Moonglow Study Guide

Moonglow by Michael Chabon

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Chabon, Michael. Moonglow. Harper, 2016.

Moonglow is a novel presented as a memoir, in which the narrator (a fictionalized version of the author) recounts the lives of his grandfather and grandmother. The book is structured as a series of nonlinear anecdotes, most of which are presented in a frame narrative concerning the grandfather's last days before dying of bone cancer in 1989. The grandfather, under the influence of powerful pain medication, becomes uncharacteristically talkative and begins to relate his life story to the listening narrator. These anecdotes are presented to the reader through the narrator's own voice and interpretation of events. The anecdotes are presented in a nonlinear order, beginning in the middle of his life and then jumping back and forth to gradually reveal the larger picture of his life story. Some extended, multi-chapter anecdotes are temporarily interrupted and then resumed later, and occasionally, the narrator interjects stories of his own personal experiences as they relate to his grandparents and other family members.

The narrator's grandfather lives from about 1920 to 1989. As a boy, he lives with his parents in Philadelphia and then attends Drexel Tech to obtain an engineering degree. Afterwards, he enlists in the United States Army Corps of Engineers and is selected for training in espionage. He serves as a soldier and spy in European combat zones during World War II and discovers information connecting German rocket engineer Wernher von Braun with complicity in Nazi atrocities. (Von Braun is a real historical figure and was instrumental in helping NASA put a man on the moon.)

After the war, the grandfather meets a French immigrant in Baltimore who has a four-year-old daughter. The daughter is the narrator's mother. The grandfather, who has no actual blood relation to the narrator, marries the French immigrant, who is of course the narrator's grandmother. The narrator's grandmother suffers psychiatric distress from traumatic experiences in France during World War II. The grandfather works as an aerospace engineer and even starts his own firm, but he is forced to become a salesman to pay for his wife's psychiatric care after she has a miscarriage and suffers a mental breakdown. After a severe episode in which she burns down a tree in her front yard, the grandfather is coincidentally fired from his job, and he attacks the president of the company in a rage. He then serves 13 months in prison and builds a working model rocket, which he sells to a toy company. In 1975, his wife dies of cancer, so the grandfather moves to Florida to be close to Cape Canaveral, the site of many NASA spaceship launches. He has a romantic affair with Sally Sichel, a fellow resident of his retirement community, but when he is diagnosed with bone cancer, he moves in with his daughter in San Francisco to live out his final days. Throughout much of his life, the grandfather struggles with his love of space travel and the fact that the glorious human achievement of landing on the moon has roots in Nazi activity. In his final days, he appears to have reached no clear answer on the moral quandary.

The life stories of the narrator and his mother also enter into the book's overall narrative. While her mother is in a mental hospital and her stepfather is in prison, the narrator's mother is taken care of by her stepfather's brother, Reynard. They have a brief sexual affair, despite the fact that she is only in her early teens at the time, and when he later spurns her, she shoots him in the eye with an arrow, rendering his eye nonfunctioning for the rest of his life. She later marries a doctor, lives in Flushing, Queens in New York City with her husband and parents, and she and the doctor give birth to the narrator. However, when the doctor and Reynard enter into a shady business deal with organized criminals based in Philadelphia, the business is broken up by the authorities, and the doctor flees to escape legal repercussions, leaving the narrator's mother and her parents to deal with the legal issues. The legal defense is costly, but no one related to the narrator appears to suffer legal consequences. The novel ends with an anecdote from after the death of his grandfather, in which the narrator and his mother attend the grandfather's funeral and admire his old things, most notably a model spacecraft he built, complete with miniature figures of the grandfather and his family. All of these anecdotes are interspersed with the nonlinear telling of the grandfather and grandmother's life stories.

Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

Chapter 1 – The novel opens with an anecdote in which a former lawyer named Alger Hiss was released from prison after serving a term for lying under oath. The year was 1957. Since Hiss was no longer able to practice law, one of his friends secured him a job at a company called Feathercombs, Inc., which manufactured and sold women's hair barrettes. In order to make room for Hiss, the president of the company fired a quiet salesman who happened to be the grandfather of the novel's narrator. In response to this firing, the narrator's grandfather went into a rage and attempted to strangle the president of the company with a phone cord. It is then revealed that the narrator's grandfather, now an old man, is dying of bone cancer and has been prescribed an opioid pain medication called Dilaudid. A side effect of this medication is that it makes him very talkative, causing him to share anecdotes from his life with his grandson, the novel's narrator.

Chapter 2 – In his boyhood, the grandfather lived in Philadelphia with his parents and his uncle Reynard. He spent his free time roaming the neighborhoods and getting into fights with other boys, causing his mother to worry often. In a train yard where he liked to explore and steal coal, he saw the security guard named Creasey enter a disused building and then leave. In the building, the narrator's grandfather found a bearded woman who used to be part of a circus show. She said that Creasey let her stay there in exchange for sexual favors. She invited him to touch her genitalia, and he did so, after which she told him to leave. He could not decide whether or not it would be beneficial for the woman if he told the authorities of her whereabouts, so he did nothing.

Chapter 3 – In the late 1960s, the narrator lived in Flushing, Queens in New York City, as did his grandparents. He recounts spending time with his grandmother, an immigrant from France. They played a card game together called piquet. She also had a deck of fortune-telling cards, which she would use to improvise stories for the narrator's entertainment. The narrator notes that his grandmother had five numbers tattooed on her left forearm, appearing to imply that she was a prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp during World War Two.

Chapter 4 – In 1941, after completing his engineering degree at Drexel University, the narrator's grandfather enlisted in the United States Army Corps of Engineers. He was soon recommended to be trained as an officer, and he accepted due to the increase in pay being an officer would provide. At the training facility in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., the grandfather entertained himself by mentally planning an invasion of Washington. He and a fellow enlisted engineer named Orland Buck decided to carry out part of this plan by attaching a fake bomb to the Francis Scott Key Bridge. However, after they arrived at the bridge under the cover of night, the narrator's grandfather found that Buck had brought an actual bomb. He then knocked Buck out with an oar and rowed back to land. Back at the base, they were met by Colonel Bill Donovan, a friend

of Buck's wealthy family. Donavan said he would make sure they were not punished too severely for their prank.

Analysis

From the very first sentence of the book, "This is how I heard the story" (1), Moonglow begins to develop and establish its very peculiar structure. Almost everything in the novel is presented as second-hand information conveyed to the reader by the narrator, a fictionalized version of the book's author, Michael Chabon. The narrator obtains most of this information from his dying grandfather, whose usual reticent nature is completely reversed by his pain medication. The opioid Dilaudid makes him quite talkative and eager to share his life story. The grandfather's reticent nature is presented early on as one of the grandfather's primary characteristics and is reemphasized throughout the book. In the very first chapter, the narration mentions that his grandfather is known around the offices of Feathercombs, Inc. as someone who speaks little and keeps to himself, thus making him an easy target for firing, leading to his violent outburst that becomes a repeated focus of the book.

The book also has a very chaotic nonlinearity that is quickly established. This chaotic structure is organized through its short chapters, which each deal with a specific time and place. For example, in these first four chapters, the settings presented are Manhattan in 1957, Philadelphia in the 1920s, Flushing, Queens in the 1960s, and the greater DC area in the 1940s. Each chapter maintains a generally linear structure, but the brevity of each chapter creates a rapid succession of anecdotes that unhinges the reader from a single time and place. This may imply that the narrator's grandfather is recounting events simply by picking interesting anecdotes at random, without regard to a greater chronology. However, the narrator's habit of inserting his own memories, such as in Chapter 3, may imply that he is taking certain liberties with the order in which he presents the larger narrative, moving to different parts of his grandfather's life in order to unfold the narrative in an interesting way. Of course, this is probably also affected by the intent of the real author, whose intentions seem to blur with his fictionalized alter ego due to the novel being presented in the format of a true memoir.

The four major characters introduced in these chapters are the narrator's grandfather, the narrator's grandmother, Uncle Reynard, and the narrator himself. Due to the book's sprawling structure, it often introduces minor characters that are only mentioned briefly and then never mentioned outside of their one chapter. In this section, such characters include the grandfather's parents, Creasy, the bearded woman, Orland Buck, and Bill Donovan. These minor characters help to further inform the backgrounds and natures of the main characters. For example, we know that the grandfather was the child of immigrants and that the wild behavior of his youth represented extremes outside of social norms. This youthful adventurousness is carried on to his early manhood but is overshadowed by Orland Buck, who gets carried away when aiding in the grandfather's scheme and brings an actual bomb. Bill Donovan represents the first encounter with impassable authority that the grandfather seems to experience.

It should also briefly be noted that many of the characters are never actually named, only referred to by their relationship with the narrator. This helps to preserve the book's fiction-as-memoir structure by not giving actual names that could be tracked down, but it also emphasizes the important familial relationships developed throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What is the impact of the novel's opening anecdote? What does it mean to you as a reader? Why do you think the author chooses this anecdote to open the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the anecdote involving the grandfather and the bearded woman in the train yard. What narrative purpose does this anecdote serve?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the narrator's relationship with his grandmother, as described in Chapter 3. How does he describe his childhood view of her?

Vocabulary

brandish, curtail, garrote, impromptu, indenture, raffish, gait, resolute, pilfer, stucco, bungalow, operetta, reproach, lattice, tartan, reverie, unfettered, chamois, patrimony, stratagem, acuity, perdition, belladonna, bohunk, clime, hernia, cadre, verisimilitude, chicane, deft, hasp

Chapters 5 - 8

Summary

Chapter 5 – The narrator recounts that his grandfather was arrested and arraigned after his attack on the president of Feathercombs, Inc. He spent a week in jail before being released on bail. The narrator then recounts his grandmother's life story as it was originally told to him. She lived in France, where her parents sold horses and animal hides. She became pregnant by a handsome doctor who later was killed by the Nazis. Her child would become the narrator's mother. Her family disowned her due to the pregnancy, and then they were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where they died. The narrator's grandmother was then raised by nuns before eventually emigrating to America. There, she met and married the man that the narrator calls his grandfather. Eventually, they moved to a farm in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey. She died of cancer in 1975 at the age of 52. The grandfather then spent his days in Florida near the NASA launch site of Cape Canaveral. He built model rockets, followed the operations of the NASA space program, became involved with a woman named Sally, and eventually moved to Oakland to live with his daughter in his old age.

Chapter 6 – The narrator recounts the first time that his grandfather (with whom he shares no actual blood relation) met his grandmother (with whom he does share a blood relation). In 1947, his grandfather has been discharged from the army after World War II, and he is living in Baltimore with his brother Reynard, whom the narrator calls Uncle Ray. Reynard was the rabbi of the local synagogue, Ahavas Sholom. Reynard convinced his brother to come to the synagogue's casino night fundraiser. There, they met the narrator's grandmother, an actress and French immigrant. She had a somewhat flirtatious exchange with the narrator's grandfather and even zipped up his pants zipper, which she saw was undone.

Chapter 7 – The narrative then jumps to 1989, the same year in which the narrator's grandfather is relaying the book's anecdotes to the narrator. In September of 1989, the grandfather was still living in a Florida community called Fontana Village. He spent his time working on a model of the LAV One, which was a speculative design for a lunar settlement structure. He met a woman named Sally Sichel, who was about his age, while she was out searching for her lost cat, Ramon. Ramon belonged to her late husband, and something in the local swamp was said to have been eating local pets. The predator was presumed to be an alligator. The narrator's grandfather told Sally that he would look for Ramon, and she thanked him.

Chapter 8 – The narrative then discusses the events leading up to the grandfather's attack on the president of Feathercombs, Inc., which was in 1957. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the grandfather worked as an aerospace engineer, first at the Glenn L. Martin Company, and then at his own firm, which he called Patapsco Engineering. Then, during the economic recession of 1953, he was forced to leave Patapsco, sell his share in the company, and look for work that would provide a regular paycheck. He spent

much of his time imagining a lunar colony for him and his wife. Meanwhile, his wife, the narrator's grandmother, suffered from delusions that a skinless horse was following and menacing her. This delusion caused her to set fire to the tree in their yard, where the skinless horse seemed to her to be nesting.

Analysis

These chapters primarily focus on developing the relationship and individual characterizations of the narrator's grandparents. The reader has already been given the bulk of the grandfather's backstory, so Chapter 5 fills in the grandmother's pre-immigration backstory in a compact section of exposition. However, the narrative seems to imply that the grandmother suffered some trauma that has not yet been revealed. This trauma is implied by the allusion in Chapter 3 to what appears to be a concentration camp registration number tattooed on her arm, as well as the discussion in Chapter 8 of her psychotic delusions. The narrative seems to be guiding the reader towards the conclusion that she suffers trauma from time spent in a concentration camp (although it is revealed towards the end of the novel that the tattoo is a fake and that she never spent any time in a concentration camp.) The image of the skinless horse seems to have some relationship with the fact that her family owned a factory that killed and skinned animals for their hides. This fact, along with the fact that her family died in a concentration camp, foreshadows the true causes of her trauma. These causes are revealed towards the end of the novel, and they are each caused by the Nazis and their occupation of France.

The grandfather, meanwhile, is developed more gradually throughout this section, which focuses mostly on his post-war obsession with aerospace engineering. He appears to be obsessed with NASA's space program. He works as an aerospace engineer for several years, he builds detailed models of spacecraft, and he even moves to Florida after his wife's death so that he can be close to NASA's launch site. Space travel, especially with regards to the moon and the moon landing, is a recurring motif in the novel. However, at this point, the motif only seems to be present in chapters concerning the grandfather's post-war life. This foreshadows certain events that took place during the grandfather's military service which led to this obsession, but his active military service is not discussed until later on in the novel.

This section also provides important insight into the very first anecdote of the book: the grandfather's attack on the president of Feathercombs, Inc. It appears that, in the earlier years of the 1950s, he pursues his professional passions by working as an aerospace engineer and founding his own firm. However, he is forced to give it up due to economic reasons (and, as later revealed, due to the cost of treating his wife's mental illness.) This is likely what leads to him working as a salesman for Feathercombs, Inc. The true inciting incident for the grandfather's rage appears to be his wife's burning of the tree in their yard, as this is a very distressing expression of her illness and seems to take place shortly before he is fired from Feathercombs. The grandfather is shown to be a very reticent and self-possessed person, so his violence towards the president of Feathercombs is quite uncharacteristic for him. However, the stress of being forced out

of his chosen profession, along with the stress caused by his wife’s mental illness, seems to be responsible for the burst of anger and violence he demonstrates after being fired from Feathercombs, Inc.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between the narrator's grandparents as described in Chapter 5. What complexities and contradictions are presented?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the tone of the scene between the grandfather and Sally Sichel. What is their interpersonal dynamic like? What subtext, if any, does their encounter hold?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the juxtaposition of the grandfather's imagined lunar colony and the grandmother's hallucination of the skinless horse. What does this juxtaposition imply in terms of theme and tone?

Vocabulary

arraignment, tedium, twill, eulogize, exonerate, penitence, handicraft, wanderlust, ennui, railleries, suffice, pragmatism, unfurl, prognosticate, eponym, encumbered, solenoid, aplomb, dialectician, disingenuous, redolent, gardenia, chambray, gaudy, trellis, gauche, gaffe, hydroponic, effervesce, ballast, dwindle, palaver

Chapters 9 - 12

Summary

Chapter 9 – The narrative returns to 1947, the year that the grandfather and grandmother met. The grandfather was living in Baltimore, sleeping on the couch of his brother Reynard. After the first meeting between the grandfather and grandmother at Shavas Sholom, they were both invited to a dinner party hosted by members of the synagogue. The grandfather did not talk much through the meal, but he did say that he wanted to go into aerospace engineering. Eventually, he and the grandmother broke off from the party and go to talk to each other on the balcony. They stood in the moonlight and smoked cigarettes. The grandmother confessed that she had a child who is almost five years old. The grandfather happened to meet this child, the narrator's mother, on a later day as she stood outside in the cold. She said she was punishing herself for saying something impolite to Reynard, the rabbi. The grandfather then talked to her and convinced her to join her mother in the synagogue.

Chapter 10 – This chapter contains only a brief anecdote in which the grandfather looked for the animal that supposedly ate Sally's cat Ramon. He enlisted the help of Devaughn, an employee of the Fonatana Village retirement community. Devaughn told him that the animal must be a snake rather than an alligator, because the excrement he saw appeared to be that of a snake. He also told the grandfather that the excrement seemed to mostly be confined to the site of the abandoned country club. The site was secured by a fence and lock, so the grandfather trespassed to search for the animal, but he found nothing.

Chapter 11 – This chapter returns to World War II, when Colonel Bill Donovan transferred Buck and the grandfather to the Office of Strategic Services. This department handled various espionage operations for America and its wartime allies. There, Buck and the grandfather trained as spies and were eventually shipped overseas to work as spies in hostile environments. The grandfather was first sent to London, from which he was set to be transferred to zones of combat on the European continent. In London, he met a fellow military engineer named Alvin Aughenbaugh, with whom he shared a hotel room. They drank together and discussed the war, but their discussion was interrupted when enemy fighter pilots flew over the city and dropped bombs. Luckily, none of the bombs hit their building.

Chapter 12 – The narrative moves ahead to the grandfather's service in a hostile combat zone. The narration reveals that Aughenbaugh was killed in combat, and that the grandfather then possessed Aughenbaugh's cigarette lighter, which remained in his possession for the rest of his life. Aughebaugh was replaced on the platoon by an American named Diddens. Diddens was shot in the foot with an arrow from a enemy, and the grandfather then killed the archer. The body of the archer was then prayed over by a German priest named Johannes Nickel, who then said he would give the soldiers shelter. The priest revealed that the archer was the church's sexton, a young man

named Alois, but the priest appeared to possess no hostility towards the American soldiers.

Analysis

It is important to note that the novel further develops the space travel and the moon as clear thematic motifs, even when not discussing them directly. In Chapters 9 and 11, the reader is shown two clear instances in which the grandfather meets someone important to him while the scene is marked by lunar imagery. When the grandfather and grandmother have a heart-to-heart discussion on the balcony, they each confess their desire to travel to the moon, and the narration makes repeated allusions to the large, shining moon hanging overhead. Then, when the grandfather first meets Alvin Aughenbaugh, Aughenbaugh is whistling the song “Moonglow” to himself. The reader already knows that Aughenbaugh holds special significance for the grandfather, as he still possesses Aughenbaugh’s lighter decades later. This seems to present the moon as a symbol for the profound but temporary happiness one may find through connection with others. The happiness is presented as temporary because the reader already knows of the grandmother’s death at age 52, and Aughebaugh is killed not long after he meets the grandfather. Thus, in the wake of losing the people he cares about, the grandfather turns his all of his focus towards his interest in the moon and space travel, as shown in previous chapters.

However, the novel repeatedly takes time to visit the anecdote of the grandfather and Sally Sichel. It has already been implied in Chapter 5 that Sally and the grandfather develop a romantic involvement, but the novel continually focuses on the anecdote of their first meeting The grandfather gallantly takes on the quest of finding her cat and/or killing the animal that preyed upon it. This anecdote takes place in Florida, which is the setting for the furthest extreme of the grandfather’s space travel obsession. This obsession appears to be partially eclipsed when he becomes obsessed with helping Sally Sichel look for her cat, or potentially the predator that may have killed the cat. On the surface, it seems like the grandfather is simply interested in searching the swamp as a means of entertaining himself or being neighborly. This would be consistent with his character in the rest of the novel because he is often very eager to embark on risky tasks. However, since the death of his wife has left him mostly alone, a blossoming romance with the widow Sally seems a natural narrative movement, especially since a possible romance between them has already been implied in Chapter 5.

Chapters 11 and 12 begin an extended anecdote regarding the grandfather’s active service with the military. This anecdote is continued through Chapter 15 before being interrupted, and it is revisited and concluded later in the novel. Chapter 11 provides the reader with a first look at the violence of the conflict with the bombing of London that the grandfather and Aughenbaugh witness. Then, in the very next chapter, it is revealed that Aughenbaugh was killed in combat. This creates the tone of sudden and terrible danger that the grandfather faces in combat. However, the introduction of Johannes Nickel adds a further dimension to the conflict, for Nickel aids the soldiers despite that fact that

he is a German, and also despite the fact that they killed his friend Alois, the sexton of Nickel’s church.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the grandfather's first encounter with his future wife and his first encounter with his future stepdaughter.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the grandfather's interaction with Alvin Aughenbaugh. What seems to draw the two men together, and what affect does this encounter appear to have on the grandfather?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the German priest appear to hold no hostility towards the American soldiers? What significance does this carry for the book's portrayal of war?

Vocabulary

scant, pettifoggery, bona fide, solicitude, russet, gamine, telemetry, putrefaction, convulse, caftan, auburn, loden, marten, discomfiture, surmount, eaves, arabesque, disavow, clandestine, feckless, billet, imperil, antiemetic, farrago, heterocyclic, servo, epaulet, calliope, gabardine, punctilio, nock, gouache, plaintive

Chapters 13 - 19

Summary

Chapter 13 – Father Johannes Nickel led the soldiers to a farmhouse where they could take shelter. Nickel was unable to give them shelter in his church, because it was destroyed in combat. In repayment for his hospitality, the soldiers helped Nickel retrieve a box containing church funds from where it lay buried in the churchyard. After they returned to the farmhouse, Nickel and the grandfather discovered that they were both interested in astronomy. Nickel also revealed that St. Dominic, to whom his church had been dedicated, was the patron saint of astronomers.

Chapter 14 - 15 – Unable to sleep, the grandfather walked about the farmhouse and found Nickel using his telescope to look at the moon. They discussed astronomy, and Nickel revealed his belief that space travel was a powerful form of worship that carried important theological implications. The next night, Nickel woke the grandfather and said that he wanted to show him something. In a shed near the farmhouse, Nickel showed him a V-2 rocket, the kind designed by German aerospace engineer Wernher von Braun and used on German missiles. The grandfather immediately felt a kinship with von Braun and imagined him as a man who simply wanted to make lunar travel possible.

Chapter 16 – This brief chapter begins with a short account of how Uncle Ray and the narrator’s father went in business together on a chain of restaurants. The restaurants were largely funded by members of Philadelphia’s organized crime syndicate, the Philadelphia Mob. The enterprise failed and brought about criminal charges, so the narrator’s father fled, and his grandparents lost much of their money in the ensuing legal defense. The chapter then shifts to the anecdote of the grandfather and Sally Sichel. He was unable to locate the cat or the predatory animal, but Sally invited him to her place for a date. They watch old movies, and the narration heavily implies that they began their sexual affair that night.

Chapter 17 - 19 – The book then begins a multi-chapter anecdote in that focuses on Halloween of 1952. The narrator’s mother wished to dress up as a horse rider for Halloween, but when her mother made a horse head using a real horse’s skull, the girl was traumatized. The grandfather did not know what to make of this behavior, but he worried it was a symptom of his wife's mental illness. His worry grew when he found blood in the bathroom and realized that his wife was nowhere to be found. He drove around looking for her and was eventually contacted by a group of nuns. They told him that his wife was with them at the nearby convent. He drove to meet her there, and she told him that her pregnancy miscarried, explaining the blood in the bathroom. She also said that she wanted to stay with these nuns and become one of them. This appeared to be a psychotic episode triggered by the loss of the unborn child. The grandfather eventually managed to persuade her to come home.

Analysis

The grandfather's interactions with Father Johannes Nickel appear to correspond strongly with previous optimistic presentations of the moon as a symbol. Nickel and the grandfather share a strong enthusiasm for the idea of traveling to the moon, although Nickel's reasons seem to be more theological in nature. This motif is then joined by the companion motif of the rocket when von Braun's V-2 rocket is revealed. The grandfather's contact with the V-2 rocket represents his first indirect contact with von Braun. This relationship becomes quite complicated later in the novel, but for now, the grandfather sees von Braun as a genius whose invention is being misused. It appears clear to Nickel and the grandfather that the V-2 rocket is a significant step towards travelling through outer space, but it is also being used as a weapon by the Nazis. However, at this point in the novel, the grandfather seems to think that von Braun is not complicit with the violence of the war, but is purely interested in extending humanity's greatness through space travel.

The narrative then moves away from the story of the grandfather in the war, and it provides a brief but thematically significant interlude before beginning a different extended anecdote. The interlude contains two separate, brief stories. The first story is about the narrator's father. This is the first mention of the narrator's father that the book contains, and it seems that his main action in the narrative is that of contributing to an instance of great distress and danger for the narrator and his family. He and Uncle Ray become involved in illegal business dealings, and the consequence falls very heavily on the narrator's grandparents. The second anecdote in this chapter is a continuation of the story of Sally Sichel's relationship with the grandfather. Their initial contact blossoms into a more explicitly romantic and sexual relationship, and the normally assured grandfather is shown as nervous and caught off-guard. This seems due to the fact that it is his first serious relationship since the death of his wife. However, the couple appears to overcome initial obstacles and settle into a comfortable romance. These two anecdotes occupy the same chapter as a way of contrasting past difficulties in the grandfather's life with the new possibility of happiness presented in the form of Sally Sichel.

However, the novel then immediately contrasts this optimism with an extended anecdote in which it is revealed that the grandmother was pregnant but then miscarried. This is linked with her mental illness, as the trauma of the miscarriage seems to cause a temporary mental breakdown. She attempts to seek shelter with the local nuns, since she was raised by nuns for a time in France. Although the grandfather is able to talk her down, the narrative seems to imply that the trauma of her miscarriage may have acted as a catalyst by which her mental illness suddenly grew worse. Also, since this breakdown takes place in 1952, the same year that the grandfather had to give up aerospace engineering, it is implied that part of why he had to do so was to help pay for mental treatment for his wife.

Discussion Question 1

What is the narrative significance of the American soldiers helping Nickel to excavate a box of the church's property? How does this develop the characters and their situation?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance to the grandfather of being shown the V-2 rocket by Father Nickel?

Discussion Question 3

How does the anecdote of Halloween 1952 further develop the book's themes and character relationships?

Vocabulary

abjection, schloss, tribunal, somnambulist, sapper, reredos, parsonage, glyph, jocular, unction, fuselage, scabbard, ordnance, conundrum, mattock, escutcheon, provenance, blight, tinnitus, hoarfrost, oculus, castellated, idyll, myopia, archipelago, axial, lien, irk, raffia, satyr, piebald, pert, livery, kinescope, lacquer, bereavement, pince-nez, perturb

Chapters 20 - 27

Summary

Chapters 20 - 22 – Chapter 20 provides another brief glimpse of the evolution of the grandfather's relationship with Sally Sichel, who was an accomplished painter. A brief scene of dialogue shows that she and the grandfather were quite comfortable and fairly sexually active with each other. In Chapter 21, the grandfather tells the narrator that he left his platoon to go track down von Braun. During this mission, he came to the German military base at the town of Nordhausen, but he does not want to give details about it. Thus, in Chapter 22, the narrator takes it upon himself to research Nordhausen, and he finds out that it was a center for both rocket manufacturing and forced labor drawn from the nearby concentration camp. This center was called the Mittelwerk. The narrator realizes that when his grandfather arrived at Nordhausen, his grandfather must have then comprehended that von Braun could not have been ignorant of the Nazis' atrocities, so von Braun was, therefore, complicit in them. The grandfather admits that this is true, and that after he came to Norhausen, he decided he would kill von Braun if he ever found him.

Chapter 23 – At Nordhausen, the grandfather tracked down a German engineer named Stolzmann who was living with a farmer's widow, Frau Herzog. The grandfather then posed as a German to get information from Stolzmann, but Stolzmann realized that the grandfather was an Allied spy. Stolzmann told Frau Herzog to kill the grandfather, but instead, she agreed to give the grandfather information in exchange for insulin for her son. The grandfather agreed, and she told him the location where thousands of documents pertaining to the operations of the Mittelwerk were buried. The Allies later extracted these documents, which helped them bargain for the expatriation of Wernher von Braun from Germany to America.

Chapter 24 – The narrative moves back to 1957, shortly after the grandfather's attack on the president of Feathercombs. The grandfather decided to surrender himself to the New York State Department of Corrections for imprisonment. First, he took his wife and daughter to a petting zoo and then out to eat. He then drove the narrator's mother, now in her early teens, to Baltimore to be cared for by Reynard, since the narrator's grandmother was still mentally unwell and was undergoing psychiatric treatment.

Chapter 25 - 27 – The grandfather was admitted to Wallkill Prison with a sentence of 20 months for assault. Wallkill Prison was a progressive minimum-security prison that allowed the inmates relative freedom. The prisoner in the cell next to him was a dentist named Alfred Storch, who said he was in jail for practicing dentistry without a license. Another inmate was named Hub Gorman. Both Storch and Gorman tried to interact with the grandfather, but he resolved to keep to himself. One day, Gorman picked a fight with Storch, hit him, and threatened to kill him. Storch later attempted to kill himself, but he failed. The grandfather then built a makeshift bomb and put it under Gorman's bed, planning to report it to the authorities and have Gorman transferred to a different prison.

However, the bomb accidentally exploded, killing Gorman. Storch realized what really happened and thanked the grandfather. Storch then confessed that he was really in prison for the accidental killing of a patient by nitrous gas overdose. The two inmates snuck to the roof of the prison at night and scanned the sky for the newly launched Sputnik satellite. They then decided that they wanted to build a rocket together.

Analysis

This section provides the conclusion to the story of the grandfather's service in World War II, and his realization at Nordhausen of von Braun's complicity in Nazi atrocities incites a very significant change in the grandfather's character. Suddenly, the kinship he felt with von Braun completely reverses, and instead of wanting to capture von Braun, he wants to kill him. Von Braun's motives are suddenly more ambiguous, but even if he had simply wanted to build a rocket to go to the moon, his integrity is compromised by his continued cooperation with the Nazis, helping them build rockets for weapons. This appears to account for the more pessimistic portrayal of rockets and space travel in the chapters that take place after the war. The grandfather remains loyal to the cause of space travel, but he is unable to deny that the technology has roots in violence and Nazi aggression. This further complicates the grandfather's own relationship with these concepts, as he still views reaching the moon as an admirable goal, but it is tainted with knowledge he obtained first-hand in the war.

Chapter 24 represents another brief but important interlude between longer anecdotes. It is placed between the grandfather's war story and the story of the grandfather's time in prison, and it represents an important transitional moment in the grandfather's life, in more ways than one. First, he is about to surrender himself to prison, thus beginning the next extended phase of adversity in his life. However, even greater adversity is represented in the grandmother's current mental state. It is still not long after she has set fire to the tree in the yard, and she is now set to undergo another extended round of psychiatric treatment. The reader learns later in the novel that she is even committed to an asylum for a short period of time. In addition, her daughter (the narrator's mother) has to be left in the care of Reynard until the grandfather is released. It is later revealed in the novel that Reynard and the narrator's mother have a brief but inappropriate sexual relationship while she is in his care.

Chapters 25 through 27 present a suspenseful account of the grandfather's time in prison, which ultimately presents a significant piece of character development for the grandfather. At first, he attempts to keep to himself as much as possible in order to stay out of trouble. However, when Storch tries to kill himself after Gorman's threat against him, he finds that he cannot stand idly by. He undergoes several severe risks in order to frame Gorman and protect Storch. While the grandfather is regretful that this accidentally results in Gorman's death, he is happy to have helped Storch, and the two form a distinct friendship. This appears to be the first close friendship that the grandfather forms after the death of Alvin Aughenbaugh. In addition, their decision to build a rocket together provides a slightly more optimistic portrayal of the rocket theme

in the wake of the grandfather’s discovery at Nordhausen. It also seems to be a way for the grandfather to cope with the temporary loss of his wife while he is in prison.

Discussion Question 1

What exactly does the grandfather discover at Nordhausen? How does this affect his view of von Braun and rocketry?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the grandfather's interaction with Frau Herzog and Herr Stolzmann. How does this develop the grandfather's character? How does this anecdote add complexity to the characterization of the war from the individual perspective?

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Discussion Question 3

Discuss the moral implications of Gorman's death. Under the circumstances, how much responsibility should the grandfather assume? What is the significance of the grandfather and Storch's reactions to Gorman's death?

Vocabulary

inordinate, shtetl, rucksack, querulous, tactician, ad hoc, supine, coaxial, nihilist, aggrandize, trite, yammer, filigree, aeronautical, gypsum, dint, rector, premonitory, ersatz, proffer, gestalt, remonstrate, gregarious, buttress, carbolic, infinitesimal, gaudy, chenille, reveille, spasmodic, poplin

Chapters 28 - 32

Summary

Chapters 28 – Chapter 28 tells the story of Sammy Chabon, the narrator's great uncle on his father's side, who founded a successful company that sold plastic novelties, mostly miniature plastic skeletons for entertainment and educational purposes. To cut costs, he opened a factory floor at Wallkill Prison with inmates as laborers. On a visit to Wallkill, he saw the grandfather and Dr. Storch launching their model rocket outdoors under prison supervision, so he made a deal with the two men to sell the rocket as a product in his company.

Chapter 29 – At the narrator's mother's house in San Francisco, the narrator's mother shows him an old photo album she found while going through the grandfather's things. It contains photos of herself, her mother, and the grandfather from the 1940s and 1950s. However, many of the photos are missing, with only the scrapbook's captions remaining. The mother describes the missing photos based on what she remembers of them. The mother soon admits that she had a brief sexual affair with Uncle Ray while she was in his care, and when he subsequently spurned her, she shot him in the eye with an arrow. She adds that everyone else already knew of this.

Chapter 30 - 31 – In 1958, the grandfather was released from prison after only 13 months due to good behavior. He and the narrator's mother visited the narrator's grandmother in the mental hospital where she had been receiving psychiatric care. There, they learn that she had written a play, and it was going to be performed that day. The play contained no spoken lines, but it was replete with lunar imagery and portrayed a bee herder who threw a lasso at the moon and proceeded to climb the rope to the moon's surface. The grandfather and mother met with the grandmother after the performance, and the grandfather had a conversation with the head doctor, Dr. Medved. The grandfather explained why he was in prison. The doctor thought that the grandfather attacked the president of Feathercombs because he was upset about his wife's mental state and the fact that she burned a tree down. The grandfather agreed that this was probably an accurate assessment.

In 1989, the narrator tracks down some of Dr. Medved's old records and discovers his grandmother's true past. She was impregnated due to the rape of a Nazi officer, after which she was forced into vagrancy. She was taken in by nuns until the convent was destroyed by a V-2 rocket. Eventually, she took on the identity of a friend who had been deported to a concentration camp and had someone tattoo a fake concentration camp number on her arm. She did this because the American government was providing passage to Jewish foreigners affected by World War II.

Chapter 32 – The narrator recalls another anecdote from the 1960s when his family lived in Flushing, Queens. In this anecdote, his mother went to the hospital, but no one told the young narrator why. He spent the time playing make-believe and card games

with his grandmother. When his grandfather returned home, he told the narrator that his mother had a miscarriage. The grandfather did not know that the narrator was not supposed to be told the truth about this.

Analysis

As the novel draws closer to its end, the narrative starts rapidly revealing secrets that shed new light on events previously discussed in the novel. The first big secret to be revealed in this section is that the narrator's mother had a brief sexual affair with Uncle Ray when she was in her early teens, and that after the affair ended, she shot him in the eye with an arrow. This accounts for the eye patch that Uncle Ray wears, which is only briefly mentioned earlier in the novel (specifically in Chapter 2 on page 7.) The next secret to be revealed is that of the grandmother's fabricated backstory, of which not even the grandfather had any knowledge until 1958. Finally, Chapter 32 tells of the narrator's mother's miscarriage, which was meant to be kept a secret from him. These secrets help to emphasize the nature of trauma that underlies most of the narratives in the novel. This trauma appears to be directly analogous to the mass violence and trauma caused by World War II and by the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

Another major development is the explicit narrative interpretation of the grandfather's attack on the president of Feathercombs, which is an anecdote that the novel repeatedly visits. The grandfather's conversation with Dr. Medved makes the explicit connection between his attack and the misguided rage generated by his frustration with the poor mental health of his wife. While this connection was already implied earlier in the novel, the fact that the novel makes it explicit in this chapter helps to re-emphasize the extended negative effects of his wife's psychological trauma. Moreover, since the novel then reveals the true causes of her trauma immediately after, all of which are direct causes of Nazi atrocities, the novel helps to strengthen the connection between the grandparents' trauma and that trauma's shared roots Nazi aggression.

Taking a closer look at the grandmother's true history, it is important to note that the French convent in which she stayed as a girl was destroyed by a V-2 rocket. This is the very same model of rocket that Johannes Nickel shows to the grandfather in Chapter 15. This rocket represents the moral quandary between the rocket's use as an instrument of space travel and the rocket's use as an instrument of violence. The narration mentions in Chapter 5 that the convent was one of the few places where the grandmother was happy in her girlhood. Thus, the fact that a V-2 rocket was directly responsible for destroying this happiness adds another layer to the grandfather's moral quandary, as it contributed to the prolonged trauma of his wife.

The miscarriage that the narrator's mother has in the 1960s appears to have a parallel with the miscarriage that his grandmother has in the early 1950s. Both women give birth to one child and then suffer a miscarriage upon their second conception. Dr. Medved's research reports that the grandmother suffers from irregular menstruation for her entire life after her traumas in France. This seems to have a parallel with the trauma that the

narrator’s father brings down upon his family through his recklessness. Together, these anecdotes appear to reinforce the idea of lasting damage caused by trauma.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the scene in which the mother recounts memories from the photo album. How does this further develop the book's central themes and characters?

Discussion Question 2

What does the play at the mental hospital appear to symbolize? How does it connects with themes and symbolism from other parts of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the grandfather's conversation with Dr. Medved. In what ways does this interaction further develop the grandfather's character?

Vocabulary

pinochle, nudnik, anemometer, canted, serif, paisley, mucilage, zaftig, asymptotic, moire, cajole, colonnade, précis, ostinato, hummock, ardor, subaqueous, settee, culpability, estradiol, marbleized, holotropic, consign, bathyscaphe, benediction, audacious, palisade, ziggurat, presentiment

Chapters 33 - 36

Summary

Chapter 33 – The narrative then tells several brief anecdotes about the grandfather's life after the death of his wife. Towards the end of his mourning period, he met a woman at an aerospace conference, and they slept together for one night. During his mourning period, he attended a support group for members of the Jewish community who had lost a loved one, but the grandfather struggled to connect with the other mourners and the rabbi who ran the group. Lastly, the grandfather relates an anecdote in which he attended an aerospace conference where he met Wernher von Braun. Von Braun was present to receive an award for his achievements. When the grandfather approached von Braun to speak with him, he witnessed the elderly von Braun urinating into a nearby ficus plant. After the ensuing embarrassment, the grandfather and von Braun had a surprisingly pleasant conversation in which von Braun admired the grandfather's design model for a space shuttle. Then, in order to make von Braun uncomfortable, the grandfather said he wanted to build the shuttle so he could create a Jewish settlement on the moon. This had its desired effect, and von Braun soon left, looking uncomfortable.

Chapter 34 – The narrative returns for a final time to the story of the grandfather and Sally Sichel. The grandfather had been able to determine from excrement samples that the predatory creature in the swamp was a python, likely a pet that had escaped. After a romantic interval with Sally, he said he wanted to go out into the swamp one more time to look for the python. Sally came with him, and instead of the python, they found Sally's cat Ramon, whom they had presumed was eaten by the python. Ramon was injured and very fat, so they deduced that he had killed the python and eaten it. They tried to retrieve Ramon, but he ran off, evidently wishing to remain in the swamp.

Chapter 35 – About a year after the death of his grandfather, the narrator goes on a book tour to promote his second book. At a book tour stop in Florida, he runs into Sally Sichel. They have lunch together and talk about his grandfather. She recalls him fondly as a lovable, intelligent, good-looking man. They agree that he even had a sense of humor that was evident to those who knew him well. Sally praises his grandfather for becoming so invested in looking for Ramon and the snake. She and the narrator agree that he often enjoyed playing the martyr and was in general a good man.

Chapter 36 – After the narrator's grandfather dies, the narrator's mother has the body shipped to Philadelphia for burial. They attend the burial service in Philadelphia. The next day, before they part ways, the narrator's mother shows the narrator one of the spacecraft models that the grandfather had built. Together, they admire the model and the miniature figurines it contains, which are meant to represent the grandfather, the grandmother, the narrator, and the narrator's mother.

The narrator ends the book by recounting one of the last things his grandfather said before he died. The grandfather said that he never met von Braun after the encounter at the aerospace convention. He said that he had heard von Braun had died in great pain, although the grandfather could not recall the cause of death. He did not say whether or not he thought von Braun deserved this pain. The next day, the narrator's grandfather was finally killed by his cancer.

Analysis

These final chapters present several conclusions to the book's most prolonged anecdotes. First, the grandfather tells of his only direct encounter with Wernher von Braun, the man who has obsessed him for so long due to the moral quandary von Braun presents. Their interaction appears to act as a direct simulation of that quandary. The men's shared interest in aerospace engineering is apparent when von Braun admires the grandfather's model shuttle. Grandfather demonstrates his expertise, and von Braun is clearly awed, similar to the grandfather's constant awe and obsession regarding all things to do with space travel. However, the grandfather then pointedly interjects Judaism into the conversation, indirectly but purposely raising the issue of von Braun's cooperation with the Nazis during World War II. This tension mirrors the tension caused by the beauty of space travel, as represented by the grandfather's awe, and the ugliness of space travel's roots, as represented by von Braun himself.

This section also concludes the anecdote of the grandfather and Sally Sichel, which spans almost the entire book. The story ends in a very unexpected way, with Ramon alive and having killed and eaten the deadly python. In addition, even though Sally is reunited with the cat, the cat surprisingly chooses to stay in the swamp. Besides simply providing a comical ending to the book's most optimistic anecdote, this conclusion serves to emphasize the strength and happiness that the grandfather has found with Sally, much like the strength and happiness that Ramon has found in the swamp. In addition, this anecdote is provided a second conclusion when the narrator meets Sally Sichel a year after the grandfather's death. Despite all the hardships and difficulties the grandfather faced in his life, Sally and the narrator choose to focus on the grandfather's good character and strong morals. In fact, it is likely because of the grandfather's hardships that his enduring good character is so remarkable.

The scene in which the narrator and his mother admire the grandfather's model spacecraft is significant in that it provides emotional closure to a motif that has shown up throughout the book, namely the grandfather's enduring interest in aerospace engineering and designing his own prototype models. In Chapter 8, the novel states that the grandfather begins imagining moon colonies and designing model space crafts after he is no longer able to work on aerospace engineering in the professional sphere of his life. Thus, the space craft model represents the grandfather's enduring imagination and optimism through all the hardships in his life. In addition, the specific model that the narrator and his mother examine is the LAV-One, which is one of the very first models that the grandfather builds. It contains miniature figures of him and his family, emphasizing the bond of love that strengthens his endurance throughout his life.

The book’s final anecdote is significant because the grandfather does not say what he ultimately thinks of von Braun. On one hand, von Braun was instrumental in helping humanity travel to the moon, a feat that the grandfather is obsessed with and in awe of. On the other hand, von Braun’s inventions were used by the Nazis as tools of violence and destruction, which von Braun was completely aware of. The fact that the grandfather does not answer this moral question appears to be a rhetorical tool by which the author leaves the question for the reader to consider on their own.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the grandfather's interaction with Wernher von Braun. How does this reflect on the grandfather's character and his moral struggle regarding space flight and its origins?

Discussion Question 2

Compare the final scene of the grandfather and Sally with the scene in which the narrator and Sally meet. What implications do they carry for the grandfather's character? For the tone and themes of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the juxtaposition between the narrator's last scene with his grandfather and the scene in which the narrator examines the grandfather's model spacecraft. What implications do these final scenes carry for the novel's themes or any message it may have?

Vocabulary

recalcitrant, tryst, chalet, azure, aspersion, platitude, politesse, polystyrene, frangible, protuberance, underwrite, amoral, espouse, hector, modish, pallor, contrite, sprue, improvidence, ambient, cheroot, batik, terrazzo, cohort, misnomer, qualm, roundel, oracular, concede, paladin, dentition, acrid, append

Characters

Narrator

The narrator of Moonglow is a fictionalized version of the book's author, Michael Chabon. In flashbacks where the author is a young boy, people refer to him as "Mike," and the narrator's great uncle on his father's side is called Sam Chabon. By inserting himself in a narrative about his relatives, the structure of the book becomes that of a memoir in which he is mostly recounting anecdotes secondhand. It is, therefore, impossible to tell which parts of the book are based in reality and which parts are wholly fabricated. The narrator himself is present in multiple anecdotes, but his personality and actions are never the focus of the narrative. However, the narrator's personality, thoughts, and feelings may be interpreted as influencing how the anecdotes are told to the reader.

Grandfather

The narrator's grandfather serves as the book's primary protagonist (despite the fact that his name is never revealed to the reader.) He usually speaks very little, but in 1989, as he is dying of cancer, he becomes talkative under the influence of painkillers and relates many anecdotes of his life to the narrator. The grandfather has no blood relation to the narrator, having married the narrator's grandmother after the narrator's mother was already born. However, the narrator always refers to him as his grandfather.

The grandfather was born in Philadelphia, received an engineering degree from Drexel Tech, joined the army corps of engineers, worked as a spy for the Allies in World War II, and pursued aerospace engineering after the war. He becomes a salesman due to economic needs, and he is imprisoned for a year after attacking the president of the company for firing him. He then makes a living designing toy rockets. He is obsessed with space travel and human flights to the moon. However, he is morally torn by the fact that space travel has roots in Nazi innovations. After losing his wife, he has a brief affair with Sally Sichel, a woman in his retirement home, before finally dying of bone cancer in 1989.

Grandmother

The narrator's grandmother (whose name is also never revealed to the reader) is the birth mother of the narrator's birth mother, so unlike the narrator's grandfather, the grandmother is an actual blood relation of the narrator. She is originally from France and suffers psychiatric trauma due to being raped by a Nazi officer and being subsequently disowned by her family. She becomes a vagrant, is taken for a brief time into the care of a convent of nuns, and ultimately escapes to America by having a fake concentration camp registration number tattooed on her arm and posing as a Jewish refugee. She marries the narrator's grandfather soon after coming to America. She continues to suffer

from psychiatric episodes and suffers a mental breakdown after having a miscarriage. She is then treated in a mental hospital and released before dying of cancer in 1975, at the age of 52.

Mother

The narrator's mother (whose name is also never revealed to the reader) was born in France but was very young when she and the narrator's grandmother immigrated to America. Her biological father is a Nazi officer who raped her mother. She is present in various anecdotes as a four-year-old, a nine-year-old, a young teen, and a middle-aged woman. After the her stepfather is imprisoned and her mother is admitted to a mental hospital, she enters the care of her stepfather's brother Reynard. They have a brief sexual affair, despite the fact that she is only in her early teens. When Reynard subsequently spurns her, she shoots him in the eye with an arrow, which forces him to wear an eye patch for the rest of his life.

Reynard

Reynard is the brother of the narrator's grandfather. The narrator often refers to him as "Uncle Ray." Reynard becomes a rabbi in his twenties but gives it up after becoming disillusioned with religion. He then becomes a con artist and businessman. He eventually enters into an illegal business arrangement with the organized crime group called the Philadelphia Mob, but the operation is soon broken up by the police. Reynard also has a brief sexual affair with the narrator's mother when she is put under his temporary guardianship in her early teens.

Father

The narrator's father (whose name is also never revealed to the reader) appears only mentioned a few brief times in the novel. He is a medical doctor, but he agrees to join Reynard in a business deal with Philadelphia criminals. When the deal is broken up by legal authorities, the father flees to escape legal repercussions, leaving the narrator's mother and her parents to deal with the consequences by spending money on many lawyers.

Sally Sichel

Sally Sichel is a fellow resident of the grandfather's Florida retirement community, Fontana Village. She meets the grandfather one day when she is out looking for her lost cat Ramon. The grandfather commits himself to finding the lost cat, and he and Sally start spending increasingly more time together. They have a romantic affair that ends due to the grandfather's declining health. A year after the grandfather's death, she runs into the narrator by chance and reflects fondly on the grandfather and their time together.

Alvin Aughenbaugh

Alvin Aughenbaugh is an engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He shares a room with the grandfather in London before they are sent to combat areas in Germany during World War II. The grandfather and Aughebaugh quickly strike up a friendship in London and even witness a German air raid over London before they are sent to combat zones. Aughenbaugh and the grandfather are part of the same platoon, but Aughenbaugh is killed in combat. As a memento, the grandfather keeps Aughenbaugh's cigarette lighter for the rest of his life.

Wernher von Braun

Wernher von Braun is a real historical figure. He was a German engineer who built rockets for German missiles during World War II. After the war, the Germans agreed to expatriate von Braun to the United States. There, von Braun worked with the American space program and was instrumental in building the spacecraft that America ultimately sent to the moon. Von Braun is at first idolized by the narrator's grandfather, but the narrator becomes disillusioned during World War II when he finds proof that von Braun was complicit in helping build weapons for the Nazis.

Orland Buck

Orland Buck is an American army engineer that the grandfather meets while they are both in military training. Buck comes from a wealthy Maine family. When the grandfather concocts a prank in which they would strap a fake bomb to a bridge near their training site, Orland Buck agrees to help. However, he gets carried away and brings a real bomb, so the grandfather knocks him out with an oar. Ultimately, Orland Buck is killed in combat in Italy during World War II.

Father Johannes Nickel

Johannes Nickel is a German priest who provides the grandfather's platoon with food and shelter in Vellinghausen, Germany during World War II. Despite the fact that the grandfather kills Nickel's friend and sexton Alois, in combat, the priest appears to harbor no ill will. On the contrary, Nickel and the grandfather bond over their mutual love of astronomy. Nickel then shows the grandfather where an abandoned V-2 rocket lies hidden in the woods.

Dr. Alfred Storch

Alfred Storch is a dentist who occupies the cell next to the grandfather in Wallkill prison. He claims at first that he has been imprisoned for practicing dentistry without a license, but he ultimately admits to the grandfather that he is actually in prison because he

accidentally killed a patient by nitrous gas overdose. Storch and the grandfather become friends after the grandfather saves him from another inmate. They bond over their shared interest in space travel and build a working model rocket together under prison supervision.

Herr Stoltzmann and Frau Herzog

The grandfather meets Herr Stoltzmann and Frau Herzog as he is tracking Wernher von Braun in Germany. They live on Frau Herzog's farm together, and when Herr Stoltzmann tries to kill the grandfather for being an American spy, Frau Herzog stops him. She agrees to reveal the location of hidden Nazi documents if the grandfather agrees to procure insulin for her son.

Dr. Medved

Dr. Medved is the head doctor at Greystone Mental Hospital where the narrator's grandmother is treated. When the grandfather comes to visit the grandmother, he has a conversation with Dr. Medved in which Medved tries to understand why the grandfather attacked the president of the company he worked for. Medved concludes that the grandfather was redirecting anger and frustration caused by his wife's deteriorating psychiatric state. The grandfather agrees with this assessment.

Symbols and Symbolism

Dilaudid

Dilaudid, a powerful opioid painkiller, symbolizes the truth and function as a type of narrative catalyst.

It is sold in pill form and taken orally. As the grandfather dies of bone cancer, he takes Dilaudid to ease his pain. A significant side effect is that it makes him very talkative, and he starts sharing his life story with the narrator. This is significant, because one of the grandfather's main characteristics is how little he usually speaks. Moreover, the anecdotes that he tells the narrator are the basis for the entire book. Is seems significant that the grandfather speaks not out of a dying wish to express himself, but merely by chemical circumstances. This preserves the nature of the grandfather's character while still allowing his stories to be told.

The Moon and Space Travel

The moon and space travel act as recurring symbols throughout the book, both in passing allusions as well as objects for the grandfather's obsession, alluding to love and beauty, but also to the darker side of human history. The grandfather appears to identify traveling to the moon as one of mankind's greatest achievements, but his relationship with this ideal is tainted and complicated by space travel's roots in technology used as weapons by the Nazis in World War II.

The Skinless Horse

The Skinless Horse is a hallucination caused by the grandmother's psychiatric trauma, but it also stands as a symbol for the original causes of that trauma. It manifests as a terrifying horse with no skin, and it appears to have its roots in the tannery that her family owned, where animals were killed and skinned for their hides. The trauma of the Skinless Horse also appears to be rooted in the rape the grandmother suffered in her youth at the hands of a Nazi officer. This trauma appears to have been worsened by the subsequent period of hardship she suffered during World War II.

Ramon the Cat

Ramon represents the bond that the grandfather forms with Sally, as his commitment to finding Ramon appears to be an expression of the grandfather's love for Sally. In addition, Ramon's exceptional toughness and ability to survive seems to symbolize the grandfather's own brand of quiet toughness, which has helped him through many hardships in his life.

The grandfather meets Sally Sichel as she searches for her lost cat, Ramon. He subsequently offers to help find the cat, and he becomes very invested in the search over time. Ultimately, Ramon is found in the swamp after having killed and eaten the python that was presumed to have done the same to him.

Ahavas Sholom

The synagogue represents the complicated relationship that the main characters have with religion and Jewish culture, which shapes these characters and their relationships in various ways throughout the book.

Ahavas Sholom is the Baltimore synagogue where the grandfather first meets the grandfather, and where Reynard serves as rabbi for a period of time. It is also the place where the grandfather first meets and forms an initial bond with the narrator's mother, bonding in part over the ridiculous perfume that Reynard wears. This coming-together of these four major characters imbues the synagogue with the significance of how those relationships evolve. Each of the four characters affect the other three in many significant ways over time after those first meetings—sometimes helping, sometimes hurting—and thus the Ahavas Sholom seems to represent the hub which makes those stories and relationships possible.

The Horse Skull

When the narrator's mother decides she wants to be a horse rider for Halloween of 1952, the grandmother fashions the horse part of the costume using a real horse's skull, representing the beginning of the gradual mental breakdown that the grandmother suffers, and which reaches its climax in 1957 when she sets fire to the tree in their front yard. It also seems to represent the death and trauma that lie in both the past and future of the horse skull's creation. For example, that same Halloween, the grandmother suffers a miscarriage after successfully conceiving for the first time since the war. Her daughter, the unhappy recipient of the skull, suffers a similar miscarriage in her own adulthood.

The Photo Album

The photo album is constructed through interpretation of memory, as well as the narrator's own interpretations, and thus the mother's reconstruction of the photos' memories seems to represent this narrative idea.

When the mother finds an old photo album belonging to her parents, she shares it with her son, the narrator. However, many of the pictures are missing, and she has to recall them from memory based on the inscribed captions. She then admits to the narrator that she had a brief sexual affair with Reynard when she was in her early teens and subsequently shot him in the eye with an arrow. This surprising revelation, never before told to the narrator, seems to share a distinct parallel with the missing photos in that

they are both originally withheld and then constructed through memory. This symbol also relates to the grandfather's own anecdotes, which he does not tell until the end of his life.

Spacecraft Models

Beginning with the model spacecraft the grandfather and Alfred Storch build during their time in Wallkill Prison, the grandfather pursues this passion until the end of his life. This pursuit appears to be an expression of love for his family, as it begins with his playful project of planning out a lunar colony for himself and his wife. He then builds other models, such as the LAV-One, with miniature models of himself and his family inside. This connection between his ideal of space travel and his love for his family appears to unite the two symbols in an outward expression of love from the grandfather, who is not very outspoken in more conventional ways.

The Mittelwerk

The Mittelwerk repsents the darker side of the grandfather's ideals of space travel and engineering, for von Barun's complicity with regards to programs like the Mittelwerk inherently connects space travel and human suffering.

The Mittelwerk is the German military factory at the town of Nordhuasen, where forced Jewish labor is used to build V-2 rockets. The grandfather realizes at Nordhausen that Wernher von Braun could not have been ignorant of the harm his rockets were causing, both to their victims and the people who were being forced to build them. It is also adjacent to a concentration camp, from which it draws its labor.

"Gravity's Rainbow" and "Nine Stories"

Both of these books connect to the narrator's project of attempting to fully understand his grandfather and his life based primarily on the grandfather's anecdotes. The narrator has no firsthand experience of the grandfather's stories, and thus he must do his best to interpret their significance on their own, drawing a complete picture of the man based solely on these interpretations.

As a writer, the narrator is drawn to fiction as a way of interpreting and processing information, hence the way the novel is structured; two primary examples of this are Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon and Nine Stories by J.D. Salinger. The first is a satirical novel about war, which the narrator contemplates because of how detailed it is, despite the fact that Thomas Pynchon had little to no firsthand experience with the subjects he wrote about. The second contains a story in which the young protagonist appears to share similarities with the grandfather as a boy, at least in the narrator's mind.

Sputnik

The juxtaposition between Sputnik and the prison the narrator's grandfather is in when Sputnik is launched, along with the men’s subsequent decision to build a rocket, appears to symbolize humanity’s desire for freedom, as well as its ability to remain optimistic in bad situations.

Sputnik 1 was the first satellite launched by humans into space. It was launched by the Russians and subsequently motivated the Americans to travel to the moon first. In the novel, the grandfather is in prison at the time of his launch, but he and Alfred Storch are able to see one of its discarded components streak across the night sky while standing on the prison’s roof.

Settings

San Francisco

San Francisco provides the geographical location for the novel's frame narrative. In 1989, during the grandfather's final days, he lives with the narrator's mother in her house in San Francisco. When the narrator comes to visit, the grandfather tells his life story, which provides most of the novel's narrative.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is the grandfather's boyhood home. As a young boy in Philadelphia, the grandfather spends his free time exploring the cities neighborhoods and picking fights with other boys. He also attends Drexel Tech in Philadelphia and receives his engineering degree. Later on, Philadelphia provides a source of hardship after Reynard and the narrator's father take part in a botched enterprise run by the Philadelphia Mob, resulting in legal problems for both of their families.

Germany

The grandfather's father is an immigrant from the German region of Pressburg. During World War II, the grandfather is sent to work as a spy in Germany. In the town of Vellinghausen, he meets Johannes Nickel, a German priest who gives him shelter and shares his interest in astronomy. In Nordhausen he discovers a Nazi weapons factory that employs forced Jewish labor. At Nordhausen the grandfather realizes that Wernher von Braun, the German aerospace engineer, was working with the Nazis during World War II.

New York City

New York City provides the setting for several important anecdotes in the novel. In the neighborhood of Flushing, Queens, the narrator lived with his mother and grandparents as a boy in the 1960s. The narrator recalls spending time with his grandmother there, as well as being told that his mother underwent a miscarriage. In 1957, the narrator's grandfather attacks the president of Feathercombs, Inc. after being fired as a salesman. Feathercombs is located on 57th street in New York City.

Baltimore

After serving as a spy in World War II, the grandfather goes to live with his brother Reynard Baltimore, where Reynard is a rabbi. At Reynard's synagogue, Ahavas

Sholom, The grandfather meets the grandmother and the narrator's mother for the first time.

Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey

After the grandfather and the grandmother marry, they move to Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, which is a suburb of New York City. While residing there, the grandfather works as an aerospace engineer before becoming a salesman. On Halloween of 1952, the grandmother suffers a miscarriage in their New Jersey home before undergoing a mental breakdown. Ho-Ho-Kus is also where they reside when the grandfather attack the president of Feathercombs and is subsequently sent to prison.

Lille, France

The narrator's grandmother is originally from the French town of Lille, where he family runs a tannery and sells horses. Lille is also the site of a convent of Carmelite nuns, who temporarily take care of the grandmother after she is disowned.

Wallkill Prison

Wallkill Prison is where the grandfather serves out his criminal sentence for assaulting the president of Feathercombs, Inc. Wallkill is a progressive, minimum-security prison that allows its inmates a relatively large amount of freedom. Inmates there are employed in gardening and other productive activities. At Wallkill, the grandfather meets Alfred Storch, with whom he builds a working model rocket under prison supervision.

Greystone Mental Hospital

After the grandmother's psychiatric condition worsens in 1957, she is admitted to the Greystone Mental Hospital. There, she slowly recovers and becomes active in writing and performing plays with other patients. When the grandfather comes to visit, he speaks with Dr. medved, who helps the grandfather understand some of his own psychological issues.

Themes and Motifs

Space Travel and the Moon

Space travel in Moonglow—and particularly NASA's moon landings—seem to represent both an expression of human ideals and a reminder of human folly. Feats of space travel take great cooperation and innovation and bravery to even attempt, let alone accomplish. However, the novel often focuses on the real historical figure of Wernher von Braun, an engineer who built missile rockets for the Nazis in World War II before becoming instrumental in NASA's space landings. This draws a distinct connection between the glory of space travel and its troubling origins. This tension creates a complex moral question with regards to human achievement in general, questioning whether monuments like the moon landing can really outweigh the tragedies of human history. The novel does not give a direct answer to this quandary, it simply illustrates both the dark and uplifting sides of the tension and allows the reader to make what they will of the juxtaposition.

These motifs are very important for the novel's central character, the narrator's grandfather. As a person, the grandfather craves challenge and adventure from his early years onward, and lunar travel seems to represent the next great frontier of human adventurousness. In addition, the moon is often alluded to in parts of the novel where the grandfather is introduced to someone who becomes important in his life, so in that way, the moon appears to symbolize the bright spots in a life otherwise peppered with trouble and tragedy. However, this is all challenged when the grandfather discovers the Nazi weapons factory at Nordhausen, with its forced labor and adjacent concentration camp. From then on the grandfather struggles to maintain the optimism of space flight in the face of its historical roots, but his unwillingness to give up his interest seems to stand as a testament of the novel's argument for perseverance in the face of tragedies and dark truths.

In light of the grandfather's struggle between an optimistic view of the ideals of space travel and a pessimistic view of the horror of its historical origins, the space motif is further developed as a tension between optimistic ideals and pessimistic reality. For the grandfather and the narrative, the moon remains the symbolic end goal of space travel, representing ideals of human cooperation, compassion, bravery, and achievement. However, it is impossible to ignore the horrific events associated with the genesis of modern rocket technology. Therefore, the grandfather's continued willingness to hold up space travel as an expression of human ideals reflect the narratives overall intention to support optimism in the face of the horrors of the past.

Love and Family

The narrator's family tree is a very unorthodox and sometimes troubled one, but it holds great narrative significance throughout the novel in that it represents a bastion of love

and support in the face of the plot's many tribulations. The narrator has no blood relation with the man he repeatedly calls his grandfather, he has no awareness of his grandmother's true backstory until long after she dies, and his grandfather's brother inserts himself into the family through multiple episodes of catastrophic irresponsibility. In addition, the narrator's father leaves the picture after one of these catastrophic episodes. Nevertheless, despite all instances of turmoil and all examples of unorthodoxy, the narrator maintains an intense fascination with his relatives and appears to greatly value maintaining these relationships when he can. The narrator's ultimate fascination with these relationships appears to be the way in which they are able to act as a means of support and motivation in the face of hardship. Even though these relationships are themselves occasionally the source of strife, the narrative seems to present them primarily as sources of help and comfort.

For example, the narrator's grandparents are originally drawn to each other by the correspondence of their mutually difficult pasts, and even though their marriage presents many of its own hardships, they build a strong and long-lasting relationship through mutual love of each other and the grandmother's daughter. Furthermore, this immediate family relationship is generally strengthened by the support of other family members such as Reynard and even the narrator himself, who seeks to glorify the merits of these family ties through the memoir he writes. A majority of the characters who ally themselves with the grandfather in his various life struggles are family members in one way or another. His brother, his wife, his stepdaughter, his grandson, and even a man from his grandson's father's side of the family are all instrumental at one point or another for advancing the grandfather's life in a positive direction. Without his brother Reyanrd, he would never meet his loving wife or his stepdaughter, who add an invaluable dimension of love to his life. Without his grandson, he may not have had an audience at the end of his life to whom he could confess all his sins, achievements, doubts, fears, and hopes. And without Sammy Chabon (the narrator's paternal grandfather) he may never have had a satisfying way to make a living after his term in prison.

Without the support of family members, the grandfather's story would have been a very bleak one both on an emotional and practical level. In addition to experiencing crushing loneliness, the grandfather would never have been able to obtain an engineering degree without his parents' financial support, and if he had still enlisted in the war, he would have had nowhere to go afterwards without his brother to provide temporary lodging. Thus, even though family members occasional cause problems themselves, the narrative ultimately presents them as a far greater source of help and comfort than as a source of trouble.

Death, Violence, and Trauma

The novel's narratives and backstories are often filled with instances of great tragedy and hardship, which tend to further highlight the importance of love and optimism in the face of these many unfortunate occurrences. This theme of tragedy is most apparent in the backstory of the narrator's grandmother, which is revealed at the end of the book to

be even more replete with hardship than originally thought. The death and violence she witnesses and experiences as a young woman in France during World War II has lasting effects on her psyche. For the rest of her life, she must deal not only with her tragic memories, but also with the psychiatric problems that flare up at different tragic times in her life. Ultimately, the love she shares with her daughter and husband appear to outweigh the tragedies of her past. Thus, despite the fact that she is forever shaped by the traumas of her early life, she is able to overcome these traumas through the help and support of her loved ones. Her husband makes personal and professional sacrifices to get her the psychiatric help she needs, and the emotional support she receives from her husband and daughter give her strong reasons to face her demons.

Tragedy and hardship seem to be visited upon most characters in the novel in some form or another. The grandfather loses friends in the war and witnesses great violence, Reynard and the narrator's mother become briefly but destructively entangled in a n unhealthy romance, the narrator's father brings down great legal hardship upon his family, and many supporting characters deal with trauma in places like Wallkill Prison and Europe during the war. However, the novel appears to remain ultimately hopeful in the face of these tragedies, offering bombastic, beautiful prose and illustrations of love and hope in the face of these dark moments. Whenever a character's life is taken by war or illness, the remaining characters generally come together in love and friendship in order to overcome the scars of these tragedies. The grandfather and grandmother help each other overcome personal demons, the grandfather and Alfred Storch form a comforting friendship in prison, the grandfather and Johannes Nickel form a brief but meaningful friendship despite being on opposing sides during a war, and many other relationships form against the backdrop of tragedy. Thus, the novel's repeated portrayals of personal hardships ultimately serve to highlight the power of love and optimism.

Memory and Storytelling

The novel experiments widely with the ideas of memory and personal storytelling, usually with multiple layers of perspective so that there is never one completely clear account of events. This helps to demonstrate how history and collective consciousness are an exercise in collaborative interpretation and storytelling. While the novel is structured like a purported memoir of the grandfather's life, that memoir relies heavily on the narrator's own impressions, conjectures, and interpretations of events in order to fill in gaps of detail. In this way, the grandfather's story transcends simply being an account of a man's life, and it morphs into an extended exercise in the creation of history. The narrator only has surface-level details to work with in transforming the grandfather's anecdotes into a cohesive memoir, so the narrator's own agenda and point of view become integral in shaping both the details and themes of the memoir. Thus, the malleability of memory is integral not only in structuring the novel but allowing it to demonstrate human tendencies with regards to memory and history.

This presentation of memory and personal history also carry important implications for the nature of human history in general, which is a topic that pervades the novel. For

example, the grandfather struggles his entire life with interpreting and making sense of the horrors of World War II. The Nazis' atrocities have grave effect on both his personal life and his views on space travel, which is a central passion of his. Because the grandfather's personal history is so directly connected with the lingering scars of Nazi aggression, he is repeatedly forced to confront these historical facts and attempt to deal with them. He and his wife were both greatly impacted by the horrors of Nazi combat and occupation, so their shared struggle to overcome the resulting personal demons functions as an extension of attempting to understand and interpret larger historical events. Similarly, the grandfather's continued passion for space travel depends heavily on his ability to examine the roots that space travel has in Nazi innovations and come to terms with what that implies. Ultimately, the novel's focus on interpretation of memory is directly analogous to its focus on interpretation of world history.

In the end, the novel's structure as an exercise in reconstructed memory encourages the reader to consider the merits of such an exercise. Moreover, the fact that the book is a work of fiction encourages the reader to consider memory, history, and fiction as similar forms constructing memories and testing beliefs. Often times, in attempting to a create a complete record of something, a person is obliged to use conjecture or interpretation to fill in missing information. This conjecture is similar to the creation of fiction in that both activities require imagination and critical thought on the part of the interpreter. Thus, history and memory both appear to involve aspects similar to fiction in that they require creative thought. The novel argues for these connections in its juxtapositions between truth, memory, history, and fiction.

Risk and Adventure

Risk and adventure are presented as interconnected concepts, where a character cannot experience the thrill of adventure without invoking risk of serious danger, and vice versa. Thus, the glory of adventure is dampened by the real danger and trauma it presents, while scenarios of risk also appear to add value to the lives of the characters. For example, the narrator's grandfather is given a sense of purpose by serving as a spy during World War II, but he also is exposed to many traumatic and disturbing things as a result. Conversely, after the war, the grandfather feels bored and purposeless, although he no longer has to face such danger each day. In this way, the novel appears to acknowledge that adventure is not without its inherent dangers. The most interesting parts of one's life can often be closely linked with the darkest parts.

This holds true for the supporting characters as well. For example, Reynard gives up his stable life as a rabbi in order to pursue much more questionable activities. One of his criminal schemes even appears to seduce the narrator's father into complicity, and the whole operation brings down many negative consequences for their families. Another example of this would be the mother's relationship with Reynard. As she tells the narrator of her brief affair with Reynard, she does not seem too troubled by the memory, although it certainly caused emotional fallout for her afterwards, as well as the fallout of a physical injury for Reynard. The narrator, meanwhile, generally seems to experience risk and adventure vicariously, although he is still very drawn to it. He maintains a

consistent interest in the trials, tribulations, and thrills of his family's lives, as evidenced by his rapt attention and thorough retelling of these stories to the reader.

The book's presentation of the interconnectedness of risk and adventure appears to be a comment on how no worthy undertaking in life is without risk, and that many valuable things can be found even in dangerous or traumatic circumstances. This appears to heighten the book's optimism. The book's presentation of the consequences of risk may seem somewhat pessimistic, but they ultimately serve to heighten the book's realism and, in turn, its argument for optimism through adversity. By dealing with the consequences of risk, it shows that they can often be overcome, and that adventure is generally worth taking risks, for adventurous undertakings are what lead to the growth of individuals.

Styles

Point of View

Despite the fact that most stories in the novel are from the life of the narrator's grandfather, the book is technically told entirely from the narrator's point of view, as he is the one interpreting these stories and recounting them to the reader. The narrator often interjects with his own opinions and interpretations, and logic would imply that he also fabricates many small details, as he is only hearing the anecdotes in a conversational setting. This even seems to apply to anecdotes in which the narrator is recounting his own memories, since memory is generally fuzzy and imperfect, so it is necessary for the narrator to fill in hazy details and filter everything through his present perspective.

However, if one wishes to temporarily set aside the narrative voice and simply treat the narrator as an omniscient entity, then the book is told from several points of view. Each anecdote has a central character, and the narrator generally attempts to fuse itself with that character's point of view. For example, in stories where the grandfather is the central figure, the narrator often takes it upon itself to guess the grandfather's thoughts and feelings in each moment, and so one may view said anecdote as taken on the grandfather's direct perspective. This principle mostly applies to the grandfather, since he is the central figure in most of the book's narratives, but it can also be applied to the grandmother and the narrator himself.

This complex, layered approach to perspective functions as a narrative presentation of memory and anecdotal storytelling. When someone tells a personal story, it must pass through the filter of the storyteller's memory, and then the filter of the listener's interpretations. The narrator of Moonglow provides an additional degree of separation since the narrator is a listener who then in turn relates the original stories to the reader, who finally will form their own interpretations. This acts as a commentary on storytelling in general while also allowing the novel great creative freedom in how it presents its stories.

Language and Meaning

One of the most striking things about Moonglow is that the tone in which it is written is so playful, inventive, and energetic, and yet it deals with many extremely somber topics, such as war, trauma, family struggles, aging, and morality. On one hand, this disparity seems to function by making the dark subject matter more palatable and engaging for the reader. On the other hand, as more and more of the dark themes and subjects are revealed, the more prominent they become against the background of the narrator's entertaining tone and structure. In addition, the text's generally upbeat and adventurous tone often seems to reframe the story's darker elements with a sense of optimism, as well as heighten the poetry of the moments that are inherently optimistic to begin with.

The book's story, while dealing with many instances of great hardship, ultimately stands as a testament to the perseverance of its characters in spite of those hardships. Thus, the vigorous momentum that the text captures tonally appears to serve as a parallel to that optimism and perseverance.

The characterization of the book's tone as energetic is based in many different characteristics that the text displays throughout. First of all, the writing style is quite verbose, meaning it does not describe scenes or characters with minimal detail. It seeks to describe its events and characters with complex detail given in inventive ways. The narration never states things plainly, but rather seeks to illustrate its plot through quirky details and inventive, nonlinear narrative choices. In addition, the text grants itself a wide scope, moving easily through many decades and many very different locations, empowering the narration to portray the intimate story of a family in an epic and adventurous scope, as the events that shape this family do have connections to large events and deep moral questions.

Structure

Moonglow is structured as a series of nonlinear anecdotes, with the narrator's grandfather acting the source of most of these stories. However, the narrator himself is the one relaying all of these anecdotes to the reader. Most sections of the narrative are told by the grandfather to the narrator, but they are presented to the reader in the narrator's voice and through the narrator's interpretations. In addition, a few of the book's anecdotes are recollections of the narrator's own experiences, as told by the narrator himself. The book is written entirely in past tense, because even when the narrator relates stories about his own experiences, he is reflecting on those experiences from the present in which he is composing the book.

Most of the novel concerns the life of the narrator's grandfather, since the book is framed around the personal stories he tells as he is dying and under the influence of painkillers. The novel opens with a specific story in which the grandfather attacks the president of the company where he was working in 1957. At first, this is simply a striking and mysterious anecdote, as the only thing the reader knows about the grandfather's personality in the first chapter is that he is generally calm and quiet. However, as the book unfolds, revealing more stories about the grandfather in a nonlinear fashion, this anecdote becomes clearer in that it functions as a climax concerning several long-term tensions in the grandfather's life. His wife is dealing with serious psychiatric issues, he has been forced to give up his career in aerospace engineering, and both he and his wife are still affected by trauma related to World War II. The novel uses this first anecdote as an anchoring point off of which to gradually fill in more detail about the grandfather's life, both before and after his attack on the president of that company.

It is also important to note that, while the book contains many self-contained anecdotes that each occupy only one chapter, there are also continuous, multi-chapter stories that are sometimes temporarily interrupted by single-narrative chapters. Examples of extended anecdotes would be the grandfather's service in World War II, the story of the

grandfather's relationship with Sally Sichel, and a major anecdote concerning Halloween of 1952. The first of these is presented in two multi-chapter parts, the second is presented in several isolated chapters throughout the book, and the third is told in an uninterrupted stream of chapters. This serves to provide connections and parallels between different parts of the grandfather's life by rapidly switching between different time periods.

Quotes

This is how I heard the story.
-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: This is the very first sentence of the novel, and while at first it appears to specifically reference the first anecdote, it carries significant implications for the structure and themes of the entire novel. The novel is mostly made up of stories that the narrator heard second-hand, so the significance and interpretations of those stories is heavily altered by the narrator's own point of view. This first line subtly references that narrative dynamic.

You went looking for trouble, and you found it. Consistent behavior produces predictable results.
-- Colonel Bill Donovan (chapter 4)

Importance: One of the grandfather's main characteristics, especially in his younger years, is that he is drawn to trouble. Donovan articulates this impression of the grandfather multiple times in this exchange. This trait defines many of the grandfather's major choices throughout his life, and Donovan's statements signal the reader to take note of this character trait in the grandfather.

She had never been happier than with the sisters of the Lille Carmel.
-- Narration (chapter 5)

Importance: The early life of the narrator's grandmother is marked by many severe instances of trauma, so this mention of her happiness living amongst nuns stands quite prominently against the background of tragedy. She even runs to a convent during her mental breakdown in 1952, saying it is the only place she can be safe. This symbol of brief happiness helps to highlight the trauma the grandmother has experienced in her life.

He thought that if he took on the job of loving this broken woman, some measure of sense or purpose might be returned to his life.
-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: Although the grandfather does not know the grandmother very well at first, he is attracted to her by a vague sense that she is troubled in some way. His wish to save her functions in part as an expression of his need for adventure. However, this quote also recognizes the feeling of purposelessness that he faces after the war, where he always had a specific mission.

The thirty minutes or so that he spent with the rocket in the woods, however, was time stolen from the war, time redeemed.
-- Narration (chapter 15)

Importance: This scene helps to further develop the grandfather's view of rockets as instruments of grace and beauty. This moment is described in almost religious terms, and it becomes clear to the reader that the grandfather is greatly interested in rockets for their power to elevate mankind, both literally and figuratively.

He would put his hand on von Braun's shoulder the way the old priest's gnarled paw now lay benedictive on his own. He would transmit to von Braun the only message lonely slaves of gravity might send: We see you – we are here.
-- Narration (chapter 15)

Importance: Before the grandfather arrives at Nordhausen, he believes that Wernher von Braun is an unwilling participant in the Nazi war effort, his innovations of rocketry being adopted for war against his will. In this moment, the grandfather expresses his belief as a young man that von Braun was a pioneer and hero, but this view is defeated by the grandfather's discovery of the horrors of the Mittelwerk at Nordhausen.

…the book's depiction of the European theater of operations, the horror of Nordhausen, the experience of rocket attacks, and so many other things Pynchon had never lived through or seen.
-- Narration (chapter 22)

Importance: This quotation acts as a reflection on the novel's own structural motif in which fictional events are presented to the reader as factual. Additionally, the fictional narrator often adds invented details and his own interpretations; this quotation implies that his purpose in doing so is to make the experiences feel authentic, even though they are not his own.

The circumstances being that when I found him, I was planning to, y'know," he said. "Kill the guy." "Right.
-- Grandfather and Narrator (chapter 22)

Importance: This represents a dramatic shift in the grandfather's view of von Braun. He has been robbed of any illusions of von Braun's innocence or ignorance, and so the grandfather decides to take justice into his own hands. This helps to re-emphasize the significance of the Mittelwerk and its implications for how the grandfather views the history of rockets.

Doc, I'm an engineer…Engineers spend a lot of time on what's called failure analysis… You what to find out why it failed, that's part of your job…Maybe I used to look at my wife in that regard…But I don't want to think of her like that anymore, you know, looking for the bad capacitor…I accept her.
-- Grandfather (chapter 31)

Importance: This declaration represents a very striking change from the beginning of the grandfather's relationship with the grandmother. Initially, he sees her as broken and in need of fixing, but in this scene, he seems to realize that he and his wife are in part defined by their traumas. He sees that they must overcome the negatives effects of

those traumas through love and support rather than trying to erase all traces of it, as it partially defines their past and their personalities.

To the extent that the cold war was fought by means of symbols, Wernher von Braun had delivered the greatest blow ever struck by either side. Usually, you could rely on Americans to believe the worst about their heroes, but nobody wanted to hear that America's ascent to the moon had been made with a ladder of bones.
-- Narration (chapter 39)

Importance: Not only does this statement solidify the moon landing's place as a crowning achievement in American history, it also provides vivid imagery to highlight the moral quandary that the grandfather faces. The moon landing in many ways represents the fulfillment of the grandfather's own ideals, but the achievement seems compromise by the fact that the technology has roots in the violence of World War II and the aggression of the Nazis.

To be honest, the man had a tendency to play the martyr." "He was comfortable in the role," I said.
-- Sally Sichel and Narrator (chapter 35)

Importance: As Sally Sichel and the narrator reflect on the grandfather as a person, they recognize his tendency to take on difficult missions for the sake of others. Even as an old man, he does not hesitate to hunt for a python in a swamp, thus possibly sacrificing his own safety for Sally's benefit. This provides another interesting dimension to his tendency of looking for trouble, because that tendency is here reframed as a wish to do good things for others.

'[Von Braun] died a couple years later. I forget what the cause was, something painful. I heard he was in a hell of a lot of pain.' I waited thinking he might be about to append something along the lines of All of which he richly deserved…He didn't say anything.
-- Grandfather and Narration (chapter 36)

Importance: This scene represents the very last instance in which the grandfather wrestles with the tension between the glory of the moon landing and the horror of its origins. Von Braun personifies that tension, and the grandfather's refusal to declare von Braun's guilt or innocence seems to imply that he has not reached a conclusion. This leaves the ambiguous moral question open for the deliberation of the reader.