

Marching Powder: A True Story of Friendship, Cocaine, and South America's Strangest Jail Study Guide

Marching Powder: A True Story of Friendship, Cocaine, and South America's Strangest Jail by Thomas L. McFadden

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Plot Summary

The subtitle of *Marching Powder*, by Rusty Young and Thomas McFadden, "A true story of friendship, cocaine, and South America's strangest jail," is an accurate description of the book's content. It starts with Rusty Young, a young Australian law graduate, being detained for sneaking micro-cassette tapes out of the San Pedro Prison and later being arrested for bribery. Rusty is recording the story of Thomas McFadden, an Englishman who has been incarcerated for smuggling cocaine. Rusty describes how he learned about Thomas through other backpackers who had been given a tour of the prison by Thomas. He goes there, and discovers that for a fee he can stay overnight in the prison. He and Thomas become friends and Rusty agrees to work on a book about Thomas and the prison. After Rusty is busted for bribery, Thomas gets him out of trouble by helping him to bribe the prison's governor. After this beginning, the rest of the book is told from Thomas's point of view. He describes how he was caught at La Paz Airport with five kilograms of cocaine hidden in suitcases when the military policeman he had bribed, Colonel Lanza, betrays him because of a drug crackdown led by the U.S. government. Thomas spends a horrific 11 days in a temporary prison and then is transferred to San Pedro, which seems more like a small town than a prison. Hundreds of women and children live there, who are the families of the inmates. The prisoners have keys to the doors of their cells, which are done up like small apartments, with televisions and even computers. The richest inmates have the best cells, but the penniless inmates live in terrible conditions in the prison's interior sections. Thomas's money has been confiscated and he learns that he must not only pay the authorities an entry fee to the prison but also must buy his own cell. Luckily, an inmate named Ricardo takes Thomas under his wing until Thomas gets money from outside sources to buy a cell.

After Thomas has settled into prison life, he bribes the guards to have a night on the town, where he meets an Israeli woman named Yasheeda at a nightclub. She stays with him for several nights in the prison, and becomes his girlfriend. Eventually, she leaves him, after which tourists begin visiting who have heard about Thomas from Yasheeda and her friends. He develops a tour business, and then opens a small shop in the prison, and then a restaurant. He also develops a cocaine habit, despite never having used it before his incarceration. Bolivia's best cocaine is made by inmates in laboratories within the prison. Following a dispute over money owed to him by father-and-son inmates named the Velascos, Thomas is framed for trafficking cocaine in the prison. Under an early release law, Ricardo is released, but Thomas is sent to a terrible solitary confinement block for two months before being returned to his own room. He meets Rusty and the two concoct the plan for a book. Thomas bribes the judges, who acquit him of the new charges. Thomas has served four-and-a-half years, which is long enough for the early release law to apply and he is set free.



Part I, and Part Two, Chapter 1

Part I, and Part Two, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Marching Powder, by Rusty Young and Thomas McFadden, is the non-fiction story of McFadden's incarceration in Bolivia for trafficking in cocaine. In Part I: Rusty, the author of the book, Rusty Young, is leaving San Pedro prison in La Paz, Bolivia, when the guards discover several micro-cassette tapes he has hidden in his pants. The cassettes are intended to assist in the production of a book that he is writing about the prison's most well-known inmate, Thomas McFadden, who is credited as the co-author of Marching Powder. Three days later, Rusty is arrested on bribery charges and ordered to leave the country. He does not know if the authorities have learned that he is writing a book. He thinks it ironic that his arrest is for bribery, because every week for three months he has been bribing the officer who arrested him. None of this worries him too much, because of what he has learned about corruption in the system during his months in jail, but when he calls Thomas, the inmate warns him this is not a game. With Thomas's help, Rusty bribes the prison's governor, but a week later, the wardens kill one of Thomas's fellow inmates and make it look like suicide, which causes Rusty to realize the extent of the danger to Thomas. Rusty originally heard about Thomas from other travelers who said he offered tours of San Pedro prison. He also heard that the best cocaine in Bolivia was manufactured by inmates there.

In La Paz, the taxi driver is not surprised when Rusty asks to go to San Pedro. Inside the gate, he encounters several other tourists. Rusty is surprised that Thomas is black, because he had been told he was from Liverpool. After the other tourists leave, Thomas invites Rusty to his cell, which is like a dorm room, equipped with cable TV and a refrigerator. Thomas chops up lines of cocaine, and the two talk for hours. Rusty discovers he can stay overnight if he pays the wardens a fee. His conversations with Thomas continue, and Rusty agrees to write a book about him, but Thomas says he must stay in the prison during the interviews. Rusty goes back to Australia for six months to earn money, and then returns to Bolivia.

In Part Two: Thomas, Chapter 1, "El Alto Airport," the story takes up the viewpoint of Thomas. At the La Paz airport, he plays his usual game of trying to smuggle out cocaine without taking the job too seriously, to avoid looking suspicious. He keeps an eye out for "specialists" or undercover agents, whom he claims to be able to easily detect in most cases. After he checks in his three suitcases, he is taken out of the passenger line by police. He is brought to a room in which an army colonel looks at his passport and asks if he speaks Spanish, which he does not. After the other police leave, Thomas says to the colonel, "What's going on, Mario?"

Part II, Chapters 2-4

Part II, Chapters 2-4 Summary and Analysis

In Part II, Chapter 2, "Change of Plans," Thomas explains that he knows Colonel Mario Toro Lanza through a drug-trafficking contact in the Bolivia city of Santa Cruz. The contact could no longer help Thomas get cocaine through the Santa Cruz Airport because of a U.S.-led crackdown. Thomas already had already bought a five kilograms of cocaine that he needed to sell, so he broke a rule, and accepted Colonel Lanza's name as a trusted contact, even though Thomas had never met Lanza. Thomas describes how he concealed the cocaine in secret compartments in the spines of his custom-made suitcases, after flattening the drugs in a press and wrapping them in plastic, chili powder and coffee grounds to confuse sniffer dogs. He also forms 70 grams into plastic-wrapped balls and swallows them. Thomas then tells about his first trip to La Paz to meet Colonel Lanza, and how they formed a trusted partnership over time, based on frequent payments to Lanza by Thomas. On this day, Lanza tells Thomas security is too tight for the colonel to check in the bags, as he usually does. Instead, Thomas must do it.

In Part II, Chapter 3, "Los Perros," Colonel Lanza continues to pretend he does not know Thomas. Guards bring in the suitcases and proceed to search them for the drugs. Eventually, they cut open the spines and find the cocaine. Thomas asks for permission to go the bathroom but instead, he grabs the coke and rushes for the door. He is overwhelmed by the guards, but not before he scatters the coke everywhere, diminishing its recoverable volume. The guards take Thomas away, as he yells death threats at the colonel.

In Part II, Chapter 4, "Thirteen Days in Hell," Thomas is taken to the headquarters of FELCN, a Spanish acronym that translates into Special Force in the Fight against Drug Trafficking. The captain in charge tells him he had 850 grams of cocaine rather than the five kilograms he actually had. Thomas is taken to an underground cell, where he remains for 13 days. He almost starves to death, because his money has been confiscated, and he cannot get food unless he pays for it. He has no socks or shoes, and no mattress or blanket in the concrete cell, which is extremely cold. Lawyers visit him, but leave when they discover he has no access to money. A British Embassy official comes, and achieves nothing. Thomas knows he will die if he remains in the cell, but he is transferred to a prison.



Part II, Chapters 5-6

Part II, Chapters 5-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5, "San Pedro Prison," describes Thomas's release from the FELCN jail. He believes he is going to court, but is placed in an unmarked car and then thinks he is going to be killed. It is a taxi, however, and he arrives at San Pedro Prison. The policemen try to make him pay for the taxi, and then bring him to a major in a big office at the prison, who also wants money, which is an entry fee to the prison. Thomas is told he must work in the prison kitchen for six months to pay the fee if he has no money, and then is told he must buy his prison cell. A book is produced that lists the available cells, and he is told that a cell costs five thousand U.S. dollars. Thomas repeats that he has no money, and then collapses from exhaustion and hunger. When he awakens, he is in a deserted courtyard. Prisoners arrive but nobody will provide food or help him. Eventually, he finds shelter in a dank room at the end of a line of doors. He falls asleep and awakens hours later, covered in sewage. In the courtyard, he sees women doing washing and buying fruits and vegetables, and children playing. At first, he thinks he is not in prison but then remembers what happened, and he coughs up blood.

In Chapter 6, "Ricardo," Thomas finds a room that looks like a medical clinic. The doctor is an inmate who will not treat him without payment, but when Thomas coughs blood all over the floor, the doctor writes a prescription for antibiotics and sends him to the pharmacy. The pharmacist will not give him the medicine without payment, and as he leaves, an inmate who has been paid by a woman named Sylvia Venables guides Thomas to her. Sylvia is with the Anglican Church in Bolivia. She gives him a few supplies, including a sweater and blanket. He is accosted by several inmates who want to beat him because he is American, but he explains that he is British. One of the men, named Ricardo, becomes friendly and says Thomas can stay on the floor of his cell until he gets money. When Thomas arrives at Ricardo's cell that evening, he is startled to see that it has no bars, and resembles a small apartment. He brings Thomas chicken and rice from his kitchen, and makes up a bed on the floor for him. Thomas takes antibiotics Sylvia had given him and stays in the cell for several days, mostly sleeping, and regaining his strength. The cell has no bathroom, and every time Thomas leaves, he is threatened by inmates who call him a gringo. He passes the cocaine balls he had swallowed and gives them to Ricardo, who says they are almost worthless, because the best cocaine in Bolivia is manufactured within the prison by the inmates. Ricardo says the women and children Thomas saw are the families of inmates. Thomas gets diarrhea, and inmates say he must pay a toll the next time he uses the bathroom.



Part II, Chapters 7-8

Part II, Chapters 7-8 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, "Researching the Housing Market," Ricardo explains the prison accommodations, which are subdivided into five rundown interior sections and three outer ones for prisoners with money, including Pinos, where Ricardo lives. A complete real estate system has been developed within the prison, including inmate agents, advertising of available cells, and bribes to guards. Each cell has a legal inmate owner who holds a deed of title issued by prison authorities. A new buyer pays the owner plus a 20 percent transfer fee to the section's administration, to cover the cost of maintenance and cleaning. Inmates with no money have to sleep outside cells, although the poor help one another to avoid that fate. After a week, Thomas ventures outside Ricardo's cell, and is immediately beaten up. The next day, Sylvia visits him and is shocked by his bruises, but he says he fell down the stairs. Weeks pass. Thomas tries unsuccessfully to get money from a British Embassy representative. One day, he is almost knifed on the stairs, but a little girl appears, and his attackers desist. Thomas goes into the poor sections of the prison with Ricardo, where he sees a mysterious concrete hole called the swimming pool, sometimes known as the well. He also meets "base" addicts, who smoke liquefied cocaine.

In Chapter 8, "Buying a Cell of My Own," Thomas gets five hundred dollars from a charity group called Prisoners Abroad to help him buy a cell. Ricardo instructs him in how not to get cheated, which essentially involves buying "low" and selling "high." A prisoner who is being released and has not found a buyer represents the ideal situation, Ricardo says. He adds that prices sometimes go down when more inmates leave than arrive, and when the authorities periodically threaten to transfer everyone to a new prison. A friend of Thomas sends money to the Embassy for him, and with this and the charity money, Thomas finds a second-story apartment at Pinos overlooking the courtyard, with a TV, refrigerator, and some furniture, which he buys for \$1800.



Part II, Chapters 9-12

Part II, Chapters 9-12 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 9, "Preparing for Trial," even though Thomas has his own room, he still gets attacked five more times by inmates who either still believe he is American or simply do not like any foreigners. The others know he has bought a room, and increase their demands for money. When the beatings get worse, Thomas ambushes the leader, breaks his nose and kicks him repeatedly. When a gang member tries to help, Thomas gives him the same treatment. After that, he begins carrying a lead pipe, and everyone leaves him alone. He pays a lawyer \$3000 to get him out of prison, and she brings in two more lawyers. They intend to secure his release without going to trial.

Chapter 10, "La Noche de San Juan," is named after June 21, the longest night of the year and an important Bolivian date. The inmates have a party at which they pass around cocaine. Thomas has trafficked in the drug for years, but has never tried it. He attempts to avoid taking any of it, but a beautiful woman who is among females smuggled into the prison for the party goads him into it. To save face, he tries it, and likes it. The group continues partying until 10 a.m. the next day.

Chapter 11, "Jack," describes the first meeting between Jack the Mexican and Thomas, at the cocaine party. Jack has an uncanny ability to seek out people who are using coke, although he has been invited to this party. At six feet, three inches, he towers over most other inmates, but he is shy and easily led. Only when he takes cocaine is he outgoing. Thomas likes to tease Jack, who is quite gullible. Once, he tells Jack that women would like him, because he has green eyes, but then Thomas pretends that he believes Jack is wearing green contact lenses, and Jack becomes frantic in trying to prove his eyes really are green.

In Chapter 12, "The Governor," the judge tells Thomas's lawyers that the case must go to trial, but he will find Thomas innocent for a \$10,000 fee. Thomas agrees, although he says it will take a few weeks to get that much money. The guards and other prison personnel constantly ask Thomas for small amounts of cash, and Ricardo advises him to meet the prison's governor, after which he will have to bribe only that one person. Thomas and the governor become close. One night, two young women knock on the door of Thomas's cell, bearing a bottle of whiskey with them. They say the governor, Colonel Montesinos, will arrive soon, and he does. The colonel asks Thomas to buy cocaine for them all. Thomas is afraid it is a set-up, and tries his best to convince the colonel that he knows nothing about cocaine, but the colonel gives Thomas money and locks him out of his own cell. He reluctantly buys cocaine, returns, and they all take it.



Part II, Chapters 13-16

Part II, Chapters 13-16 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 13, "The International University of Cocaine," Thomas gets back some of his possessions from FELCN, now that he is friends with the governor. His money, gold jewelry and best clothing are not returned, but he gets his hair dryer and steamer, each worth more than \$1,000. When guards conduct a routine raid of his room, they think the steamer is a bomb, and the machines are confiscated. Thomas describes the prison's economic strata, at the top of which are the biggest dealers among the inmates, such as Barbachoa, who was caught smuggling more than four tons of cocaine. The prison's middle class are tradespeople who continue to do their jobs as inmates, and the lower class are those who run errands for other inmates. Dealing cocaine from the prison is so common that it is simply referred to as "business." Thomas wants to get involved, but is wary of being double-crossed, until he meets Juan Carlos Abregon.

Chapter 14, "Abregon: Brothers in Crime," describes Abregon as smart, tough, and moody, but not dangerous. He is visited regularly by a young woman named Raquel who he says is his wife, although Thomas doubts it. Abregon reveals little to Thomas about himself, but they nevertheless form a trusting relationship, and do a deal together. Abregon supplies the cocaine and Thomas supplies the buyers from Europe. They make \$60,000, which they split equally. Thomas agrees to reinvest \$10,000 with Rachel's non-inmate brother to expand the business.

In Chapter 15, "A Night on the Town," Thomas has been in prison for six months. He bribes the major in charge to let him out for one night under the supervision of a guard, a young man named Jamie. They go to a fancy restaurant, where the waiters are leery of Jamie's poor attire, although Thomas is well-dressed. Jamie gets very drunk and Thomas considers escape, but realizes it would be foolish to try. They go to a nightclub called Forum where all the rich Bolivianos go. Thomas meets a beautiful Israeli woman called Yasheeda who asks if he has any cocaine. He buys some from the bartender and gives it to her.

In Chapter 16, "Yasheeda," Thomas develops a crush on the Israeli woman, who seems unapproachable at first, but warms to him as the night continues. Her friend, Sharon, is contemptuous of Jamie, but early in the morning, Yasheeda asks Thomas where he lives. He hesitates, and then confesses that he is a prisoner. She does not believe him and becomes irate, but he eventually convinces her to come and see for herself. Sharon goes home but Yasheeda comes to the prison gate. Thomas talks the guard into letting her come inside, which worries her, but she enters. They stay up all day and in the morning Yasheeda calls Sharon on Thomas's cell phone. The couple spends the next day together in the cell, leaving only to go to the bathroom.



Part II, Chapters 17-21

Part II, Chapters 17-21 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 17, "A Voluntary Inmate," Yasheeda calls Sharon again in the morning to say she will stay another day. Sharon is upset, so Thomas suggests that Yasheeda go visit her, and bring her back to the prison if she likes, which Yasheeda does. Sharon is angry because their travel plans around South America have been disrupted, but Yasheeda insists on staying in the prison for a few more days while Sharon and other friends go on a trip. When she returns, Yasheeda goes with her on a bicycle trip, promising to return.

In Chapter 18, "Happy Birthday," Thomas returns to his cell from having a shower to find his room completely rearranged and a number of people wearing party hats, wishing him a happy birthday. He has forgotten it is his birthday, but Yasheeda has secretly organized the party, which is even attended by Sylvia Venables from the church group. Thomas is moved, never having had a birthday organized for him. He makes a wish before blowing out candles on the cake. Jack tries to get Thomas to take cocaine with him, but Thomas sternly forbids it at the party. Later, Yasheeda incorrectly guesses that Thomas's birthday wish was to be released from prison. She is leaving on a trip to Peru in three days, and he does not tell her that he wished she would stay with him forever.

In Chapter 19, "Christmas in Prison," Thomas has great difficulty adjusting to the absence of Yasheeda. He has jealous dreams about her with another man. He listens to Bob Marley's music to calm him, and it helps. Sylvia is busy with church affairs, and does not visit over the Christmas holidays. His lawyers bring a fruitcake but have no good news about his legal case, which stresses him, because he has been in prison now for eight months.

In Chapter 20, "Los Violadores," Thomas hears a commotion outside his cell. He opens the door and hears hundreds of voices shouting a word unknown to him, "violadores." In the courtyard, a huge crowd pushes toward the prison's inside sections. They arrive at the swimming pool, where two men have been shoved into the water. He is told that these are gang rapists. Thomas watches in fascinated horror as the crowd violently prevents the men from leaving the water. A third man is thrown into the pool. Gradually, two of them are beaten into unconsciousness and drown, while the other manages to get out of the pool but is stomped on by the crowd. Thomas, sickened by the sight of the rapist's head cracked open and his brains being smashed, throws up several times on the way to his room, where Bob Marley is still singing about peace and love.

In Chapter 21, "Sleeping Pills," the murders of the rapists are so disturbing to Thomas, who had never even seen a dead body, that he buys large quantities of sleeping pills and drugs himself regularly, sleeping much of every day. Even so, he has nightmares about Yasheeda returning to her ex-boyfriend.



Part II, Chapters 22-26

Part II, Chapters 22-26 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 22, "My Trial Begins," Thomas can barely summon the energy to prepare himself for court. Eleven months have now passed since he was incarcerated but by Bolivian standards, this first court appearance has come speedily. Very little happens, and his second appearance is scheduled in three weeks. Back at the prison, he sees Ricardo, who seems a bit miffed at being ignored while Yasheeda was around, but they smoke marijuana and watch TV, where they see that a labor union head named Gabriel Sanchez has been arrested for stealing from the pension fund. They make a joking bet of \$40 million over whether Sanchez will go to prison.

In Chapter 23, "Thomas the Tour Guide," Yasheeda visits the prison with Sharon and their other backpacker friends. Thomas pays a bribe for each person to get them into his cell. Jokingly calling himself the tour guide, he shows them around the prison. Before they leave, they insist on paying small amounts of money, and one young man suggests Thomas should give regular prison tours. Yasheeda stays, and Thomas has to hide his tears, because the relaxed friendliness of the backpackers toward him has affected him deeply.

In Chapter 24, "Sentencing," Thomas takes a taxi to his second court appearance with a friendly police escort. The prosecution calls numerous witnesses that testify they saw Thomas in the airport. One policeman holds up his hand while testifying, and Thomas recognizes his own gold ring. He shouts that the ring was stolen from him. The judge demands quiet, but eventually looks at the ring, which Thomas describes in detail. After the trial, a handcuffed Thomas slips into the judge's chambers and gives him a \$5,000 bribe. Even so, at the sentencing hearing, the judge gives him six years and eight months. The lawyers are happy, saying the sentence is light and will be reduced to four or five years on appeal, but Thomas is depressed.

In Chapter 25, "Troubled Times," Thomas returns to his cell and immediately starts snorting cocaine, which worries Yasheeda. She tries to get him to stop, but he yells at her, and she leaves the prison. Two days later, she goes on another trip. Thomas waits anxiously to hear from her, and after a week of no word, he becomes depressed.

In Chapter 26, "Hasta Luego," Thomas takes an entire box of sleeping pills but still wakes up in the morning and stumbles out of his cell for roll call. Three weeks after Yasheeda had left, she returns, but the guards say television crews are outside the gates that day, and no visitors are allowed. He is permitted to talk to her through the bars of the interview room, but she is distant and not too communicative. After five minutes, the guard comes. Thomas suggests she come tomorrow, but she does not sound certain. She kisses him on the cheek and says, "Hasta luego," or "See you later," and then is gone.



Part II, Chapters 27-30

Part II, Chapters 27-30 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 27, "San Pedro Prison Tours," Thomas is deeply depressed after the departure of Yasheeda, and only Sylvia and Ricardo help to keep him from losing all hope. A plan bankrolled by Thomas and Abregon to deal to steal and sell cars goes wrong and they lose their money. Yasheeda has left a legacy, however, which is a small but slowly growing stream of tourists who have heard about Thomas and come to visit him. He gives them an hour-long tour of the prison and tells stories, which they love. The price starts at five dollars but gradually goes up, as the police insist on larger cuts. Other inmates, especially David Cordero, a dangerous man nicknamed Fantasma, try to muscle into the action, but the tourists specifically ask for Thomas. He befriends Fantasma, who is in prison for shooting his best friend dead in an argument. The tourists who visit are friendly and amusing, and Thomas arranges for one young man to cheaply telephone his parents, with whom he has not spoken for four years.

In Chapter 28, "Thomas the Shopkeeper," needs to invest money from the tours. He buys another cell, converts it to a shop, and stocks it with basic necessities. He learns that the best way to do business is by being friendly and engaging in small talk with customers, and his shop becomes popular, but he has the problem that too many inmates want credit that repay very slowly. One of his customers is Barbachoa, or Red Beard, the most prominent inmate, who was arrested for trafficking more than four tons of cocaine in his private airplane.

In Chapter 29, "Mike," Thomas buys a third cell, which he sets up as a restaurant. It does well, and to help him, he hires a talkative, ponytailed 50-year-old man from Canada named Mike who he says later went crazy. He likes Mike, who has endless stories about his life, many of which are no doubt untrue. He also claims to have given up cocaine, but Thomas does not believe him. Mike is funny, energetic, and a good cook.

In Chapter 30, "Night Shift in the Cocaine Laboratories," Thomas explains that at about this time, he first met the prison's biggest dealers and saw their laboratories, where he began working at night in exchange for cocaine. He describes basically how cocaine is refined from a paste with the aid of water, sulphuric acid, kerosene, alcohol, sodium bicarbonate, and various chemicals. He says his job was to stir the mixture continuously and keep an eye on its temperature while the chemist slept, waking him if help was needed. The final product was smuggled out the front gates, sometimes by children going to school.



Part II, Chapters 31-35

Part II, Chapters 31-35 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 31, "The Velascos," Thomas's court appeal of his sentence fails, and his last recourse is the Bolivian Supreme Court. Two friends of his, father and son inmates named the Velascos, receive and distribute counterfeit bills. When the son's wife, Rachel, is caught smuggling bills out of the prison, the authorities demand a \$1500 bribe. The father, Jose Luis, comes to Thomas, who has only \$200. He does not believe Thomas, and insists he can repay him in two or three days, but the police want the bribe now. Jorge, the son, arrives and says he has bargained the price down to \$1000. Thomas gets his friend Abregon to reluctantly lend the other \$800. Rachel is released but after two weeks, the Velascos still have not repaid the debt.

In Chapter 32, "One of the World's Most Bizarre Tourist Attractions," Thomas describes how tourists come back repeatedly for tours during his second and third years in prison. He parties almost constantly, doing coke with the backpackers almost every day. Thomas's friend, Samir, who is Bolivia's leading car thief, tells about being sneaked out of another prison each night by wardens before he came to San Pedro, to steal cars for them. However, in the maximum security prison, Chonchocoro, stories of inmates murdered by wardens are common. Thomas's main problem is Fantasma trying to take over the tours, and his own bodyguards, especially Lucho, who Thomas tries to fire but must rehire when he is threatened with a machete.

In Chapter 33, "Word Spreads," Thomas's bodyguards cannot take over by force because they do not speak English, and Fantasma tries to raise prices and cheat the guards. An American freelance journalist named Mark Johnson visits Thomas, who does not like his pushiness, and tells him a wild story about how he is a Jamaican in jail for terrorism. Weeks later, he reads Johnson's report, but most of the lies he told have been omitted. Thomas mentions other odd visitors, such as a Dutch backpacker who always slept in parks to save money and a businessman who climbed mountain peaks to sleep in thermal sleeping bags in temperatures so low he had to breathe through a straw to keep his lips from freezing.

In Chapter 34, "Fat Joe," an American named Joe visits, who is so fat that he breaks Thomas's chair. He visits often, always leaving money, and eventually reveals that he is a Mormon who wants Thomas to start a recruiting drive in the prison. Thomas agrees, because he will be paid by the church. He buys a room, put candles in it, and never receives a single visitor, but reports to Fat Joe in America that things are going well, and receives regular payments.

In Chapter 35, "Mike Goes Crazy," Thomas's chef, Mike, begins to believe that his girlfriend is cheating on him. One night, Mike crawls across the roof to Thomas's room. He grabs a kitchen knife and threatens Thomas, who he thinks is hiding his girlfriend. Eventually, he leaves, but he cannot go back to his room, because he has sold it. He

gets on the roof again, jumping back and forth three stories high. The guards lock him up, after which he shaves his head and announces he will give up cocaine.



Part II, Chapters 36-39

Part II, Chapters 36-39 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 36, "Prisoners' Day," Thomas resolves to cut down on cocaine use, but the year's biggest party is arriving. On Prisoners' Day, the police relax all controls, and the prison is full of visitors. During the night, a New Zealander begins chopping lines of Thomas's coke but accidentally spills it on the floor. Thomas calmly sweeps it out the door, to the amazement of the visitors, who have no idea how cheap it is in the prison. After the two-day party, the prison returns to its usual routines.

In Chapter 37, "The Australian's Wallet," Thomas declares that the tourists who came to his cell were the best friends he ever had, because all his previous friends wanted something from him, usually cocaine. The only time Thomas was able to repay the kindnesses of his visitors was when an Australian brought four Norwegian girls with him on a visit, and then realized his wallet full of Bolivian money was missing. Thomas quickly identified a pickpocketing inmate as the likely culprits. His bodyguards beat up the man, who confessed. Thomas gave the wallet and money back to the Australian, much to the dismay of his bodyguards.

In Chapter 38, "Prison Elections," Thomas admits that he does not regret having trafficked in drugs, which he did for the money and the excitement. He thinks returning the money to the Australian improved his standing outside prison. Two inmates from his section, Alamos, come to Thomas for support in their campaign for treasurer and section delegate in the prison elections. On election day, everyone gets drunk and votes, and Thomas's friend, Julian, is elected section delegate.

In Chapter 39, "Hidden Enemies," a distressed Abregon tells Thomas that he is being transferred immediately to Chonchoroco, for unknown reasons. He gives his cell key to Thomas and tells him to take care of his hidden money for him. As the guards take Abregon away, he says he will call, and he does, but this moment is the last time that Thomas will see him alive. Thomas discovers that Abregon was reclassified as high-risk, because he supposedly was planning to escape. Raquel, his girlfriend, shows up and tells Thomas that Abregon wants him to give her all his money, which he does. When Abregon calls Thomas and discovers this, he is angry. Abregon needs money for bribes, and tells Thomas to get the money the Velascos still owe him. Thomas's bodyguard, Lucho, warns him that the Velascos have a relative who is an army colonel, but Thomas tries to get the money anyway. The Velascos say they will pay, but not trusting them, Thomas brings along Julian, his section delegate. Outside the Velascos' room, police confront Thomas. They take him into the room, search it, and find cocaine. They let Thomas go, but eight days later, the press run a story about cocaine found in the prison without any charges being brought, and Thomas is sent to the prison's punishment section.



Part II, Chapters 40-41

Part II, Chapters 40-41 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 40, "Solitary Confinement," Thomas is brought to La Muralla, a block where the cells are dirty, without light, windows, mattresses or blankets. The section has five other inmates, who are never allowed to speak to each other, and are allowed outside for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Fed thin soup, they are constantly hungry, and are beaten and humiliated by the sadistic guards. No visitors are allowed, and Thomas battles to keep his sanity. Eventually, Julian manages to visit him. He brings money, and confirms that Rachel stole Abregon's money. At a disciplinary meeting, Thomas confronts the prison governor, who later says he cannot get him out of solitary confinement, but helps him to bring furniture and clothing from his room. The Velascos also are brought to solitary. Thomas befriends a conservative young guard who hopes to marry soon, and agrees to accept bribes to save for a wedding, in exchange for bringing Thomas food. One day, the block's six inmates are told to clean their cells thoroughly, after which they will be allowed to stay outside longer and will be fed a substantial meal of chicken and soup. They realize this is because human rights advocates will be visiting. The advocates ask a few questions of the inmates, are told lies, and go away satisfied. In the courtyard, the inmates see a bird, the first one Thomas since he has been in prison, and even the taciturn Samir, the Brazilian car thief, smiles.

In Chapter 41, "Samir," Thomas is still in the courtyard when Samir tells him of a plan to escape. He wants Thomas to accompany him, but Thomas knows escape from solitary is impossible and he refuses. Angered, Samir says he at least wants to have a party before he goes, and he makes a deal that Thomas must get cocaine for the party if Samir gets beer. Thomas knows this is impossible, so he agrees, but he has not counted on a seventh cell in the block where the guards keep confiscated contraband. Samir breaks in and steals beer and rum, forcing Thomas to send the young guard to deliver a code word message to the Alamos section that means he wants cocaine. When the young guard returns with the coke hidden in toilet rolls, he demands and receives another bribe. That night, Samir escapes from his cell and passes around the alcohol and cocaine. He gets drunk and becomes uncontrollable. In the morning, the others manage to hide their beer cans in a sewage pipe. The major in charge, who is one of the men for whom Samir stole cars, says the hung-over Samir is ill and must go to the infirmary.



Part II, Chapters 42-46

Part II, Chapters 42-46 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 42, "Tormenta," Samir recovers and makes plans to have another party, after which Thomas and the others discover ten cans of beer hidden in each of their cells, which they drink. Samir escapes from his cell and makes a commotion until Thomas gives him the rest of the coke. While a storm rages outside, Samir smashes up the kitchen next to the cells. In the morning, Thomas is awakened by angry guards, who have discovered that contraband is missing. Samir is taken away and tortured until he sobs but when Thomas calls out to him later, Samir responds feebly that the guards did not find the cocaine.

In Chapter 43, "A Special Visitor," Samir receives another 90 days in solitary. Gabriel Sanchez, the politician who had stolen labor funds, is brought to the solitary confinement block, where the other inmates, with the exception of Thomas, threaten to kill him. Thomas befriends Sanchez and soon is invited to spend exercise time with him. Sanchez's brother is incarcerated in an exclusive section of San Pedro Prison, where Thomas goes with Sanchez for a family reunion at Christmas. He stays through the New Year, but then the prison is electrified by the disappearance of a six-year-old girl. She was raped and strangled by an inmate, who then bribed guards to be sent to solitary.

In Chapter 44, "Terrible News," Thomas hears from Julian that Raquel visited Abregon, who strangled her with the cord from a television set, and then hung himself. Julian seems suspicious that Thomas did not give all Abregon's money to Raquel, which disturbs Thomas, until he realizes that Julian had to ask about it, for the sake of Abregon's family. The news reports say Abregon was depressed by a 16-year sentence. Thomas gets Julian to call the governor, who signs his release after 66 days in solitary.

In Chapter 45, "New Charges," the rape and murder of the child prompt the media to question allowing children to live in the prison, but when the wives of the prisoners respond that the alternative is life on the streets, the uproar abates. Thomas loses his tour business to Fantasma, and he has to sell his shop at a loss. After a year, he and the Velascos are charged along with cocaine trafficking. A new law, called Extra Muro, cuts the sentences of prisoners in half to reduce crowding, and Ricardo is released. Thomas and a new inmate, an Italian named Roberto, take a lot of coke together.

In Chapter 46, "Meeting Rusty," Thomas meets Rusty when Fantasma is locked in solitary for a while and Thomas conducts the tours in his absence. When Rusty returns for a visit with a photocopied coloring book and conducts a drawing contest for the prison children, Thomas decides he is the one to help him write his story. On the first day of the trial, the lawyer for the Velascos declares that they were police informants working on a sting operation, which has the effect of changing their defense case into a prosecution of Thomas.



Part II, Chapters 47-51

Part II, Chapters 47-51 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 47, "Money Worries," Rusty becomes angry with him for taking too much cocaine. Thomas tells Rusty about the Velascos, solitary confinement, and the new court case, and Rusty is disappointed that he had not been told this earlier. Thomas's restaurant begins to lose money, he suspects Mike of stealing, and replaces him. He starts mailing ten grams of cocaine at a time overseas, pressed and specially wrapped to avoid sniffer dog detection, with orders placed by phone or email, and upfront payment telegraphed to the wife of one of Thomas's inmate friends.

In Chapter 48, "My International Human Rights Lawyer," Rusty and Thomas repair their friendship. Rusty sits with Thomas at the next court session and Thomas starts calling Rusty his human rights lawyer. Through contacts in the prison's administration, Thomas locates and bribes someone in the filing section to photocopy a page of the Velascos' defense case on which they signed a statement saying they were working for FECLN. He writes "informants" across the top in Spanish and distributes copies around the prison. Shortly after that, Roberto is sniffing cocaine in Thomas's room when a raid begins. Roberto shoves the drugs into Thomas's hand and escapes before the police arrive. As they search Thomas's room, he finds the chance to slip the coke into the coat pocket of the major.

In Chapter 49, "Witness for the Defence," the Velascos' lawyer calls for Colonel Lanza - the same man who had double-crossed Thomas and who is also related by marriage to the Velascos. When Thomas's lawyer asks Lanza about this relationship, the Velasco lawyers point out that by law he is not obliged to reply. Thomas bites his tongue, knowing that to speak out in court would be damaging.

In Chapter 50, "Desperate Measures," Thomas asks Rusty for money to help him bribe the judges. Rusty does not believe that Thomas is being set up, until Rusty gets arrested. After the news that Samir had died in Chonchocoro, probably murdered by guards, Rusty agrees to help find bribe money. Thomas and Roberto vow to stop taking cocaine, and to admit it if either of them backslides. Roberto breaks the pact, but does not admit it. Rusty has difficulties getting the bribe money. Thomas writes to all the tourists who have sent him cards and letters, and with their help and money through Rusty's contacts, they assemble about \$2000. The judges want twice that much. Roberto offers Rusty cocaine, but he refuses. Thomas tells God if He will let him go, he will never touch or sell cocaine again, but if he is convicted, he will either escape or kill himself.

In Chapter 51, "Verdict," Rusty is now convinced that Thomas will be convicted, but the judges proclaim him innocent. Later, they extract a promise from Thomas that he will pay the rest of the bribe as soon as he is released. He leaves by taxi, penniless, and determined never to traffic in drugs again. Going to a bar with Rusty for a few drinks to

celebrate, Thomas considers the possibility of getting a job from one of his backpacker friends, or perhaps even finding Yasheeda again.



Characters

Thomas McFadden

Thomas McFadden is the book's central character. A black Englishman who speaks with an accent that could be mistaken for Jamaican, he is a charming and persuasive individual who thrives on dangerous and illegal situations. Nothing is divulged of his childhood or family, almost as if his life begins with his trafficking in drugs. Thomas admits to no remorse over being a drug smuggler, and even while he is imprisoned throughout most of the book, he becomes involved in many illegal activities over which he never reveals a troubled bad conscience. Even so, he is capable of close and loving friendships, not only with the woman he meets, Yasheeda, but also with various male friends, including Rusty. In part, Thomas's affection for these people, and to the many backpackers he meets as the prison's tour guide, is driven by his need for companionship and sympathy during his imprisonment. A witty and generally upbeat person, he nevertheless is subject to bouts of depression, and he suffers from an inability to look at himself objectively. For example, he discusses the addiction to cocaine that he develops in prison as an experience that he would not describe as entirely good or bad. This noncommittal attitude is part of a self-delusory viewpoint that allows him to brag about his smuggling exploits as if they were praiseworthy feats, and to never once mention the damage to others that is promoted by his trafficking in cocaine. Only at the end of the book, when he fears that he will be imprisoned even longer on a second drug charge, does Thomas come close to repentance, when he promises God that he will never smuggle or use drugs again if he is freed. Even then, the bargain he tries to strike with God is leveraged with the threat that he will either escape or commit suicide if he is declared guilty. Thomas does not learn much in the course of this story. A likable and basically good individual, he is however fatally flawed by an inability or unwillingness to look honestly at himself.

Rusty Young

Rusty Young is the young Australian backpacker who meets Thomas on a prison tour and agrees to help him write this book. A university graduate in law, Young speaks Spanish, and is described by Thomas as rather cocky and cavalier. In the first part of the book, told from Rusty's viewpoint, he finds Thomas fascinating and charismatic. In the bulk of the book, told from Thomas's viewpoint, Rusty comes across as self-involved and occasionally judgmental. A good part of Thomas's affection for Rusty seems to be attributable to Thomas's need for emotional support. Indeed, it is easy to imagine the two not continuing their friendship after Thomas's release from prison, although their later relationship is not discussed in the book. Rusty's gumption in deciding to stay in the prison for months while he records Thomas's story is admirable. He also bribes prison officials and judges, pretends in court to be Thomas's lawyer, and snorts cocaine with Thomas in jail. All of this contributes to the portrayal of him in the book as a rather swashbuckling young man, just as Thomas is depicted as daring smuggler. Another side



of Rusty is shown by his censorship of Thomas for using too much cocaine, and his anger with Thomas for being tardy in revealing that he is up on new drug charges. The impression given is that he regards himself as having an upper hand in the friendship, rather like an elder or a mentor. It is hard to forget that Rusty put this book together, using Thomas's recorded words. Not surprisingly, his portrayal of himself and his friend both seem a bit self-serving.

Yasheeda

Yasheeda is a beautiful young Israeli woman whom Thomas meets in a La Paz nightclub after he has bribed the guards to let him out of prison for the evening. Not knowing who Thomas is, she asks if he has any cocaine. He procures some for her, and late that evening, when he tells her that he is a prisoner, her initial response is rage because she thinks he is lying. Yasheeda displays what Thomas admits is a hint of craziness in agreeing to come to his cell that night. He describes her as a warm and tactile woman, and she shows much loyalty to him over the ensuing months, returning regularly to stay with him after periods outside the prison. She also organizes a surprise birthday party for him in the prison, which requires ingenuity. Eventually, however, she leaves him, which must be interpreted as confirmation that, for her, the episode with Thomas was primarily a big adventure.

Ricardo

Ricardo is an inmate who befriends Thomas just after his arrival in the prison. Without Ricardo's help, it is quite possible that Thomas would not have survived in San Pedro, and Ricardo never asks for anything in return, except to be repaid money that he had lent to Thomas. In the book, the older Ricardo represents a kind of father figure for Thomas. He can always be trusted, and usually has good advice. He has spent time in America, but he wisely counsels Thomas to tell everyone is in English, because the Americans are hated by the prisoners. Ricardo's principal interests are the complicated politics and economics of the San Pedro system, upon which he loves to expound. His attitude toward cocaine, a dominant factor in the prison, is to take it only in small amounts and not too often. When Ricardo is released from the prison, Thomas is devastated by the loss of his friend. Ricardo returns to visit, as he promised to do, but the pain of coming back to the prison is too much for him and he eventually does not return, which Thomas understands.

Juan Carlos Abregon

Juan Carlos Abregon is another close friend of Thomas's at the prison. He is a tough, uncompromising man, but not inclined to violence. Initially, Juan Carlos reveals little about himself to Thomas, but the two gradually develop a friendship based on mutual trust. They organize illegal deals together from the prison and split the profits, although they lose their investment on one failed deal. Juan Carlos gives money to Thomas to



help the Velascos, who need to bribe an official. Later, when Juan Carlos is sent to Chonchocoro Prison and his girlfriend steals his money, he demands that Thomas retrieve the loan to the Velascos. Thomas is unable to get the money, and Juan Carlos hangs himself, which crushes Thomas.

Samir Mustafa Ali

Samir Mustafa Ali is another of Thomas's inmate friends. A Brazilian, he is an exceptionally good car thief who in the past has been frequently let out of prison overnight to steal cars for the prison authorities. Samir is a dangerous and unpredictable man, who seems to have no fear of the guards and little regard for his own safety. When Thomas is sent to solitary confinement, Samir is in a nearby cell, and Thomas considers him to be his best friend among the six men in the block. Samir is the one who goads the others into having big parties using liquor he steals from the cell block's cache of confiscated contraband. When he is beaten and tear-gassed by the guards, he breaks down and sobs, but he never does tell them about the cocaine Thomas had procured for the parties, which is in Samir's possession. In the end, Samir is murdered in solitary confinement by the guards, who try to make it look like suicide.

Colonel Mario Toro Lanza

Colonel Mario Toro Lanza is an army colonel in the drug unit whom Thomas meets through a corrupt government contact in another city. At first, Lanza seems easygoing and eager to be paid for helping to ensure that Thomas gets his drugs through the La Paz Airport. After the American government orchestrates a crackdown on drug smuggling, Lanza apprehends Thomas and sends him to prison. Years later, Lanza resurfaces in the story as an in-law of two inmates who are involved in an attempt to frame Thomas on drug charges. Colonel Lanza, who started out as an accomplice of Thomas, ends up as his arch enemy in the book.

The Velascos

The Velascos are father-and-son inmates who borrow money from Thomas, do not repay it, and then try to implicate him in a prison drug bust. Jose Luis is the father and his son is Jorge. The Velascos are generally mentioned together and are not given distinctive characteristics, except when Jorge cries and Jose begs to get money from Thomas for bribing a judge to keep Jorge's wife, Angela, out of prison. The two are uniformly duplicitous and ruthless in their efforts to backstab Thomas.

Raquel

Raquel is supposedly the young wife but more likely the girlfriend of Juan Carlos Abregon. She visits him regularly in prison but after he is sent to Chonchocoro, she comes to Thomas at San Pedro and tells him Juan Carlos wants him to give her all the



money Juan Carlos has hidden in his cell. She is lying, and she keeps the money Thomas gives her. Stupidly, Raquel later visits Juan Carlos at Chonchocoro, and he strangles her to death with a television cord before killing himself.

Sylvia Venables

Sylvia Venables is a middle-aged woman from a church group who visits Thomas shortly after he is imprisoned at San Pedro, and who continues to see him throughout his sentence. She is pious, and he never drinks or takes cocaine in her presence. She is kind and has a good sense of humor, and Thomas greatly values her friendship.

Fantasma

Fantasma, which is Spanish for "ghost," is the nickname of David Cordero, an inmate who reads books about black magic. He is young but is the leader of a gang in the prison, and is notorious for being a very dangerous man. Fantasma is doing time for shooting his best friend in the face with a shotgun because of an argument. He befriends Thomas and eventually tells the story of this shooting, even as he holds a knife and remarks that Thomas is now his best friend. Seeing Thomas's success as a tour guide, Fantasma decides he wants to do the same thing. He tries, and eventually succeeds, in cutting Thomas out of the business, although many tourists still come to the prison asking specifically for Thomas. Whenever Fantasma is in solitary confinement for misdeeds, Thomas fills in for him as tour guide.

Mike

Mike is 50 year-old, ponytailed Canadian inmate and a compulsive liar, who claims to speak several languages, had dinner with the Bolivian president, was a spy, an assassin, and taught university mathematics, among many other accomplishments. He has an excellent memory, which makes it hard to catch him contradicting himself in his stories. He is a cocaine addict, but claims to have given up the drug. Thomas hires him as the chef in his prison restaurant, and Mike is very good at the work, but eventually Thomas suspects him of stealing money to fuel his cocaine habit, and he fires him. Mike becomes paranoid, sells his cell, threatens Thomas with a knife, but finally shaves off his ponytail and announces that he is giving up cocaine.

Barbachoa

Barbachoa or "Red Beard" is the richest and most prominent inmate at San Pedro. Arrested for attempting to traffic more than four tons of cocaine in his private airplane, he has a two-story apartment custom-built in the prison. He remains aloof from most prisoners, but Thomas meets him when Barbachoa buys supplies at his store. Thomas finds him easygoing and personable.



Jack the Mexican

Jack the Mexican is an inmate who comes from a wealthy family and has an extremely difficult time adjusting to prison life. Addicted to cocaine, he is at the party where Thomas first tries the drug. Jack often comes to Thomas for advice and solace, and Thomas is nice to him, although he teases him frequently, because Jack's gullibility amuses him.

Mark Johnson

Mark Johnson is an American journalist working freelance for a Bolivian newspaper who comes unannounced to Thomas's cell to interview him. Thomas does not like Johnson's rude, nosy questions, and he concocts an outlandish story about himself as a Jamaican terrorist who was arrested before he could carry out a bombing scheme. Johnson believes him, but when his article appears, it is mostly an expose of the prison, with only a mention of the "Jamaican terrorist."

Fat Joe

Fat Joe is an American who visits Thomas in his cell on a number of occasions, always leaving money for him before he goes. On his first visit, he sits on Thomas's favorite chair and breaks it, thus earning the nickname "Fat Joe," at least in Thomas's mind. Fat Joe turns out to be a Mormon missionary who wants Thomas to start a church within the prison, even though Thomas is not Mormon. He agrees, buys a cell and puts candles in it, but never receives a parishioner. He regularly contacts Fat Joe, who has gone back to America, giving him glowing progress reports on the church, so that Fat Joe will keep sending money.

Colonel Montesinos

Colonel Montesinos is the governor of San Pedro Prison. He and Thomas develop a friendly relationship, based on largely on bribes Thomas pays to him, and the governor even visits Thomas in his cell. Once, he brings two women and a bottle of whisky with him, and demands that Thomas buy cocaine from other inmates, which he does. When Thomas is moved to solitary confinement, Colonel Montesinos claims he does not have the power to release him, although two months later, he does sign the order to move Thomas back to his room.

Sharon

Sharon is Yasheeda's friend. The two are together at the nightclub when Yasheeda first meets Thomas. Sharon expresses displeasure concerning the relationship, which



disrupts her travel plans with Yasheeda, and she continues to complain when she comes to visit the two at the cell.

Julian

Julian the elected delegate to Thomas's prison section. He accompanies Thomas to the Velascos' cell and is there when Thomas gets busted. He later brings information and money to Thomas in solitary confinement, and helps him to bribe the governor for release back to his old cell.

Gabriel Sanchez

Gabriel Sanchez is a politician who is imprisoned in the solitary confinement block of San Pedro Prison for stealing pension funds from a labor union. Thomas befriends him, and Sanchez manages to get Thomas out of solitary with him over Christmas and the New Year, for a reunion with Sanchez's brother, who is imprisoned in the exclusive Posta section of San Pedro.

Roberto

Roberto is an inmate who arrives near the end of Thomas's incarceration. The two take a great deal of cocaine together, but then make a pact to stop. They agree to be truthful if either of them breaks the pact, but Roberto backslides and does not admit it, until Thomas confronts him.



Objects/Places

San Pedro Prison

San Pedro Prison is the setting for most of the book's events. Thomas is sent there after being busted for cocaine trafficking. The prison's amazing rules, living arrangements, and system of criminalized capitalism become central to the story.

La Paz

La Paz is the Bolivian city that contains San Pedro Prison. When Rusty arrives there early in the book, he describes it as a high-altitude, cold city whose narrow streets are lined with multi-story buildings and blocked with traffic.

El Alto Airport

El Alto Airport is in La Paz. This is the airport from which Thomas tries to smuggle cocaine overseas, only to be double-crossed by his accomplice, Colonel Lanza, and imprisoned.

FELCN

FELCN is a Spanish acronym of the Bolivian federal police's special unit against drug trafficking. After Thomas is arrested, he is incarcerated by Colonel Lanza for 11 days in FELCN's jail, under terrible conditions, until his transfer to San Pedro.

Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz is the Bolivian city out of which Thomas originally operates his drug smuggling business, until a crackdown orchestrated by the American government at the Santa Cruz airport forces him to try his luck in La Paz.

Ricardo's Apartment

Ricardo's Apartment is two stories with a balcony in the "five-star" Los Pinos ("The Pines") section of San Pedro Prison. Ricardo makes a bed for Thomas on the floor of his apartment and lets him sleep there for several weeks after his arrival, until Thomas gets enough money to buy his own cell.



Alamos

Alamos is the second-best section in the main prison after Pinos. Thomas first buys a cell in Pinos, but after undergoing setbacks in his business ventures within the prison, he sells his Pinos room and buys a somewhat cheaper apartment in Alamos.

Posta

Posta, which is even more exclusive than Pinos, is given five-and-a-half stars in the prison's rating system. Politicians and wealthy businessmen, including top drug dealers, live in Posta, which has its own entrance on a side street around a corner from the main prison.

Forum

Forum is the nightclub in La Paz where Thomas first meets Yasheeda. It is renowned as the "hot spot" for rich and famous Bolivians.

Chonchocoro Prison

Chonchocoro Prison is a high-security facility feared by the inmates at San Pedro. The guards there are violent and sadistic, and living conditions are highly oppressive. There is a strong chance that people sent to Chonchocoro will not get out alive.

La Muralla

La Muralla is the solitary confinement block at San Pedro, where the cells have no windows or light, the beds are planks with no mattress or covering, and prisoners are not allowed to speak to one another. Thomas spends more than two months there before being returned to his room in Alamos.

Extra Muro

Extra Muro is a law passed by the Bolivian government during Thomas's incarceration that halves the sentences of most of the country's inmates, to reduce overcrowding in the prisons. Ricardo is among those released under Extra Muro, but Thomas loses his eligibility until a new drug charge brought against him is resolved.

The Swimming Pool

The Swimming Pool, also known as the well, is located in the dangerous inner sections of San Pedro Prison. A concrete hole with steps leading down into it, the swimming pool

occasionally is filled with water, supposedly for ceremonies such as christenings, but the only time Thomas sees it used is when irate inmates drown three rapists in it.



Themes

No Man Is an Island

If there is anything that Thomas McFadden needs most to survive at San Pedro Prison, both physically and mentally, it would be other people. Even in a system based entirely on money, to be rich would be insufficient for him, because wealth cannot buy emotional support. Ricardo keeps Thomas alive when he first arrives by providing shelter from the cold and from dangerous inmates, but he also gives him friendship and advice, both of which are essential. The toll of confinement, even in an atypical prison such as San Pedro, is as much mental as physical. Throughout the book, Thomas seeks out friendships among the inmates and relies heavily on this sustenance to withstand the emotional duress of incarceration. Ricardo, Juan Carlos Abregon, Rusty, Roberto, and even the chaotic Samir are important bulwarks for Thomas against the despair of solitude. Yasheeda quickly becomes central to his life, and he sinks into depression after she leaves. Similarly, he is stunned by the departure of Ricardo and the suicide of Juan Carlos. The undemanding friendliness of the many tourists who visit him is such an overpowering experience for this lonely man that it brings him to tears. Solitary confinement surely would have driven him insane if he and the others in the cellblock had not devised ways to converse and bond against their oppression. In this book, the prison is a community whose members are condemned to separation. That's why much of Thomas's focus throughout the story is on forging the human connections that can protect him from the devastation of being utterly alone.

Power Corrupts

Almost anyone in this prison system who has something to sell attempts to capitalize on it. Money is the fundamental driver of relationships, between inmates or between them and their guards. This makes money the tool and the measure of power, because without it, a person is powerless, and in the prison, to be powerless is very likely a death sentence. Of course, it could be argued that the outside world also has an inseparable relationship between money and power, but the difference is that outsiders are not in prison. Their fundamental freedoms are not restricted by people hired to control them. This situation gives the controllers unusual power, which they exercise to get money. At San Pedro, the normal capitalistic exchange of goods and services for cash is intensified and perverted into liberties for sale. A system in which everyone is bribable and nothing is done through altruism is devoid of morality, which is the definition of corruption. This situation extends even beyond the prison walls to the Bolivian judiciary. The old saying that power corrupts is perhaps most clearly in evidence in a prison system that encourages those with power to sell favors only they can grant, because power then becomes the main commodity. Whatever anyone has to sell, even cocaine from one inmate to another, becomes regarded as a form of power in the prison system, which is built to create powerlessness. Worst of all are those with the most power, such



as judges and the prison governor, whose actions demonstrate that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The Fittest Survive

The law of the jungle prevails at San Pedro, where the Darwinian theory of fitness must be given its widest interpretation. In the prison, it is not simply a matter of the strongest surviving, unless strength is defined in all its physical, mental, and emotional senses. Inmates are forced to exercise ingenuity and daring, make alliances, buy and sell favors, and manipulate the system with cunning if they are to survive or, in a fashion, to prosper. Thomas is among those who make use of many different strategies to combat the system's oppression. His most effective skill is in forging relationships not only with inmates but with many people outside the prison. In any population, the survival of the individual is dependant upon support from the community, and Thomas works hard at creating this support. His "fitness" consists primarily of his ability to make himself useful or important to others. Inmates who have nothing to offer are literally left in the cold, and become prey to the most dangerous prisoners. Some inmates, such as Samir and Juan Carlos, are extremely tough and would seem likely to survive, but their fitness is actually limited. Samir does not have the mental strength and Juan Carlos lacks the emotional endurance necessary for prison. Ultimately, neither man gets out alive. Thomas notes in the book that some people are not suited for prison life. He is not talking about tough men like Samir and Juan Carlos, but they, too, can prove to be unfit for survival there.



Style

Perspective

As the book begins, Thomas already has been a drug trafficker for a number of years. He is clearly proud of his ability to stay calm under the threat of being detected and he has a high opinion of his smuggling skills. He also regards himself as unusually personable and likeable. He displays no sense of shame or even of ambivalence about activities that certainly have done damage to others. This is the perspective of someone with the tendencies of a sociopath, a man with an impaired conscience. Such an unusual viewpoint is made even more interesting by Rusty's transcription of the story that Thomas tells of his life at San Pedro. No doubt, Rusty made changes to transcript, such as paraphrasing or omitting parts of it, and making structural adjustments to improve continuity, which means the story of Thomas was filtered through Rusty's sensibility. Rusty studied law, which is important, because the practice of courtroom law is largely about constructing an interpretation of events that puts the lawyer's client in the best legal light. Given that Thomas has a personal interest in making himself look good, and Rusty has a similar interest that stems from both the commercial consideration of selling the book and his own legal training, it is not surprising that the story's dual perspective is quite positive about Thomas as a person. Unsavory traits, such as selfishness or greed, are generally avoided, although Thomas's rage at people who have mistreated him is depicted. Nevertheless, the perspective of the two authors is something of a conspiracy to make Thomas look almost heroic.

Tone

This book has an eclectic tonal mix. During Rusty's description in Part One of his experiences at the prison, the tone is wide-eyed and excited, as one might expect of a young backpacker on an adventure. At the start of Part Two, Thomas adopts a self-assured, calm, and experienced tone in describing his work as a drug smuggler, which gives the impression that the book will be a suave crime thriller. After Thomas is arrested and thrown in a terrible temporary jail, the tone quickly turns abject. When Thomas arrives at San Pedro, he becomes befuddled and meek under the wing of Ricardo, who saves him from almost certain death. Once Thomas gets money from the outside and buys his own cell, his self-assurance begins to return, and he adopts a tone similar to the confident one at the start of Part Two, but tinged with the humility of recognizing that he is a prisoner, and no longer a freewheeling "mastermind" criminal. Thomas's confidence in his personable nature and networking skills is mitigated throughout the rest of the book by his need for companionship and emotional support from others, which results in a rather appealing blend of cleverness and emotionalism. Periodically, people with whom he has bonded leave him or die, and he lapses into depression and self-destructive drug-taking and drinking, which carries with it a certain amount of self-pity. Through all these changes and nuances, perhaps the book's most consistent tone is one of self-justification. Thomas seems to view himself as a good guy,

albeit a criminal, who is just trying to get along, and he regularly exercises his considerable personal charm to convince the reader that this is the case.

Structure

This book is divided into Part One and Part Two, but the first part, titled "Rusty" is only 11 pages long. It is an introduction from the viewpoint of Rusty Young about how he met Thomas McFadden, the development of their friendship, and their decision to write a book together, which would entail Rusty staying at the prison to conduct lengthy taped interviews with Thomas. Part Two, which comprises the remainder of this 373-page book, is told in Thomas's voice. It is subdivided into 51 numbered and titled chapters. An italicized paragraph on a separate page at the end of the story indicates that Thomas left Bolivia without paying the second half of a bribe he had promised to the judges who let him go, and that conditions at San Pedro Prison remain essentially the same as they were upon his release. At times, the story foreshadows what is to come. For example, Thomas reveals that an inmate named Mike will "go crazy," and that another inmate named Samir will die. Both these events occur later. Mike's psychotic break comes only a few chapters after Thomas first mentions it, while Samir's death is revealed near the beginning of the book but does not occur until near the end. The middle of the book has sixteen pages of black-and-white, captioned photos that show Thomas and Rusty in the prison, and other people and parts of San Pedro, most of which are mentioned in the book. Mostly, the story is linear, progressing through the four-and-a-half years that Thomas was incarcerated. Virtually no information is given about his life before or after San Pedro. The structure of the book is based entirely on the prison experience.



Quotes

"It is impossible to convey adequately the way in which Thomas related the events of his life to me. He did not simply narrate them; he acted them out as if he were living the entire experience" (p. 11).

"For the next four months, I spent time with Thomas in San Pedro every day. It was not long before I discovered that Thomas was right—it seemed like a relaxed place for a prison, but it was a prison nonetheless" (p. 13).

"The optimal-size package for swallowing is ten grams. It's not a pleasant task, but you get used to it after a while" (p. 25).

"Dogs aren't used in every airport, and there aren't enough of them to check every single bag on every single flight in every single hours, but if there is a coke-addicted hound with a big, sensitive nose anywhere near your merchandise, you can be sure it will smell even a tiny molecule of the stuff" (p. 26).

"After hearing about the women and children in the prison and the cocaine laboratories, I didn't think there could be many more shocks. But there were" (p. 80).

"I had to put him out of action completely, so I kicked him again and again until one of his gang arrived and tried to pull me off. I went for that one, too, knocking his head against the wall and kneeing him in the groin before giving him the same kicking as the first one" (p. 110).

"The rapist's head had been cracked and the top of his head was completely open, so I could see right inside. A section of his skull was still attached and it looked like a lid with all the brains spilling out over it onto the concrete" (p. 180).

"When Samir was being punished one time, the guards made him lick their boots while they pissed on him. Afterwards, they threw him scraps of food on the dirty floor and he thanked them for it" (p. 295).

"On his last visit, Richard told me of a bad dream he had been having recently: he had come back inside to see his old friends, but when visiting hours were over and he went to leave, the guards wouldn't let him out" (p. 338).

"So, if you're ever thinking of doing a drug run, before making your final decision you should visit the local prison where you'll be living if you get caught. And if you're in La Paz, you can even do a guided tour or stay the night as practice" (p. 340).



"Coming out of prison is completely overwhelming—when you're inside, it's like being frozen while the world goes on without you. But then they unfreeze you and expect you to fit straight back into the world, as though nothing had happened" (p. 371).