and edge when they were stretched too far and he didn't seem to find the slightest primal joy in world-naming or enumerating, in penetrating the relatedness of things or words, those breathy sentences that beat with new exuberance."
p. 140

"Bill had his picture taken not because he wanted to come out of hiding but because he wanted to hide more deeply, he wanted to revise the terms of his seclusion, he needed the crisis of exposure to give him a powerful reason to intensify his concealment."
p. 140

"Survival means you learn how to narrow the space up take up for fear of arousing antagonistic interest and it also means you hide what you own inside something else so that you may seem to possess one chief thing when it really is many things bundled and

tied and placed in side each other ..."
p. 145

"Bill: 'What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous.' George: 'And the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art.' Bill: 'I think the relationship is intimate and precise insofar as such things can be measured.'"
p. 157

"[T]he experience of Mao became incorruptible by outside forces. It became the living memory of hundreds of millions of people ... it was a call to unity, a summoning of crowds where everyone dressed alike and thought alike."'
p. 162

"'Of course he's alone. He wants to be so alone that he can forget how to live. He doesn't want it anymore. He wants to give it all back. I'm completely certain he's alone. I know that man for a hundred years.'"
p. 183

"Writing was bad for the soul when you got right down to it. It protected your worst tendencies. Narrowed everything to failure and its devastations. Gave your cunning an edge of treachery and your jellyfish heart a reason to fall deeper into silence."
p. 198

"It was dangerous to speak because he didn't know which way a sentence might tend to go, toward one thing or the logical opposite. He could go either way, one reaction as easy as the other. He was not completely connected to what he said and this put an odd and dicey calm to his remarks."
p. 219

"The pictures of Bill were glimpses of Brita thinking ... a photographer who was trying to deliver her subject form every mystery that hovered over his chosen life. She wanted to do pictures that erased his seclusion, made it never happen and made him over and gave him a face we've known all our lives. But maybe not."
p. 221

"She has come here already tired of these stories, including the ones she has never heard. They're all the same and all true and it is sad that they are necessary. And they almost always exasperate her, especially the stories about terror groups that issue press credentials."
p. 228

"'Women carry babies, men carry arms. Weapons are man's beauty.'"
p. 234

Topics for Discussion

Consider and comment on the weddings that begin and end the novel. What are their metaphoric/symbolic implications? Relate your discussions, in part, to the novel's contemplations of violence ... of authority ... connection ... etc.

Consider the character of Bill Gray in the context of contemporary celebrity culture. Discuss whether his pursuit of renown can be considered a commentary on the perils of pursuing public acclaim. Explain your answer.

What do you think is the metaphoric value of Bill's having changed his name? What does his doing so suggest about how he perceives himself, his identity, and his relationship with the world?

In what ways does the quote from p. 145 apply to the lives and experiences of the book's major characters - Bill, Scott, Karen and Brita?

What do you think is the reason why the author chose to narrative the experience of the prisoner from the same intimate, omniscient perspective as that of the main characters?

At the beginning of Chapter 7, Bill is given a visitor's badge so he can go to his meeting with Charlie Everson. At the end of the chapter, Bill destroys the badge. Considering what happens in between those two moments, what happens later in the novel as the result of what happens, and what Bill experiences previously in the novel, what do you think is the metaphoric meaning of the two references to the badge?

Discuss the symbolism of George Haddad's repeatedly urging Bill to stop using a typewriter and start using a word processor. What is it about a word processor that makes it so much different and/or so much better than a typewriter? What do these differences represented in terms of the two men's ways of thinking?

The character of Bill Gray is a complicated one, apparently self-contradictory - egocentric and altruistic, passionately committed and indifferent. Consider these apparent contradictions and other aspects of his character and discuss whether he could be considered a hero.