

Missing Links Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Missing Links is a comedic novel about a group of golfers in Boston who frequent what might be the worst golf course in the country. Ray, a thirty-year-old member of this roguish band of golfers, tells the story. Through the course of the novel, Ray must come to terms with his shortcomings and face adulthood.

Ray's friends are colorful, and almost none of them go by their actual names. Instead, they go by the nicknames they earn at Ponkaquogue Municipal Golf Links and Deli, or Ponky to those who frequent the course. These friends are known as Chops, a slang term for bad golfer. The Chops are proud of their golf course being the worst in America, and they delight in the fact that much of it is built on top of a garbage landfill. The friends enjoy making up their own games that have little resemblance to traditional golf. One day, when a hole is knocked in a hedge at Ponky, the Chops get a view of everything their golf course is not.

Next to Ponky is one of America's most exclusive golf courses, The Mayflower Club. The Mayflower is exclusive in both who can join and how few people can afford the exorbitant membership fees. Soon the Chops, inspired by the eccentric character Two Down, make a bet to see who can play at the posh club first. The wager changes the happy atmosphere at Ponky and takes on a life of its own. It becomes known as "The Bet."

Like most things in his life, Ray is only half serious about winning The Bet. Ray had been a professional golfer until he gave up on that career. Ray had aspirations of becoming a writer until he gave up on that too. His resolve to win The Bet changes when he sees a particular member of The Mayflower Club, his father, who he has not spoken to in years. Seeing his father makes Ray contemplate things in his past that he has not addressed. Ray now has a dual quest: to put to rest some painful memories and to win The Bet.

The Chops will stop at nothing to win The Bet and to have a good time. When it comes to finding ways to have good times or finding unconventional ways to get out of impossible situations, the Chops are never at a loss. The Chops are a picaresque group, and their talents and occupations are varied, including one felon and one MIT scientist. The situation surrounding The Bet and its aftermath puts this group up against a group of wealthy and conservative people more interested in decorum than fun. The mix is predictably volatile.

Not every moment is all fun and games. Ray has to face past memories, painful career failures, lost love, lingering resentments, and a variety of other demons he has spent most of his life hiding from. Along the journey, Ray learns something about true friendship and personal accountability. While Ray learns, the reader gets to go along for the hysterically funny ride.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Ray Hart, a thirty-year-old underachiever, tells this comic tale. On the surface, Ray's goal is to win a bet worth a few thousand dollars. Below the surface, Ray struggles with much more serious and painful emotions. Ray is not alone. Every step of the way he has his group of misfit friends, the Chops.

The novel opens with the narrator's statement that a bet ruined his friendships, caused two women to leave him, and ended the happiest time of his life. That time of his life takes place at a place called Ponky, or Ponkaquogue Municipal Golf Links and Deli, a golf course that has been named by a major golf magazine as "possibly the worst golf course in America."

At Ponky, besides golf, the main activity is betting. The narrator describes many games that are very different from traditional golf, including some where players are allowed to intentionally sabotage their opponents' efforts.

Several pages into the first chapter, the narrator introduces himself as Raymond Lee Hart. He also says that Ponky is the only place he has had any real friends. His mother moved far away to San Diego. His bother, Travis, has been dead for six years. His father is a local bank official, but he is estranged.

Ray describes the interior of Ponky's clubhouse, a place nicknamed The Pit of Despair. Along with the unusual furnishings for a golf course, Ray describes a colorful cast of characters that frequent the place. These characters are known as Chops, a term used at Ponky to mean bad golfer. Most of these characters have colorful names like Thud, Hoover, Two Down, Chunkin' Charlie, Crowbar, and Cementhead. Other notable non-Chops who frequent Ponky are Froghair, the owner, and Blue Chao, the clubhouse cook. Perhaps the most significant character Ray introduces in the first chapter is Dannie Higgins, both Ponky employee and Chop. Dannie and Ray have an ongoing and secret sexual relationship. They get together weekly for sexual adventures, but they do not share intimate conversations.

Chapter one closes with another reference to The Bet and how it caused great problems.

Chapter two opens with Ray stating that The Bet started the day Hoover lost over two hundred dollars in a golf game. Hoover is described as a small, likable man who, despite being one of the worst golfers, is an avid student of the game. He is always willing to read a new theory on how to improve play or try a new gadget. He is also a Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist and prone to over-thinking the game. The other Chops gave Hoover his nickname because he is such a bad golfer, or as they



say, "he sucks." Hoover's real name is Alberto de Salvo, the same name as an infamous serial killer, so perhaps he does not mind being called Hoover.

During a game of golf, Two Down asks Hoover why it is that a person never notices his own shadow while swinging a golf club. Hoover becomes so obsessed with his shadow that he plays poorly and loses over two hundred dollars. Afterward, Hoover, a normally calm and kind man, loses his temper and tries to hit Two Down with a tool. Hoover misses Two Down, but he hits the hedge and creates a large hole that permits the Chops to look through and see The Mayflower Club.

In chapter three, the Chops become fascinated with looking through the hole in the hedge and seeing The Mayflower Club. The Mayflower is one of the most exclusive golf clubs in the country. Originally constructed in 1896, its members are all wealthy. In fact, the Chops refer to the members of The Mayflower Club as "Numerals", because the Chops suppose that all Mayflower members have names that end in numbers like "Haverford Livingston III or Stockton Charlesworth IV." In addition to being very exclusive about who it will allow as members, The Mayflower Club has a membership fee of \$35,000. Ponky's fee is six dollars a day.

The Mayflower Club was originally built when Dorchester was a wealthy neighborhood. After Dorchester was no longer a wealthy area, The Mayflower Club remained, but the members built high walls. The narrator also gives the history of Ponky. After it was designed, and those that played it saw what a horrible golf course it was, Ponky was given to the city to be used as a garbage dump. Later, the city decided to rebuild the golf course on top of the landfill.

One day, while looking through the hole in the hedge Ray, sees his father at The Mayflower Club.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Soon in the first chapter one can see that while a knowledge of golf will not be required to enjoy the book, some knowledge of golf will be helpful. Ray, the narrator, often uses golf terminology and seldom does he ever define the terms unless they are unconventional terms used only at Ponky.

Chapter one describes the setting, Ponky, and the cast of characters. It also reveals a habit of the narrator, the practice of not telling the entire story all at once. Several times Ray makes a statement but does not follow through. At the beginning and end of the chapter, Ray mentions a bet, but he does not describe this bet. Ray refers to his father as "part-time child murderer" but does not explain. Even in his most intimate relationship Ray keeps secrets. He says that he is not allowed to ask about Dannie's locket, and she is not allowed to ask about his brother Travis.

Chapter two illustrates that second only to golf, the major preoccupation of the Chops at Ponky is betting. It seems they will bet on just about anything. It seems that nothing is out of bounds in trying ensure one wins a bet. The most significant bit of action in the



chapter occurs at the end when Hoover opens up a view to The Mayflower Club. The Mayflower world is the absolute opposite of Ponky.

Chapter three completes the setting. This chapter describes the history of both Ponky and The Mayflower Club. It is interesting in how even though it is not said, the history and condition of the two golf courses seems to mirror that of their respective members.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Chapter four opens with Ray mentioning extreme dislike for his father. He even refers to him as "the man who took my brother from me." Ray stops looking through the hole in the hedge, but the other members become more and more obsessed. Dannie spends the most time looking through the hole. In The Mayflower Club, she sees all that she has never had. Dannie came from an impoverished background in Arkansas and has always dreamed of being rich, or at least of not being poor. Dannie also believes that she sees a rich man who once helped her push her broken down car.

Ray describes Two Down as his best friend. Two Down is a dreamer who will bet on anything. Two Down truly believes that one day he will win big, become rich, and move into a mansion. One evening while, the Chops gathered in the Pit of Despair, Two Down develops the idea for The Bet. The Bet involves each Chop wagering \$1,000, and the first to play golf at The Mayflower Club wins. All of the Chops except Dannie and Ray refuse to take part in the bet. Two Down, Dannie, and Ray agree to wager \$1,000 each, and the first to play The Mayflower Club can keep all the money.

In chapter five, the three participants develop the rules for the bet and agree to let Thud hold the money because he is the most trustworthy person at Ponky. This is ironic, considering that Thud has recently completed a prison sentence, and Thud is a part-time professional thief. However, when it comes to golf and friends, Thud is the most reliable person any of the Chops know.

Ray has to sell his car to raise the \$1,000 buy-in for the bet. He knows that perhaps the easiest way to win is to ask his father to invite him to play at The Mayflower, but since Ray has not spoken to his father in years, and since Ray says he hates his father, he will not use that method. Ray speculates about Dannie and Two Down's reasons for wanting to play at The Mayflower. Two Down, the constant schemer, sees a group of wealthy men he can win money from. Dannie sees a better life and perhaps even love. Ray claims to be in the contest only for the money.

In his early efforts to discover a way to play at The Mayflower and win the bet, Ray conducts some research. He calls The Mayflower Club and learns that the only way a non-member can play is as a guest of a member. The only way a person can become a member is to be personally invited to apply for membership by The Mayflower Club's captain.

Dannie is the first to devise a scheme for playing at The Mayflower. She pays Thud and Cementhead fifty dollars each to pretend to have been invited to play by a guest who has recently died. When Dannie and the other Chops arrive, the staff of The Mayflower Club asks which member they are meeting. Dannie and Cementhead tell an elaborate lie, and pretend to be grief stricken when informed that their friend has died. The staff



takes pity on them and agrees to let them play. The scheme almost works until Cementhead, when speaking of the recently deceased doctor, mentions how the doctor's patients always spoke highly of him. The Mayflower staff informs the group that the doctor was a veterinarian, and they demand that the Chops leave.

In chapter six, Dannie has become so obsessed with The Bet that she has lost interest in the secret sexual partnership with Ray. Ray thinks about his own situation and remembers life with his father. Ray's father had been an alcoholic and very critical of his sons. Ray remembers that one specific thing that his father often said that annoyed Ray was that a person must have to "want to" in order to succeed in life. In addition to being overly critical verbally, Ray's father could be physically abusive. He once slapped Ray at a basketball game and broke Ray's mother's nose for failure to have two cold beers ready with dinner. When Ray was thirteen, his father introduced him to golf, and while Ray says he has always admired his father's skill at golf, Ray says he can never forgive his father for what happened to Ray's brother Travis.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Chapter four continues to demonstrate the extreme dislike that Ray has for his father. Ray refers to him as "the man who took my brother from me", but he does not explain the statement. By contrast, Ray describes Two Down as his best friend. Two Down is a dreamer and schemer who frequents the worst golf course in the country, and Ray holds him in high regard. Ray's father is successful and a member of an exclusive club, and Ray despises him.

Chapter four also sets the stage for The Bet, the event that drives the plot through much of the novel.

Chapter five begins to illustrate the great lengths the Chops are willing to go to in order to win. Ray sells his car in order to get the \$1,000 buy-in, and Dannie has sex with a rich young man only to learn that he does not have the necessary connections to allow her to play at The Mayflower Club. Dannie's elaborate ruse involving a dead club member is but the first of many outlandish methods the Chops will use throughout the novel.

In chapter six, Ray again makes a reference to something bad his father has done, something so bad that Ray cannot forgive. As in previous references, Ray does not explain the statement. This chapter is in stark contrast to the previous chapters that described the fun loving hijinks of the Chops. In this chapter one can see the more serious side to Ray, and here his character begins to take on greater depth.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

Ray remembers that he and Two Down have been friends since high school. Two Down was always coming up with outrageous ideas. One Christmas, they stole many baby Jesus figures from nativity scenes in front of churches. When they realized they had no where to keep all the stolen figures, they decided to place them in unexpected places, like putting a baby Jesus in front of a synagogue or putting a black baby Jesus in front of a rich white church.

Two Down uses his job with the telephone company to gather information on The Mayflower Club. He taps phone lines and overhears a conversation between a Numeral, a Mayflower Club member, and someone the Numeral has not met in person before, arranging a time to play golf. Two Down uses his resources at the phone company to find the name and telephone number of the non-member, and he calls that person to say the meeting has been cancelled. Then Two Down goes to the Mayflower club claiming to be the non-member. Just as Two Down's match is about to begin, he is informed that his partner, a Numeral, has died. The deceased is the same member that Dannie claimed to know.

Ray notices that activities are not as festive at Ponky. Two Down and Dannie are obsessed with winning The Bet, and the other Chops are resentful of the attention paid to The Mayflower Club. In trying to think of a way to play at The Mayflower, Ray realizes that no one stipulated what time of day play must occur. Ray decides to sneak into the club and play at night. He enlists the aid of Crowbar and Hoover.

In chapter eight, Ray, Hoover, and Crowbar sneak through the hole in the hedge onto the grounds of The Mayflower Club. Ray has provided everyone with dark clothing and face paint. Hoover and Ray play while Crowbar goes along as a witness. While they play using glow in the dark balls, they do their best to remain quiet and to not alert the security guards. When they are nearly finished with the game, they see a security guard sleeping and another man doing something they cannot identify to the putting green. Hoover and Ray begin to play the last hole. Crowbar is so impressed with Hoover's first swing on the last hole of the game that he shouts. This wakes the guard, who begins to pursue Ray, Hoover, and Crowbar. At first, the three flee from the guard, but Ray goes back in an attempt to finish the game before being caught. Hoover and Ray almost finish the game before more guards arrive and they have to abandon the game and leap through the hole back to Ponky.

Ray says he has one last idea.

Chapter nine opens with Ray attempting to apply for a job as a caddy at The Mayflower Club. On his way to apply for a caddy job, Ray thinks back about his life and his love of golf. Ray had been the best player on his high school team. After high school, Ray had



been accepted by Harvard University, but he turned down the opportunity to go to the University of Massachusetts and play golf. Ray became very close to his uncle, his father's brother, Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe gave Ray a special golf club, a driver once used by Jack Nicklaus. Uncle Joe was a caring supportive mentor in the absence of Ray's father, and Uncle Joe financed Ray's attempt at professional golf.

Ray meets Fletcher, the supervisor of the caddies, and Fletcher tells him he does not hire white caddies. Fletcher says that white caddies want to play the game rather than carry clubs. Ray persists in saying he will make an outstanding caddy, claiming he does not even play golf, and Fletcher relents, telling him to come back on Tuesday. Before Ray leaves, Fletcher asks Ray for his name, and Ray says he is "Carl Spackler," which is the name of a character from a famous comedic golf movie called *Caddyshack*.

Rather than walk the two miles back to his apartment, Ray breaks into Ponky and spends the night. In the morning he sees Cementhead and Chunkin' Charlie. Ray thinks highly of Charlie, and it bothers Ray that Charlie has cancer. Ray's Uncle Joe died of cancer. While Ray and Charlie talk, Charlie says he is angry about The Bet and that it is harming the atmosphere at Ponky.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

In chapter seven, Ray tells the history of his friendship with Two Down, and the reader gets a glimpse into the character of this larger than life character. Back in the present time, one can see that Two Down is no less creative than Dannie in his attempt to play at The Mayflower Club, but his efforts end in an identical manner. While Ray notices that the atmosphere at Ponky is not as festive as usual, he thinks back about previous good times and how Two Down could entertain everyone. Once Two Down bet everyone at Ponky that a woman they knew who was serious about losing weight could soon gain weight and be happy about it. In his efforts to win the bet, Two Down ignored all boundaries of common decency and even broke several criminal laws. Perhaps it is the contemplation of Two Down's lack of convention that inspires Ray's idea on how to win The Bet by playing The Mayflower Club at night.

The tone and pace of chapter eight is tense and nonstop. In addition to the wild chase scene reminiscent of something from the *Keystone Kops*, there is some deeper symbolism. Like so many other things in Ray's life, he comes close but ultimately does not accomplish his goal.

In chapter nine, Ray acknowledges that all his life he has been a person who "nearly" finishes. Amid his life of disappointments, Ray has had some memorable moments and relationships. Ray tells of his kind and supportive Uncle Joe. During his father's emotional, and at times physical, absence, Uncle Joe encouraged Ray's dreams of becoming a professional golfer, financed his first attempt at completing a professional golf tour, and gave Ray the golf club that became his dearest possession.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

Ray arrives at The Mayflower Club and immediately notices that he is not as impressed as he expected to be. When he sees the room where the caddies wait until they are needed, he notices that the caddies are not allowed to enter the clubhouse for any reason, not even to use the restroom. Ray meets the other caddies, and has a humorous conversation with a caddy named Professor. Professor is suspicious of Ray in that he is the only white caddy, and Ray immediately notices that Professor is incredibly intelligent, especially about financial matters.

When Ray gets his first assignment as a caddy, he also meets his first Numeral. Concorde is an immaculately dressed man. He is friendly with the other Numerals in a fake sort of way, and he is very rude to the caddies. Ray also notices something else about Concorde. Concorde is an accomplished cheat. He has a complex method of using a magnetic ball marker to get an extra three feet every time he marks his ball placement on the putting green.

Ray says that something he sees makes him eager to remain a caddy at The Mayflower Club: Madeline the Cart Girl. He also soon makes another discovery when he goes to the employee window of the clubhouse to get lunch. The attendant at the window is Two Down.

In chapter eleven, Ray thinks back to when he was twenty-two years old on the professional golf tour and he learned that his Uncle Joe had cancer. Joe died two months later. Ray did the best he could at returning to professional golf, and just when it looked like he was going to make it as a pro, his brother Travis began displaying symptoms of an illness that was later diagnosed as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Ray's father used his usual tough method in dealing with the problem. He told Travis the problem was that he did not have enough "want to." Ray leaves the professional golf tour to go back home and help with Travis. One day while Ray was not at home, his father arrived drunk and angry and forced Travis into the car in an effort to have him committed to a psychiatric hospital. En route to the hospital Travis leaped from the car and was struck by another car, and he died.

Ray speaks to Two Down while at the employee window of the clubhouse restaurant. They make a bet that Two Down cannot keep his job as a cook until Friday.

One morning, Fletcher assigns Ray to "Mr. Hart," Ray's father, but Ray is able to get out of it without Fletcher becoming suspicious or Ray's father seeing him. Ray still sees Madeline, the woman that works a catering cart, but he has yet to speak to her. As he watches Madeline, Ray realizes that he is attracted to her. Then it occurs to him that he has not thought of Dannie in some time. Most significantly, Ray realizes that he has not thought of his ex wife, Deisha, in a very long time.



Chapter twelve begins with Ray remembering the time after the death of Travis. Ray did not return to the tour he left when he went home to try to help with Travis. He decided to try again the next season, but he did not have enough money to finance the attempt. After having not spoken to his father in about a year, he visited his father at work. His father refused to help him and said some critical things about Ray's golfing ability and Ray's character in general. Ray attempted some smaller tours on his own but performed mediocre before returning to Boston.

After giving up on professional golf, Ray met a beautiful woman named Deisha Lake. The two were soon married, and they had a happy time for a while before Deisha grew disappointed by Ray's lack of ambition. One night Ray discovered that Deisha was having an affair, and when he confronted her, she said the affair was his fault. They divorced.

While working as a caddy one day, Ray is able to speak to Madeline. Immediately, the two discover that they share a similar sense of humor. Like Ray, Madeline hates the rich and privileged Numerals who look down on everyone else. Ray and Madeline quiz each other on golf rules and make jokes. Before leaving and ending the conversation, Madeline openly flirts with Ray.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The character Stone Concorde seems to embody everything Ray expects from a place such as The Mayflower Club. Concorde is exceedingly rude to the caddies and ingratiatingly polite, in a fake way, to the other club members. The absurdity of racial prejudice does not escape Ray's notice. The rest of the country might have progressed, but at The Mayflower Club bigotry is alive and well. Ray describes the décor of the caddy facility as "early slave."

Chapter eleven marks a drastic, though temporary, departure from the light and comic tone of previous chapters. In this chapter, Ray tells of the illness of his brother and the brutal actions of his father that resulted in Travis's death. Despite Ray's mention of events in the present time, including Two Down taking a job as a cook, very little in chapter eleven can be described as funny. In addition to the tragic nature of his brother's death, Ray describes his failed marriage.

Chapter twelve further illustrates Ray's hatred for his father and the devastating impact his childhood and the death of Travis has had on Ray's recent years. Ray imagines in great detail what it would be like to violently attack his father. These musings go beyond a mere thought of being angry with someone. Ray's detailed imagination shows his wrath is dangerously close to erupting into violence. Ray's anger is not limited to his father; large and unhealthy portion of it is aimed at himself. Ray believes that the day he asked his father for financial assistance in pursuing his golf career marked the day that he lost all respect for himself. In a bit of irony, Ray says that he has never been depressed, but in the way he describes himself and his life, Ray vividly depicts many of the classic symptoms of depression.

Before the tone gets irretrievably lost in the morbid, Ray introduces us to the beautiful and charming Madeline.



Chapters 13 & 14

Chapters 13 & 14 Summary

Two Down combines his role of employee of The Mayflower Club with his role as employee of the telephone company. Every day, after finishing his shift as a cook, he changes into his telephone company uniform and searches the club for any information that might be helpful. One day he is able to get a list of members. He finds a member who appears to have not visited the club in a long time. Two Down asks a friend who works for the newspaper to find any information he can on the member, Bingley Colchester. After much searching, Two Down cannot find any information, so he decides to impersonate the member. But to do so convincingly, he knows he will need better clothes and a better car. Two Down quits his job as a cook.

Two Down enters a golf tournament with Hoover, Thud, Cementhead, and Meltdown. The golf tournament is giving away a new car, a Lexus, to anyone who makes a hole-in-one. Through an elaborate scheme, Two Down tricks the contest official and wins the car.

Ray and Madeline frequently sneak away to places at The Mayflower Club to talk, and one day they kiss. Another time the club is under a thick fog, and all play is suspended. Madeline finds Ray, and they drive away in a golf cart far into the golf course. Under the cover of the dense fog, they have sex. This begins a relationship between Ray and Madeline, and while he likes her a great deal, Ray does not tell Madeline complete truths. For instance, he does not tell Madeline that he is working at The Mayflower Club only to win a bet.

In chapter fourteen Ray's time as a caddy abruptly ends. Ray demonstrates his golfing ability, and Fletcher sees. Fletcher knows that Ray lied in order to get the job, and Fletcher immediately fires Ray.

Dannie has become incredibly depressed after her first attempt failed, and amid her depression she decides to try something bold. She finds the name of the man she has seen through the hole in the hedge: Browning Sumner. Dannie goes to the man's house and tells an complex lie about how she works for a golf magazine. Well into her lie and impressed with the man's hospitality and manners, Dannie bursts into tears and admits that she has lied. She tells the man about The Bet, and he offers to invite her to play with him at The Mayflower Club the following Thursday.

While waiting for Madeline one evening Ray sees his father. Ray decides to ask his father to invite him to play. The next day he visits his father's office. Ray's father, William Hart, acts as if it has not been long at all since he saw his soon when in fact it has been many years. He agrees to play golf and makes arrangements for a match on Thursday.



Two Down begins his impersonation of Bingsley Colchester. He wants to play immediately, but he is informed that the day is the first ever employee day. If only Two Down had not quit his job as a cook, he could have played legitimately. As Bingsley Colchester, he will have to wait until Thursday.

The Wednesday night before the Thursday matches, Ray, Two Down, and Dannie act as if nothing has changed. They remark how it appears that no one will win the bet since the time expires the following day, Thursday, at sunset. At Two Down's suggestion, Dannie and Ray agree to double The Bet.

Chapters 13 & 14 Analysis

Chapter thirteen begins a refreshing return to the madcap adventures of the Chops. In an absurdly complex cloak and dagger operation, Two Down uncovers the name of a club member he can impersonate, and with the help of some fellow Chops, he enacts a bit of fraud to allow himself to play the part of a wealthy club member. Ray's prospects for a happy future also seem to be on the rise with the development of his romance with Madeline. However, with Ray's mention that he has not been completely honest with Madeline, one has to wonder about the long-term chances of this relationship.

In chapter fourteen, events begin to intertwine until they become impossibly absurd and hilarious. All three parties to The Bet are scheduled to play on a Thursday, yet each believes the others have lost. Based on this knowledge, each agrees to double wager, a sum each can barely afford. In addition to the hilarity of the chapter, one can see another side to Dannie that might also be a bit of foreshadowing. When Dannie is well into her lie to Browning Sumner, she breaks down in tears and admits the whole truth. Clearly, this is a woman to whom honesty and integrity is important. She is not just another Chop.



Chapters 15 & 16

Chapters 15 & 16 Summary

Ray's father calls while Madeline is at Ray's apartment. Ray is in the shower, so Madeline answers the telephone. Ray's father tells her the golf appointment at The Mayflower Club is confirmed. Madeline is furious. Ray tries to explain that he is playing with his father only to win The Bet, and this makes Madeline angrier that Ray would use his father for something petty. She leaves, and Ray gets depressed and drunk. He goes to Madeline's apartment to try to make peace, but in his drunken state he further offends Madeline.

Ray arrives at The Mayflower Club on Thursday morning and encounters Two Down, and both are surprised to see each other. They are even more surprised to see Dannie arrive with Browning Sumner. The three talk and realize that the winner of The Bet will be the one that finishes a game first. When the order of the matches is called, Ray, Two Down, and Dannie realize that Ray has won.

Ray plays the match with his father. Also in their group are Concorde and Captain Roberts. Ray and his father manage to get along because they do not speak to each other much. Toward the end of the match, Ray's father tells Ray that it is rude to beat the Captain, so Ray backs off. Later Ray realizes his father said this only so Ray would not get a better score than his father.

After the match at Ponky, Thud gives Ray \$3,000, and Two Down and Dannie each give Ray \$1,000. Ray wants to celebrate, but Two Down and Dannie say they have other plans.

In chapter sixteen, Ray notices that the atmosphere has changed at Ponky. It is not longer fun and festive. Two Down is interested only in playing at The Mayflower Club, and Dannie spends all of her free time with Browning. Chunkin' Charlie has been too ill to come to Ponky much, and many of the other Chops have ceased to appear as often because they came to be entertained by Two Down.

Once when Ray encounters Dannie, he asks about the nature of her relationship with Browning. Because Ray seems critical of her relationship with Browning, Dannie angrily says that Ray does not let people close to him. Ray points out that Dannie also keeps secrets, and as an example, he mentions her locket.

One day Ray is surprised to receive another invitation from his father to play at The Mayflower Club again. Ray accepts and the game goes well. Ray and his father play a few more times, but Ray notices that his father always declines the opportunity to have a drink with Ray after the game. The third time Ray plays with his father, the opponents are Two Down and Cementhead. Ray notices that Two Down is no longer fun loving.



Two Down talks to Ray alone and admits he is in trouble. He says he has lost money he does not have to Concorde. He hopes to win the money back in a putting challenge against Concorde, and he asks Ray to stay and watch to give him support. The challenge seems to go well for Two Down, and he is able to win most of the money back. Concorde then suggests they try a longer putting challenge for different stakes. Two Down begins losing badly, and while Ray watches, he realizes that Concorde is the man he saw at night doing something strange to the putting green. Two Down has now lost over ten thousand dollars to Concorde, and Ray confronts Concorde and tells him that he knows he cheats. Concorde denies it, and when Two Down tries to charge Concorde, Concorde punches Two Down, badly cutting his face. Concorde yells for security, so Ray and Two Down leave.

Chapters 15 & 16 Analysis

In chapter fifteen, Ray discovers that his forced honesty to Madeline is too little too late. He has lost her, and by the intensity of her anger, it seems the loss is for good. It seems that may not be all Ray has lost. After he wins The Bet, neither Two Down nor Dannie are agreeable to any sort of celebration with Ray. This behavior is uncharacteristic of Chops. Up to this point, so much of the plot has depended on The Bet. Now that The Bet is complete, the story should be over, but as Ray and the other Chops are about to discover, The Bet has spawned a variety of other problems.

Chapter sixteen begins with Ray beginning to realize that something has changed at Ponky, and he does not like it. In his brief conversation with Dannie concerning her relationship with Browning Sumner, much of the nature of Ray's problems is revealed, but the significance of the details escape Ray's attention. Dannie tells Ray that he does not let people close to him. Ray counters with saying that Dannie keeps secrets too. He uses her locket as an example. Ray does not realize that it is the barriers he constructs that keep others from sharing with him. It is Ray's secrecy and lack of sharing that force others to do the same.



Chapters 17 & 18

Chapters 17 & 18 Summary

Ray takes Two Down to the emergency room. While they wait for his cut to be stitched, they make a list of possible solutions to Two Down's predicament. Among the possible solutions, Ray jokingly mentions kidnapping Concorde, and Two Down takes the idea seriously. Before Two Down can get himself into more trouble, Ray calls all the Chops so they can meet and convince Two Down to behave rationally. All of the Chops meet at a bar. Before they discuss Two Down's problem, the Chops pick on Dannie about her relationship with Browning. They find it funny that the relationship is not sexual.

Two Down tries to describe his plan for kidnapping Concorde, but everyone refuses to help. After Two Down leaves, so do all remaining Chops except Ray and Charlie. Ray and Charlie talk. Charlie says that The Bet ruined the good times everyone had at Ponky, and Ray remembers that Ponky saved him at a time when he was in despair after his failed golf career and his failed marriage.

Two Down and Crowbar visit Thud at home. Two Down again tries to convince Thud to help him with the kidnapping scheme, but Thud says he will not be involved in anything that requires violence. After Two Down agrees to Thud's terms and agrees to let Thud handle things his way, Thud agrees to help Two Down. After four days of watching Concorde, Thud finds a solution.

Thud has discovered that the married Concorde is having an affair with someone at The Copley, a hotel. Thud hides in the closet of the hotel room and photographs one of Concorde's encounters, and he discovers that the person Concorde is having the affair with is not a woman. It is a man dressed as a woman.

In chapter eighteen, Ray continues to play golf with his father at The Mayflower Club. That is the only time he sees Madeline, who will not take or return any of his telephone calls. Ray gives Madeline a note, and she goes to the nearest trash can, lights the note on fire, and drops it in the trash can.

During a round of golf, Ray's father expresses a great deal of interest in Ray's driver, the special club that Uncle Joe gave to Ray. After the match, Ray's father invites Ray to have a drink with him in the clubhouse, and he tells Ray that he would like to purchase the driver that he estimates to be worth \$16,500. Ray realizes that all of these invitations had really been about getting the driver, and Ray refuses. He also verbally lashes out at his father and tells him to never contact him again. Ray then goes to his apartment and begins breaking things until he injures his eye and his hand.

At Ponky, Two Down is nearly frantic with worry until Thud appears with the photographs. Many of the Chops gather around to view the photos, and all of them are



shocked. They realize that the other person in the photos is Browning Sumner, the man Dannie is in a relationship with. All the Chops agree not to tell Dannie.

Thud leaves a letter and some copies of the photos at the hotel for Concorde, instructing him to forget about Two Down's (Bingsley Colchester's) debt. Ray believes the plan would have worked had Two Down not gotten overly confident and returned to The Mayflower Club so soon. While Two Down is again impersonating Bingsley Colchester and Concorde is practicing his putting, a staff member calls out the name Bingsley Colchester, and the real Bingsley Colchester answers.

At the end of chapter eighteen, Ray learns that Madeline's telephone number has been disconnected and Charlie has died.

Chapters 17 & 18 Analysis

Ray again notices that the relationship between the Chops has changed when they meet in a bar to try to help Two Down. The Chops seem more interested in petty bickering than reaching any sort of solution. This idea is further confirmed during Ray's conversation with Charlie. Charlie again expresses his dislike for The Bet and all the preoccupation with The Mayflower Club. He realizes that many of the other Chops do not appreciate what they have at Ponky. This conversation helps Ray realize that Ponky saved him at a difficult time in his life. In fact, Ponky and the Chops became a sort of surrogate family.

In chapter eighteen, Ray learns that his father's invitations to play golf had really been about gaining possession of Ray's driver rather than reestablishing a relationship with Ray. During Ray's verbal assault of his father, he is able to vent some ideas he has suppressed for a long time. This is particularly true with Ray's sarcastic comment that the day Travis died from throwing himself to the car he had more "want to" than his father.

The Chops demonstrate that all of their caring for one another is not lost when they agree not to mention that Browning is the other man in the photographs. They do this to protect Dannie's feelings.

As the chapter ends and Ray learns that Madeline's telephone number has been disconnected and Charlie has died, he feels more and more isolated.



Chapters 19 & 20

Chapters 19 & 20 Summary

Concorde and the Slavic man arrive at Two Down's house. Concorde refers to Two Down by his real name, Leonard Petrovitz, and says that if he does not receive his money in two days he will have Two Down fired from his job, convicted of forgery, and have Two Down's home loan recalled. The Slavic man kicks Two Down.

Ray visits the library and looks up information on the MacGregor 693, the club his Uncle Joe gave him and his father wants. Ray discovers that the particular club he owns is worth twice what his father has offered. When Ray asks the librarian, he discovers that the last person to check out the book had been his father.

Ray is depressed at Ponky. He decides that he ought to sell his valuable golf club and return to playing golf professionally. Two Down arrives and tells Ray that he has an idea to get himself out of trouble. He wants to challenge Concorde to a golf match for double or nothing stakes, and he wants Ray to be his partner. Ray refuses, and Two Down says he has already challenged Concorde. Ray again refuses, and Two Down tells Ray that Concorde's partner is Ray's father. Ray agrees.

Ray and Two Down meet with Concorde and Ray's father to go over the rules. Half the match will be played at Ponky and the other half at The Mayflower Club. Concorde and Ray's father know that Two Down cannot cover the bet. Ray agrees to put up the remaining \$8,000. Ray also makes an additional bet with his father. He offers to wager the special golf club against Ray's father sponsoring Ray's membership at The Mayflower Club and putting up the \$35,000 fee.

In chapter twenty, Ponky is crowded with Chops and Numerals gathered to watch the match. Chops bet against the Numerals. Concorde and Ray's father arrive, wearing identical uniforms and followed by their caddies. As the match is about to begin, Ray notices Crowbar's absence. The Numerals are horrified at the conditions at Ponky.

The match begins, and after Ray hits his first shot, Professor arrives and offers to be Ray's caddy. As they play, Ray shows his father how Concorde cheats. Ray's father is horrified. When Concorde approaches the green to putt, Ray tells him that he has already lost the round for cheating, and Ray's father agrees. Ray and Two Down have won the first of eighteen rounds, and they win the next.

As the chapter ends, Two Down looks pleased to see Crowbar approaching in a golf cart.



Chapters 19 & 20 Analysis

With the revelation that Ray's father has offered him only half what the driver is worth, it seems that the man is every bit as greedy and callous as Ray describes him. It is understandable that Ray relents and offers to help Two Down after learning that Ray's father will be part of the opposition. Beating his father at something will fulfill a childhood—and perhaps childish—dream for Ray. However, the reader has to wonder about Ray's wisdom in seeking membership to The Mayflower Club. Even if Ray can achieve his goal of returning to professional golf, it may not be worth it if it comes at the cost of Ray's principles.

In chapter twenty, the significance of the wager begins to make sense to Ray. He has risked everything he has, and he starts to understand that his motives are more than financial. In addition to wanting to beat his father, what he has wanted more than anything is for his father to be proud of him for something. This realization causes Ray to wonder about his father's motives for wanting the driver. Perhaps he did not want it only for financial reasons. Perhaps he wanted it because it had once belonged to his own father.



Chapters 21-23

Chapters 21-23 Summary

Crowbar arrives, and to the shock of everyone, the first words he says are curses directed at Two Down. Crowbar says that his last three checks have not cleared the bank, and he is no longer going to work for Two Down. Crowbar says that he has been working for Two Down for the last six years. All of the Chops present are angry. They realize that Two Down has employed Crowbar to distract them during golf games so that Two Down can win bets. This revelation affects Two Down's concentration and he begins playing badly.

Crowbar offers to help Ray's father, and he introduces himself as Demetrius Howlings. Ray's father hires Crowbar as his caddy.

Concorde makes fun of Thud's weight, and as revenge Thud drives ahead in his golf cart and urinates on Concorde's ball. Concorde is so upset by this that he plays badly, and Ray's father concedes defeat on that round. By the end of the chapter, Ray and Two Down are one ahead and halfway through the match.

Chapter twenty-two begins with Ray being shocked by his father's request that Crowbar continue as his caddy at The Mayflower Club portion of the match. All of the Chops that had watched the match at Ponky follow the players over to The Mayflower Club, and there are too many Chops for the Mayflower staff to stop them. The staff, however, draws the line at allowing anyone in wearing blue jeans, so Ray and Thud go into The Mayflower Club golf shop and purchase pants.

Dannie arrives with Browning and is angered by all the laughter from the Chops, especially Thud. Dannie threatens to become violent with Ray if he does not tell her what all the laughter is about, and Ray tells her about the photos. Dannie becomes furiously angry and attacks Two Down. Two Down is injured during the attack and is unable to continue playing. Ray's father and Concorde say that Ray must forfeit, but the Numerals shout for a substitute golfer to be chosen. Concorde looks at the crowd of Chops and selects Hoover.

With Hoover as his partner, Ray begins losing. Again he sees Concorde cheating, but this time he cannot prove it.

In chapter twenty-three, Two Down uses his telephone company connections to make Concorde's cellular telephone ring when he is about to swing. Other Chops try yelling during Concorde's second attempt, and a fight breaks out between the Chops and the Numerals. Thud produces a pistol and brandishes it to restore order.

Two Down allows Hoover to use his favorite putter. Hoover makes his shot, and this gives Hoover confidence and improves his play. When Ray's father is about to swing,



Hoover asks him if he has ever considered his own shadow while swinging. Ray's father becomes distracted with thoughts of his own shadow and makes poor shots.

Chapters 21-23 Analysis

Two Down's relief in seeing Crowbar is only momentary before he realizes that the edge he has relied on for years in winning golf bets is not only no longer available but has joined the opposition. Not all hope is lost for the Chops. Thud demonstrates a method of support that only a Chop can deliver.

In chapter twenty-two, the absurdity of the Numerals and The Mayflower Club's obsession with decorum is once again demonstrated by the refusal to allow spectators or players to wear blue jeans on club premises. With so many of the club's rules being blatantly violated by the massive influx of non-members, the one rule the club makes a stand on is the wearing of denim. Ray's chances of winning dwindle when of all the Chops present Concorde selects Hoover, the worst golfer among the Chops, as Two Down's substitute.

In chapter twenty-three, despite the odds, Ray and Hoover still have a chance of winning. Hoover seems to begin a transformation. Instead of being an object of ridicule, he becomes a champion of the Chops and even uses the shadow trick that Two Down played on him in chapter two. By the end of the chapter, Ray and Hoover are even with the opposition with only two rounds left to play.



Chapters 24 & Epilogue

Chapters 24 & Epilogue Summary

Ray's father offers him \$20,000 to call off the bet. Ray considers the offer but refuses. In an attempt that shocks everyone, Ray completes an unconventional shot. Ray and Hoover are one round ahead with only one round left to play. The best that Concorde and Ray's father can hope for is to win the next round and tie the match.

Ray overhears a conversation among Numerals mentioning leaving to go to a funeral. He inquires and learns that Chunkin' Charlie had been a member of The Mayflower Club, a Numeral, for twenty-five years. While Ray wonders why his friend would rather play at Ponky than The Mayflower Club, he notices that Madeline has arrived. Ray approaches Madeline and tries to talk to her, but she says that she came only to return his hat and to give him a note to read once she is gone. She also says that she is not going to the funeral, but she does not explain this statement. Madeline says she is leaving the country.

While Ray watches Madeline walk away, he contemplates the situation and performs an act that shocks everyone. He intentionally commits a violation, forcing the game to end in a tie. Two Down is shocked and afraid of the implications of Ray's act, but Ray says he will give Two Down the special golf club to sell. Two Down can then repay Ray at a rate of \$100 per month payable in person at Ponky. Ray also says he wants two trophies, one for himself and one for Hoover with the words "Alberto de Salvo, Champion" engraved.

While everyone celebrates, Ray opens Madeline's letter. Ray learns that Chunkin' Charlie was Madeline's father.

In the Epilogue, all the Chops are back at Ponky and the festive atmosphere and camaraderie has returned. Crowbar is no longer around because he has become the first black man granted membership at The Mayflower Club. Hoover changes after the match and is now a better golfer and much more confident. Two Down has also changed. He still frequents Ponky, but he also spends much more time with his wife.

At Chunkin' Charlie's funeral, Thud switches Charlie's cremated remains with some dirt from Ponky. The Chops take Charlie's ashes and have a special ceremony at Ponky.

One day, in front of all the Chops, Dannie approaches Ray and says that she underestimated him. The two begin dating and soon are married with a child. They name their son "Charlie." Ray finally learns the secret of Dannie's locket. It had contained a photo of him all along.

As the novel closes, Ray is shocked to see his father arrive at Ponky and smile.



Chapters 24 & Epilogue Analysis

In chapter twenty-four, all of the questions Ray has been pondering are answered. He realizes that he cannot continue to blame his father for his shortcomings. Ray knows that an adult must take responsibility for both accomplishments and failure. With this new knowledge of personal accountability, Ray commits an act that sacrifices his misguided self-interest and promotes the well being of those around him. In that one single act he saves his friend, makes peace with his father, and most importantly comes to terms with his own reasons for being angry with himself.

The Epilogue ties all loose ends and provides as close to a "happily ever after" ending as can be achieved with any believability.



Characters

Raymond Lee Hart (a.k.a Ray, Stick, Stickman, Carl Spackler)

Ray is the narrator and protagonist of the story. He is thirty years old, and as he says the only real friends he has are those associated with Ponky. Ray went from being a professional golfer to playing at what some consider the worst golf course in the country.

Ray's childhood with his alcoholic and abusive father was unpleasant. He was always pushed to succeed and criticized for anything less than perfection. While the abuse in Ray's home was mostly verbal, his father was capable of violent physical abuse. In addition to being slapped at a basketball game, Ray witnessed his father break his mother's nose, and Ray blames his father for his brother's death.

Ray's father introduced him to golf but can take none of the credit for any of Ray's success at the sport. In hindsight, it is little wonder that Ray excelled at golf more than any other sport. Playing golf required Ray to be on fairways and greens far from his father's critical eye. Ray gained acceptance to Harvard, but he declined the offer in order to attend the University of Massachusetts on a half scholarship and play golf. After college, Ray wanted to try professional golf, and his kind Uncle Joe arranges to help him financially. The death of both his uncle and his brother interrupt his first season of professional golf.

Ever since leaving professional golf, Ray has blamed his father for the death of his brother and, in turn, the failure of Ray's professional golf career. In the present day, Ray works a mediocre writing job and spends all of his free time playing golf with his merry bunch misfit friends at Ponky.

Two Down (a.k.a Leonard Petrovitz)

Two Down is a giant in the body of a small man. He has big dreams and the courage to try anything in order to make them come true.

Two Down and Ray have been friends since high school. In describing Two Down, Ray says that his ideas got them both into trouble many times. Ray describes one of Two Down's more infamous ideas, the stealing of baby Jesus figures from nativity scenes.

Two Down's real name is Leonard Petrovitz, but his nickname is more accurate to his personality. It comes from his practice of saying that the betting does not begin until he is Two Down. In other words, he does not begin making bets until the odds are against him. It is Two Down's wild imagination and never ending supply of courage that gives birth to The Bet and drives much of the action in the novel. Only Two Down would have



thought of such a thing, and only Two Down would be crazy enough to insist that the Chops actually try it.

Outside of his life with the Chops at Ponky, Two Down has a family and a home, but it is his larger than life persona that drives events at the worst golf course in the country. Two Down can be thought of the mascot or the leader of the group. In fact, Ray notices that when Two Down becomes obsessed with The Mayflower Club, many people stop playing golf at Ponky simply because Two Down is not there.

Danielle Higgins (a.k.a Dannie)

Dannie is a beautiful red headed woman who works at Ponky. To most of the Chops, Dannie is just one of the guys. She can play golf better than most of them, and she is just as quick with the crude jokes and profanity. To Ray, Dannie reveals another side. Dannie came from an impoverished family in Arkansas. Dannie's family had no money, but they instilled in her a sense of integrity and loyalty. She has big dreams about a life away from rural poverty, but she also has definite ideas on what constitutes integrity in people. When the wealth of The Mayflower Club is revealed to Dannie, she is initially dazzled by the opulence but later begins to balance the affluence against the more important human qualities she seeks.

William Davenport Hart

William Hart is the father that Ray has always feared and resented. Hart is a wealthy CEO of a Boston bank and a member of The Mayflower Club. As long as Ray has known his father, the man has always been driven by success and had little patience and understanding for anything else. Despite his alcoholism, William Hart is driven to succeed, and he tries to impart that same ambition to his sons. Whereas Ray would classify his father as cold and uncaring, Mr. Hart himself would say he is merely a realist.

Chunkin' Charlie

Charlie reminds Ray a great deal of his Uncle Joe, a man he cared for dearly. Aside from the fact that both men have cancer, both Joe and Charlie also share an enjoyment of life and friendship. While Two Down might be the closest thing to a best friend or peer to Ray, it is with Charlie that Ray shares the most conversations of substance.

Thud (a.k.a. The Almost Human, Thaddeus Jones)

Thud is one of the most memorable and unusual characters of the story. The man is a giant of more than three hundred pounds, and when he speaks, the words are not understandable because Thud is almost always eating. Thud has a job working for a funeral home, but his real talent is in non-violent crimes like burglaries. Despite being a



convicted felon and ex-convict, Ray describes Thud as the most trustworthy person at Ponky.

Hoover (a.k.a Alberto de Salvo)

This MIT scientist studies everything he can find related to golf and has all the latest clubs and gadgets, yet he is still a truly horrible golfer. In an attempt to attack another character, Hoover opened the hole in the hedge that allows the Chops to see The Mayflower Club. Hoover shares a name, Alberto de Salvo, with an infamous serial killer. Hoover begins as a born loser but becomes a hero to the Chops.

Stone Concorde

On the surface, Concorde embodies everything Ray expects from the rich. He is always impeccably dressed, and he is charming to his friends, albeit in a fake sort of way. To the employees of The Mayflower Club and possibly to anyone who cannot be of use to him, Concorde is incredibly rude. Beneath the polished surface, Concorde is a cheat with an even bigger secret that shocks all of the Chops.

Madeline Wagner

Madeline is an employee of The Mayflower Club. Like Ray, she had ambitions that did not turn out as she planned. Madeline has a master's degree in paleontology, but after a divorce and other unexpected circumstances, she finds herself working at The Mayflower Club, where she has nothing but contempt for the members.

Joe Hart (Uncle Joe)

Uncle Joe provided the support and mentoring that Ray never got from his own father. Uncle Joe encouraged Ray's golf ambitions and even financed Ray's first year on a professional golf tour. Ray's most prized possession, his driver, came from Uncle Joe. Some of Ray's fondest memories are of hitting balls at the driving range while his uncle drinks beer and watches.

Browning Sumner (a.k.a. Xanadu)

This wealthy and handsome member of The Mayflower Club catches the interest of Dannie.



Cementhead

This man is a Chop during his leisure time and a plumber by profession. He is an average golfer but the least intelligent of all the Chops.

Crowbar (a.k.a. Demetrius Howlings)

This obese character who rarely leaves his golf cart has the annoying habit of talking about things completely unrelated to golf while others are trying to play.

Froghair

This man owns Ponky and hopes to sell the golf course. The Chops have gotten used to his inferior maintenance that affects their golf games.

Blue Chao

This Cambodian woman works at the clubhouse at Ponky as a cook. She cannot cook or speak English.

Travis Hart

This is Ray's younger brother who was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder before he died.

Captain Considine Roberts

This man is the head of The Mayflower Club. New members can join only with his approval.

Dr. Alfred A. Dingsby

This member dies while the Chops are trying to get into The Mayflower Club, so Dannie claims to be a friend of this man in an attempt to play the course and win The Bet.

Bingsley Colchester

This woman was the first female member of The Mayflower Club. She goes by her married name, Mrs. Miriam Smythe, but the club still lists her as a member under her maiden name so no feminist organizations can sue for discrimination. Bingsley



Colchester is also the name Two Down uses when trying to pose as a member of The Mayflower Club.

Fletcher

This man is the supervisor of the caddies at The Mayflower Club. He does not want to hire Ray because Ray is white.

Professor

This golf caddy is brilliant with financial matters. Though he has no money of his own to invest, he is an avid reader of financial publications.

Deisha Lake

Ray's ex-wife had grown disillusioned after seeing his lack of ambition, had an affair, and left Ray.

Meltdown

This nineteen-year-old man is a "part-time Chop." He comes to Ponky in spiked green hair and a leather jacket and still plays golf better than most.

The Slavic Man

This man arrives at Two Down's house with Concorde. While Concorde verbally threatens Two Down, this man kicks Two Down.



Objects/Places

Ponky

Ponkaquogue Municipal Golf Links and Deli is perhaps the worst golf course in America. It sits on top of a garbage landfill and is owned and operated by a man that does not care about its maintenance.

Chop

Like golfers at other clubs have the term "hack" for an average or bad golfer, the players that frequent Ponky refer to themselves as Chops.

Pit of Despair

This is what the Chops call the lunchroom at Ponky. The narrator describes the décor as "looking like it was put together from the remnants of a Holiday Inn Fire." There is an orange chair reserved for the day's biggest loser.

The Mayflower Club

Originally built in 1896, this is one of the finest and most exclusives golf courses in America. Those that pass the membership criteria and are selected to join must pay a membership fee of \$35,000.

Numerals

This is what the Chops call the members of The Mayflower Club because they believe that people with enough money to belong to The Mayflower Club must have numbers after their names, as in "Haverford Livingston III" or "Stockton Charlesworth IV."

Dorchester

In the late nineteenth century, this was one of the wealthiest sections of Boston. In the present day, the narrator mentions housing projects and crime. It is also the location of both Ponky and The Mayflower Club.

Bridgewater

Bridgewater State Penitentiary is where Thud spent some time after taking over a dry cleaner store and working the drive through window.



Midnight Mulligan Marauders

This is the name that Ray gives to himself, Hoover, and Crowbar after their attempt to play golf at The Mayflower Club at night.

Caddy

This is a person who carries golf clubs and assists a golfer.

The Uglies

This is the name Chunkin' Charlie has given to the symptoms of his cancer-related illnesses.

The Bet

This was the idea Two Down devised where the first Chop to play golf at The Mayflower Club wins \$2,000.

The Copley

This is the hotel where Thud photographs a meeting between Concorde and Xanadu.

MacGregor 693

The MacGregor 693 was the type of golf club used by Jack Nicklaus when he won the 1962 U.S. Open. The club used by Nicklaus was later purchased by Ray's grandfather, given to Ray's uncle, and later given to Ray. Ray's father wants the club.



Themes

Personal Accountability versus The Dysfunctional Family Era

Toward the end of the novel, Ray says that having come from "America's Dysfunctional Family Era", he was required to blame his father for all of his shortcomings, which is something Ray has done with passion. Every shortcoming in Ray's life, in his mind, can in one way or another be traced back to his father and the emotionally brutal way Ray was constantly criticized for not having enough "want to."

Near the end of the golf match, Ray looks at his father. He does not see a giant ogre. He sees an ordinary man. Indeed, Ray sees a man a couple of inches shorter than himself. All his life Ray has built up his father as the arch villain. Now he sees a mortal and wonders if his father can truly be responsible for all Ray's own shortcomings. Ray wonders at what age a person's failings become his own. He acknowledges that while he was a child his father could be blamed, but then it occurs to Ray that problems cannot be attributed to one's parents forever. Ray has never taken responsibility for his problems and he understands the absurdity of Ray's father blaming Ray's grandfather for problems, something Ray's father would never do.

All of these contemplations add up to something of an epiphany for Ray. Finally Ray realizes that his father did not end his golf career. His father had nothing to do with his failed marriage or his giving up on writing. Ray realizes that his shortcomings are his own, and with that knowledge, he performs the action that changes the course of the golf match and many people's lives.

Nearly Man: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Ray describes himself as one who almost achieves but always falls short. Sometimes he attributes this to a lack of skill and other times he lays the blame on outside forces, such as his father. Ray never acknowledges another possibility: a crippling lack of self-confidence.

It seems that time and time again Ray goes into situations expecting failure. He stops short at forming a lasting relationship with Dannie, and he attributes this to the peculiar rules of their strictly physical relationship. It is unclear who made these rules, but knowing that Ray forbid any questions about Travis and the knowledge that comes later that Dannie carried a photo of Ray in her locket makes the reader suspect that it was Ray all along who constructed the barriers and made a lasting relationship impossible.

Ray blames the failure of his golf career solely on his father for not financing his second attempt at a professional tour. Yet Ray makes only a passing reference to the fact that while on a minor tour, he spent his time drinking and caused himself to be unable to



play at his best. He does a similar thing when he mentions the break up of his marriage. He describes the affair his spouse had and her cold attitude when confronted, but he makes only passing reference to the repeated warnings she gave him about his lack of ambition.

Ray's ambitions for serious writing ended when he decided to burn his manuscripts. This was something Ray did entirely on his own. Without having attempted to publish his writing, he decided his writing was not good enough and quit. This trait, this belief that he will not succeed, is something that Ray carries well into the novel. Many times when describing the progress of *The Bet* he says that he is close to losing.

Clearly Ray is a talented individual and one must wonder how many of his shortcomings are due to real circumstances or his own lack of confidence and self-sabotage.

Quality versus Quantity

Ray's friend Charlie asks him, "What's wrong with Ponky?" Charlie understands something Ray and other characters do not. Charlie understands that the quality of friendships in a place is far more valuable than all the opulence in the world.

Ray is not the only person who struggles with this lesson. It seems that all of the characters fail to see what Charlie sees in his last few days of life. Dannie wants a relationship with a person of integrity, but she is momentarily dazzled by all the wealth at The Mayflower Club and fails to see the true nature of the person that is closest to her.

Two Down, the perennial dreamer and schemer, is so obsessed with the "easy marks" at The Mayflower Club that he forgets the wonderful environment he already has at Ponky. Indeed, Two Down does not understand that he is Ponky. Many people stop frequenting the run-down golf course once Two Down is no longer providing any entertainment and excitement.

In perhaps the most surprising change in perspective, Ray's father undergoes a shift in priorities. Ray's father is CEO of a major bank. He has an expensive car with personalized plates. He belongs to one of the most expensive golf courses in the country. After the contest with his son, Ray's father drives past the exclusive club and all its wealth to play at a run-down municipal golf course, perhaps the worst golf course in the country, but the course where his son plays.

Style

Point of View

Missing Links is told entirely from the perspective of a first person narrator. Every action and every suspected thought of any character comes to the reader through the perception of Ray, a thirty-year-old underachiever with a subtle and sarcastic wit. However, the point of view and narration is not static, because in addition to not being the most reliable narrator, Ray's perception matures over time. Along the way he questions himself and allows the reader to remember to question his reliability.

In the beginning of the novel, Ray as narrator seems to be steadfast in his perception of his world. His father is evil and is the sole reason for Ray's lack of achievement. Dannie can never be more than a physical partner for convenience because of the ground rules she put in place at the beginning of the relationship. Ray's ex-wife was unfaithful and callous. Ray's writing aspirations never materialized, but that is not due to any fault of Ray. In short, Ray seems to see things clearly and in black and white.

As the novel progresses and Ray begins to encounter obstacles both in his lighthearted quest to win The Bet and in his need for closer personal relationships, Ray begins to doubt his vision. In one instance, Dannie is blunt in telling Ray that he will not let anyone close to him, yet Ray at first resists seeing that he might have constructed obstacles to a healthy relationship. Over time and after struggling with some difficult questions, Ray also starts to back off his adamant view of his father as the evil arch villain. In time, Ray begins to see his father as just a man, just a fallible man much like himself.

Setting

The setting of the novel is modern day Boston. More specifically, it is at a municipal golf course known affectionately as Ponky to the characters in the novel. Ponkaquogue Municipal Golf Links and Deli is perhaps the worst golf course in America, as it is called in a major golf publication. To those that frequent the course, the Chops, it is unquestionably the worst golf course. It sits on top of a garbage landfill and is owned and operated by a man that does not care about its maintenance.

The narrator describes some of the more colorful aspect of Ponky, such as the lunchroom known as the "Pit of Despair" with its "puke-orange La-Z-Boy" chair reserved for the day's biggest loser. The décor described as something left over after a motel fire makes the reader wonder why the merry band of misfits, the Chops, want to frequent such a place. The narrator spends so much time describing Ponky that the place seems to be more of a character than a mere backdrop for a story.

Like many memorable characters, Ponky has a foil. Adjacent to Ponky sits The Mayflower Club, one of the most luxurious and exclusive golf courses in the country. The Mayflower Club is everything Ponky is not: refined, well cared for, and desirable.



The Mayflower Club, however, is too sterile an environment for the likes of the Chops, and after time spent at both places, the Chops finally come to appreciate their home course, the worst golf course in America.

Language and Meaning

There are two types of language in *Missing Links*. The first is the everyday American vernacular, complete with colorful and spicy expletives. This language is easily accessible and adds to the comic element of the novel. In some cases, it makes it easier for the reader to identify with and empathize with characters who say the exact same thing anyone would put in any of the abundance of absurd situations.

The second type of language can be described as the language of golf. The author of *Missing Links* is a renowned sports journalist, and the novel has obvious appeal to golfers. It could even be said that the book is written for golfers. Frequently the text is dense with golf terms, both technical and slang. Often these terms are not defined by context. While a non-golfer might be able to follow enough of the story to find humor and enjoyment, only a reader with a complete understanding of golf terminology will understand the book in all its detail, particularly in the scene on the course during play.

In using both types of language, the narrator has a subtle and understated wit. This, juxtaposed with the slapstick action of the plot, makes for a hilarious story. Often the more outlandish the action, the more subtle and understated the narration and dialogue. In some rare cases, in what should be a somber or quiet moment the language is raucous, but through almost all of the novel the narrator, Ray, keeps the reader entertained by his sarcastic and playful sense of humor.

Structure

For the most part, the structure of *Missing Links* is linear and chronological, told by a first-person narrator, Ray Hart. Ray begins by describing a setting and a time as well as an event that changed the circumstances, and he tells the story of the event from start to finish. There are, however, frequent and extended breaks from the present action. All of these breaks are in the form of backflashes, Ray's memories or back-story about other characters as told by Ray.

The breaks from the present action do not follow a uniform pattern. Instead, they occur as external events cause Ray to remember something or when a situation requires a back-story. In both cases, the extra detail to the present action does not come across as dry exposition. The remembrances of Ray's are often poignant, sometimes painful, and the back-stories about other characters, particularly the Chops, are absolutely hilarious.

The breaks in the present action, particularly those that take the form of remembrances, or backflashes, serve more than just to help explain the current situation. Sometimes, as in the case where Ray notices that Two Down is working as a cook and then stops the current action to tell the story of the tragic death of his brother, the break heightens



the tension in the present action. The reader wants to know why Two Down is working as a cook at The Mayflower Club, but Ray halts the action to tell us the story of his brother's death, a story he has hinted at previously.

Curiously, it is breaks like these make Ray seem like a more believable narrator in that his mind does not always proceed in a linear fashion.



Quotes

"Two Down was the Chops' Yaz, their knight in spikes, their patron saint of the double-back press. He was a little wiry guy who would take on King Kong with a Swiss Army Knife and want half the action. He was a little man with huge dreams and hopes. He stood five-eight, five-nine tops, 155 pounds with all his change in his pockets, yet he shopped at Coppman's Big and Tall Shop in Newton."

Chap. 20, p. 215

"I was about to be a member of a bluenose country club, like him. I drank too much, like him. I never made a relationship last, like him. I never made a relationship last, like him. Never been a father, like him."

Chap. 24, p. 266

"But if I could blame my failures on my dad, could he blame his on his? And when do they do a quick-deed on your failings? When do they become your own? Eighteen? Twenty-one? Thirty? Mine never had. Not my failed writing. Not my failed marriage. Not my failed golf. Had his?"

Chap. 24, p. 267

"'In fact,' Thud explained proudly, 'I use no violence in my work. I also refuse to deal in drugs or porno or anything tacky. I'm a style guy. You know, like Robert Wagner. It Takes a Thief? There aren't many of us left.'"

Chap. 17, p. 184

"I did lose one good friend in the deal, though. My main man, Glen Fiddich. Oh, we keep in touch. It's just that I learned opening up the scotch was a good way of closing me down to everybody else. Dannie and Charlie are mostly what I drink in now. Charlie being our son."

Epilogue, p. 276

"'Should've gone in on the bet,' I said. 'You'd be up two Large right now.'

His face fell a little.

Poor guy. Even his silver linings came with acid rain.

Sockless, shoeless, scraped, blackfaced, exhausted and penniless, I had one idea left. Plan C."

Chap. 8, p. 80

"I fell for golf. It was my kind of thing. I could play it by myself, practice it by myself and sink deep into it by myself. I became good at golf, I suppose, thanks to my father. It was



the only place I could go and know he wouldn't be anywhere near."
Chap. 9, p. 82

"As we were driving out, Meltdown was leaning on the outside of the wall, underneath Ivan's window. When he saw us, he jumped to his feet.
'How'd it go?'
'It was a tie,' Thud said.
'Yeah,' said Cementhead. 'But it could have just as easily gone the other way.'"
Chap. 24, p. 270

"My real name is Raymond Lee Hart and I guess I had no excuse. It's just that Ponky was the only place I had any real friends and golf was the only thing I really did, I suppose. Well, except for my lame job, which was writing lame glowing reviews of lame books for a lame outfit called Publisher's Reviews. Other than Ponky, I was about as alone as one sock."
Chap. 1, p. 4

"The ball, confused, went about 8 feet up and 6 feet sideways, bounced off a sick-looking pine tree nobody had hit in the history of Ponky and drowned itself in shame in the pond in front of the tee box."
Chap. 2, p. 17

"The charming Stone Concorde was also a born cheater. It took me about three days to figure it out. Reason I knew is cause they kicked a guy of the TC Jordan Tour for doing exactly the same thing."
Chap. 10, p. 95

"To us, Ponky was unquestionably the worst golf course in America, and if you didn't believe it, you should've come and tried to break 90 on our Astroturf tees and tractor-pull fairways and greens about as soft and puttable as Boylston Street."
Chap. 1, p. 3

Topics for Discussion

In addition to the cast of colorful human characters, the golf course Ponky is something of a character. Describe some of the predominant traits of Ponky.

Ray, the main character, is not the only character who learns a lesson. Describe some of the life-changing lessons learned by other characters.

Ray's father tells him that a person must have "want to" in life, and Ray hates hearing it. How is it ironic that despite how much Ray hates hearing his father's message, a lack of "want to" is truly Ray's chief problem?

The Mayflower Club is described as one of the most exclusive and desirable golf courses in America, and Ponky is described as the worst. How does Ponky fulfill certain needs for the Chops that The Mayflower Club never can?

Toward the end of the story Ray contemplates how long a person can blame others for his own shortcomings. What is Ray's conclusion?

The Chops are known, in part, for their brutal sense of humor. They love to play pranks on each other and have laughs at each other's expense. However, several times in the novel, one or more characters show caring and sensitivity. Describe one or more instances where a character or characters demonstrated a surprising concern for another.

The author of *Missing Links* is a renowned sports journalist, and the novel has obvious appeal to golfers. In your opinion, is the novel still accessible and enjoyable to non-golfers? Describe some instances where the text is dense with golf terminology, either technical or slang, and determine whether the meaning can be understood through context by a non-golfer.