

# **The Mezzanine: A Novel Study Guide**

## **The Mezzanine: A Novel by Nicholson Baker**

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# Plot Summary

The Mezzanine: A Novel is a stream-of-consciousness novel which covers the thoughts of Howie, a 1980s mid-level office worker, during his one hour lunch break. Howie works at the mezzanine, one of the mid-level floors in his office building, and his job is unclear. We never learn the author's full name, his real job, anything much about his family or life. Instead, Howie serially recounts his thoughts, one after another, as they come to him.

Howie's thoughts jump around events in his life, but are all anchored around the events that transpire during his lunch hour, from his ride up the escalator, to his trip to the men's room, his brief conversation with an office secretary, the snapping of his left shoelace, going to the CVS down the street to buy new shoelaces, and reading Marcus Aurelius's Meditations after eating a hotdog, a cookie and drinking some milk for lunch. Perhaps the most important two events are the escalator ride, where the reader both meets Howie and leaves him in the book. The escalator forms bookends around all the thoughts of the book and one might see the book as one entire extended thought that is generated by the escalator.

It is difficult to say what the point of The Mezzanine is. It seems to have several aims: first, one subtle claim in the book is that life is really full of trivialities, tangential thoughts, eddies within common thoughts, new thoughts and so on that do not neatly fit into the pattern of an ordinary description of a life event in the news or a novel. Even great novels misrepresent reality by leaving out the wholly random and mundane mental events that occupy most of our internal mental lives. The author aims to represent our chaotic mental lives by taking brief thoughts, slowing down to examine them and then expanding them into a book. The book is also about the relationship between the meaningless and the meaningful or between the pointless and the profound. The book clearly illustrates that even our silliest thoughts are embedded within a context of thought, experience and conceptual structure that is deeply influenced by one's life events and that the briefest examination of the context of one's thoughts would reveal this.

Finally, in an important sense, The Mezzanine is a coming-of-age story, but in one of the most unusual ways the reader may encounter in a novel. Howie is only in his mid-twenties in the book and has an experience described in the book where he believes he enters adulthood; it occurs when he notices that his life has become straightforwardly mundane. What disturbs him is that the vast majority of his new thoughts still derived from his childhood, yet his childhood insights were sentimental, nostalgic and full of error. To grow up, he must make a concerted effort not only to "de-sentimentalize" his childhood memories but to focus on having detailed, new thoughts in order to ensure that one day (when he is forty, he believes) he will have a "new Majority" of new adult thoughts that exceed the number of his new childhood thoughts. On this day, Howie will be a man.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Howie, a young office worker, enters his workplace. He takes the escalator to the intermediate level of the building, also known as the mezzanine and sits down at his office. On the way, he observes what he regards as the beauty of the escalators. He transfers his CVS bag to his other hand and cannot remember what is inside, and then makes some observations about what carrying small bags signals to others. At lunch, he visited a Papa Gino's for food and bought some milk to go with his cookie. The attendant, Donna, asked him if he wanted a straw, which leads Howie to observe that he had become uninterested in using straws for anything other than milkshakes for some time. In a lengthy, two page footnote, Howie recounts the first time he remembers seeing a straw in his soda can. In his childhood in 1970, Howie thought that the purpose of straws was to prevent one from having to put down one's food in order to have a drink. He comments on the evolution of straws.

Howie then declines the straw but asks for a small bag, noting that Donna appears embarrassed that she had messed up; it is clear she is new to the job. While he waits, Howie wonders why he asked for a bag in the first place. Most people decline bags when offered, but Howie observes that he flouted the convention. He does this because he has gotten in the habit of using a bag to carry pornographic magazines, so as to hide them from view. Developing a habit of asking for bags makes it appear that he has nothing to hide, but then he observes that he likes having a bag so his hands are free to touch things. Back at the bottom of the escalator, grabbing his book and bag together, he then notices that a pair of shoelaces are in his CVS bag.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 recounts Howie's train of thought from entering his office building to his reaching the top of the escalator, which must have taken place within a minute-long stretch of time. It will become clear to the reader that *The Mezzanine* is an unusual book. It will turn out to focus on an extremely short period of time, and is written in stream-of-consciousness format. One of the aims of the book, as we shall see, is to follow the random thoughts that people have to the conclusions people would reach if they had the time. *The Mezzanine* is a novel that unpacks our quick succession of thoughts within short spans of time, showing that they possess a marvelous contextual complexity. In fact, the author says just this, that the "specific lunch hour" described in the book is composed of a "fairly long sequence of partially forgotten, inarticulable experiences, finally now reaching a point that Paid attention to it for the first time."



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Howie opens the chapter noting that his left shoelace had broken just before he went to lunch, while he was working on a memo. He had his foot out of his shoe, rubbing his foot on the carpet and describes how much he loved the feeling of the carpet on his foot. Howie notes that his coworkers' shoes squeak when they walk on linoleum, but they now have carpet. He also claims that he can often tell who the person is by their foot-pounding, especially Dave, his officemate. Howie's foot slipped out of his shoe on its own; Howie recalls no conscious willing of this behavior. He realizes that when one rubs one's sock on the carpet, one only feels the inside of the sock, which can be quite nice, and in a footnote he describes his method of pulling on socks.

A few minutes till noon, Howie stops working, removes his earplugs, finishes his morning coffee, and staples a memo to another memo, the former of which references Abe, his manager and considers whether he would forward the memos to Abelardo. He begins to tie his shoe, when Dave, Sue and Steve—his coworkers—wave at him. Since he is tying his shoe, he is unable to wave in response, so he calls out to them, but then due to his distraction he pulls his shoelace too tight and it snaps. He then describes in great detail his combined reaction of incredulity and resignation and gives examples of other things that make him feel similarly, such as getting to a top step, believing there to be another one, and then awkwardly stamping one's foot onto the top of the staircase. He instinctively blames Dave, Sue and Steve but realizes this is irrational. The shoelace incident causes him to remember that on the previous day, his right shoelace snapped while he was getting ready for work. This strikes him as an odd coincidence, and it excites him.

Howie plays with the lace and tries to re-lace his shoes; as he is doing so he struggles to remember other memorizes of tying his shoes to see whether one of his shoes came untied more often than the other, but he cannot remember. This is due to the fact that one only remembers beginning to master a technique, after which one forgets the practice of it. Humans master shoe tying before most other things. The chapter ends as Howie recounts how he learned to tie his shoes. Apparently Howie added two "substeps" which personalized the procedure.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

The entirety of Chapter 2 is devoted to trains of thought tied to the breaking of Howie's left shoelace just before lunch. The reader should note that Chapter 2 itself is a tangential and branching thought that arose from the mere observation of the shoelaces in Howie's CVS bag. As a result, Chapter 2 takes the reader no further forward in the present. Instead, it primarily recounts how Howie's shoelace broke. However, we learn some things about Howie; for instance, that he is excited by coincidences, and



apparently is proud of himself for personalizing the process of tying his shoes. These observations appear to indicate that Howie has a flare for the creative, but it is admittedly hard to tell given how subtle the observations are. It is important that the reader know the book has no plot, but is merely a description of thoughts tied to events, and the thoughts that arise from those thoughts, and so on. It is in some ways an illustration of the profundity of human thought processes and about the great weight of information they contain and the profound complex relationships they bear towards one another.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Howie does not make the sort of technical progress he makes learning to tie his shoelaces until he is twenty, when he learns that L brushes her tongue. He never understood this was even a possibility. When he starts dating L, she tells him that to keep her breath fresh, she brushes her tongue and Howie is revolted. Another major advance is learning to apply deodorant while he is dressed, but this is a digression.

Howie jumps to his sixth "advance" which occurs in his second apartment following college. He discovers that some people clean in order to improve their mood. So one day he tries it, cleaning his room, sweeping, and so on. Just as he finishes, L calls and he shares his cleaning with her. She has just done the same thing and they discuss what was great about it. The seventh advance involves the purchase of a rubber stamp, which deeply impresses him. Howie describes some of the letters he sends with the rubber stamp.

His eighth advance is the last prior to his laces; it is his discovery of four reasons why it is good for brain cells to die. One reason holds that the brain is pruning excess processing capacity, another that the best neurons survive the onslaught of booze, etc. in order to make the brain stronger as a whole. The third reason holds that the neurons which do made imitation possible, and the fourth holds that neuron death is necessary to deepen and increase the subtlety of one's ideas. Howie claims that all of his advances could be brought to bear on his current shoelace predicament.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 describes Howie's various "advances" or the advances in cognition that help him to see the world in a new light and give him tools to make his life much easier. These advances range from learning to tie his shoes (his earliest advance), to learning that one can brush one's tongue, to discovering four theories as to why it is good for some neurons to die. Howie claims that the advances could be relevant to solving his shoelace predicament, although the chapter ends with this note. It is not clear how this could be. The chapter also introduces the reader to L, Howie's college girlfriend. They appear to have had a delightful romance, at least for a time.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Howie finishes his repair knot and then finishes tying his shoe. He then begins to observe his hands engaged in the tying, seeing them as the hands "of a mature person." His shoes no longer look new either. Howie stands up, rolls back his chair and steps towards his door, next doubting that his daily activity of tying his shoes could have caused his shoelace to snap all on its own and considers a theory he calls the "walking-flexion" model.

In a footnote, doorknobs are discussed, particularly the doorknobs in Howie's childhood home. The two-page footnote then transitions to discussing ties, and how proud he is of the tie he buys himself a year after he takes his current job. He expresses doubts about the walking-flexion model and then walks to his co-worker Tina's cube, noting on the sign-out board that he is "out" to lunch. Tina asks if he has signed the poster for Ray. Apparently Tina is rather alert, manning phones for the other two secretaries in their department, Julie and Deanne. Howie considers the origins of support-staff sayings, one of which is displayed in her office, "If You Can't Get Out of It, Get Into It!"

Howie asks Tina what happened to Ray, the janitor. Tina tells him that Ray hurt his back moving a swimming pool and that he may be out for some time. After some brief flirting, Howie pulls out a pen to sign the poster for Ray, while she reaches for a pen at the same time to give him. This produces a kind of confusion that Howie comments on. He signs the poster and notes its floral layout. He then comments on the petal of the fourth flower on the poster and that he is concerned Ray does not like him much.

Tina then asks him if he is off to lunch, and Ray says that he is off to buy shoelaces, noting the coincidence. However, Tina is interrupted with a phone call. Howie pokes about a bit in Tina's office first, though, noting her chrome date-stamper. He has sometimes watched her use it. When Tina finishes the phone call, they awkwardly resume their conversation and banter a bit. Howie asks her where he can buy shoelaces and she suggests CVS. With that, Howie leaves to go to the men's room and then to lunch.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 covers Ray leaving his office for lunch, going to Tina the secretary's office and signing out. It also records their brief conversation, at the end of which Howie learns from Tina that he can find shoelaces at the CVS. The chapter, like the others, is full of associated thoughts. Howie continues, however, to consider why his shoelaces broke. At the beginning of the chapter, he develops a theory that shoelaces wear out at once due to walking with both of them, but this is later contradicted when Tina notes that both smoke alarms broke at the same time, despite lack of use. The significance of this





main thread is that Howie continues to be preoccupied with explaining the coincidence surrounding his shoelaces; he is unable to accept that it was a simple coincidence but probes for a deeper explanation. The chapter also introduces the reader to Ray the janitor who has hurt his back and Tina, one of the office secretaries who flirts with Howie.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

The story returns to Howie on the escalator; he comments that he loves escalators in part because he loved them as a child. He very much liked "systems of local transport" generally speaking, and he then gives some examples at length. The pleasure of the escalator, then, consists of various different perceptions loosely strung together over time in Howie's mind. He then recounts one with his mother and sister, and claims that 70 to 80% of his escalator memories come from when he was a child.

However, lately Howie is losing his love for the escalator, due to an experience several weeks before while driving behind a garbage truck. He finds the paint covering old patches of rust in the back of the truck beautiful and recalls that as a child he loved anything filthy. Yet at thirty, the garbage in front of him reminds him of something else. He decides that the phrase "when I was little" throws one back to a less accurate picture of the world. Nostalgia is often misunderstood; it is not the pleasure experienced at the time that matters, but the pleasure of the recall and the advances made from the recall, so Howie commits to himself not to confuse these pleasures in the future. No more "far-away" looks when these stories are recounted.

Later in the day, Howie gives himself a treat for his new commitment, a Cream Cheese and Sliced Olive packaged sandwich in a convenience store. He had stored it, only to find it again in the morning, noting that it too looked beautiful, like other garbage. From these previous diatribes, Howie moves forward to accomplish two goals: showing that considering the escalator is something worthwhile to consider, and to maintain his commitment to not sentimentalize his commentary with the confused pleasure of nostalgia for childhood.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Howie aims in Chapter 5 to justify his thinking about the escalator and to remain faithful to his commitment to recognize that the pleasure of nostalgic memories is due to the context of the memory in the present, not due to the pleasure it brought in the past. It becomes clear in the passage that Howie is aware that the reader may wonder how Howie could justify wasting so much time on a thought as trivial as that of the escalator. "Why focus on what matters not at all?" Howie appears to imagine the reader accusing him.

His justification, as with everything else in the book, is complex and involves surrounding his focus on the escalator with what he regards as an important realization about the purpose of nostalgia, the falsity of childhood memories, and how these memories nonetheless serve an important, present purpose. One point of *The Mezzanine* is that the trivial is embedded in the same network of ideas, memories and concepts as

the profound and important; further, conceiving of the important can be accomplished by means of conceiving of the trivial.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Howie is feeling like stating his feelings frankly: he really cannot resist his sentimentality. He resists thinking of the escalator in a sentimental light, telling himself that they are quite ordinary and remains the same for some time. Yet other things in his life have undergone dramatic change and altered his life in subtle and complicated ways. For instance, he no longer enjoys drinking from milk cartons, and the carton he bought at Papa Gino's is purchased only to see if he can regain his old childhood pleasure. He loved that pleasure because it was associated with the first time he could remember milk cartons in the store, alongside other mundane items.

The previous system of milk-delivery had also fascinated him as well, however. This memory is tied to the former one. His focus on the milk bottles informs him that the milk-delivery industry is going under because a milk company bought up another milk company's bottles, and is using them. Howie then describes the disappearance of the milkman, perhaps in 1971. However, he does miss them at the time, but is instead embarrassed to be among the last family to utilize milk-delivery services. He then recounts the trouble family members have adjusting to the milk carton, which leads to a footnote diatribe about the ice cube tray.

All of these memories derive from his simple milk carton and prevent him from focusing merely on his thankfulness for modern milk packaging; he is eager to think about milk so often as an adult that thoughts about milk lose their sense of sentimentality altogether. He now opposes milk as a beverage, having believed in college that it produced mucus when one had a cold. Sometimes afterward he thinks it gives him bad breath and L is allergic to milk, with it giving her bloody diarrhea. He then discusses the details of L's allergy and distaste for milk generally. He wants more than one unit of milk consideration in his adult life. Howie wishes to avoid relying so heavily on childhood memories for his cognition. He wants to know how long it will take before "the rule of nostalgia" ends and his "true Majority" begins.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 explains to the reader Howie's obsession with de-sentimentalizing his memories. He finds childhood memories faulty and inaccurate; further, they distract one from true adulthood. Howie's focus on his milk memory is meant to aid him in eliminating the sentimentality of his thoughts about milk cartons. He strongly desires to acquire more "units" of adult milk thoughts in order to bring about the full abolition of sentimentality associated with milk. He feels that he languishes under "the rule of nostalgia." To free himself, he wishes to become an adult by relying primarily on adult thoughts, memories and ideas in order to think via parallels, analogies and other forms of conceptual expression not tied to his childhood.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Howie becomes an adult when he is twenty-three, after being on the job in the mezzanine for only four months. He owns only five shirts at the time, and has planned out his dry cleaning accordingly. In the morning, he has a package containing three of his newly cleaned shirts. Howie opens the package eagerly to greet his shirts, as if they are old friends. He chooses one of his white shirts to wear. He then discusses his dressing habits and how he adjusts them to make his workday easier. While considering how to relate his tucked T-shirt to his pants, he realizes that he can deodorize himself with his shirt on through a space in an open button. He is overcome with a feeling akin to "Balboa or Copernicus." In a long footnote he describes a similar sense of discovery when he sees how ably his mother turns an inside-out shirt right-side in.

Howie then walks to the subway, happily. His shoes are new at the time, incidentally. While on the subway, he laments the fact that white bread has fallen out of favor, particularly because it looks good as toast. He then considers the details of toasting white bread and applying butter and considers the reasons why slicing bread horizontally had evolved into slicing it diagonally. Howie fears he will be late to work due to his watch being stolen. He observes various watches on the subway, and finds women's watches too nondescript and small. He admires a man's cuff which he notices has undergone a superior starching to his own cuff.

It is that moment that Howie feels as if his greatest period of growth as a human has ended. He has entered an "intermediate" or slower stage of growth. The shock does not cause him to move and his realization does not upset him. He is a man who says "actually" too often and thinks about toast in a subway car. The new discoveries in his life will be small and he has not reached the great level he had hoped he would.

On his escalator ride, Howie attempts to recall his feeling during the revelation of adulthood and thinks he has experienced something of great enough magnitude to reward himself with coffee and a delicious muffin. He is anxious to get to the office to speak with his co-workers Dave, Sue, Tina, Abe, Steve and the others. He will tell them the story of how he realized that his personal growth has slowed, about how he left the subway as a new man. He then enters work.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 brings out the importance of Howie's stream of consciousness explicitly. It is the story of Howie's realization that he has become an adult. One day on the subway, he notices that his thoughts are mundane and that the discoveries of his remaining years will remain small and also continue to attenuate. He thinks more about ordinary

things. He is pained by this thought, but he feels as if it has advanced his maturity and helps him to be reborn as a new man.

This realization occurs when he is twenty-three, but he is eager to return from lunch at the present time in order to recount the significance of his recollection to his coworkers. We see that the significance of the escalator-related thoughts is indeed much more than the mundane. Howie has come to the profound by means of the mundane; in fact, in one way, it is the fact of his mundane thoughts that has led him to a profound insight. The mundane has not simply led to profundity, but is itself the object of a profound discovery.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Later in the day, Howie realizes that he is not as set in stone as he thought. However, his childhood still ended at twenty-three. From this point, each day Howie assumes he has a constant number of new thoughts and each new thought maintains enough integrity that it can be recalled later through network connections in the brain. In a footnote, Howie notes that he decides this when he is driving home from work in the dark. To reach majority reliance on new thoughts from adulthood, Howie only must have the same number of new thoughts each day until he is forty. The new thoughts will then be a majority. This becomes his goal—to reach neurological middle age.

At his current age, which now appears to be twenty-five, 12% of his thoughts are adult; Howie realizes that he must accept this. He then realizes no one is on the escalator he just got off, and he realizes he could play one of his favorite games, pretending that if someone else got on either escalator that he would be electrocuted, which causes him to grow more excited internally as he gets close to the end. Sometimes he loses the game and describes one such occasion with a man named Bob Leary.

After getting off the escalator, Howie passes through the "bank" of elevators, describing the scenes along the way. He also notes the mailroom and speculates how he will not be able to stand being a mail man. He reaches a position where he can view the escalators' profile and watches a man drag a rag up the escalator to clean it. What a fun job, Howie thinks. Howie speaks to him about Ray being out, and Howie mentions Tina's get-well poster for him. After the man leaves the escalator, Howie gets on it again, reflecting on his method of stepping on it. He is proud of this skill, just like his ability to tie his shoes without looking.

He reflects on safety with regard to escalators. People often think their shoelaces can get caught in them, leading to death, but in a lengthy four page footnote he explains that this is false. In the same footnote, he explains in detail about how he learns about the way traction works on them, and then makes many associations with grooves on various other objects to those on the escalator steps, such as those in records or on ice-skates. He desires to gain a detailed knowledge of the relationship between one surface and another, much as he had with respect to his sock and the carpet. He then describes an incident that raises this issue and is associated with his family listening to the My Fair Lady record, reflecting on the record-cleaning system they used. After the footnote, Howie describes how he would deliberately leave his shoelaces untied on escalators while in high school to demonstrate their safety. As an adult, Howie will retie his shoes on the escalator.

The reader may expect Howie to think of shoelace wear at this point in the afternoon, but because the matter has already occurred to him, he passes over it. He only remembers it as he is writing the book. Even in his office afterward when he is replacing



his shoes, he does not think of the problem that had bothered him so much earlier. He instead considers whether he should put four hundred dollars towards eliminating the debt on his Chase Visa card, but decides on two hundred. He once enjoys thinking of finances, particularly of viewing the records of his transactions. The shoelace theory is only recalled just before lunch after Howie speaks with Tina.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The chapter begins by focusing on Howie's calculation about how long it will take him thinking new thoughts until a majority of his new thoughts are from his post-twenty-third-year adulthood. He will need to be forty years old. He speculates further on escalators, and spends a four page footnotes discussing thoughts related to escalator safety, which include his fascination with the contact between distinct surfaces, such as his shoes with an escalator step, his socks on the carpet, or the contact between surfaces when a record plays on a record player.

The chapter ends with Howie noting that it may seem unusual that while playing his game on the escalator or weaving his new shoelaces into his shoes that he does not think of his shoelace theory from earlier chapters. However, he explains that it is not so odd, given that he prefers to think of finances around lunch time. Only after speaking with Tina, will Howie think once more about his shoelace theory.

The chapter contains more important information about Howie's drive to become an adult, and further justifications and observations regarding his interest in escalators. Further, we can see The Mezzanine now in light of Howie's goal of thinking mostly adult thoughts.





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Howie opens wondering whether lunch hour is properly said to begin when one enters the men's room or leaves it. Perhaps it is work, but perhaps not. He is allotted six bathroom breaks a day in this "decompression" chamber. Howie then marvels at the level of technical skill exhibited in the bathroom—the entire process is full of deeply internalized but complex habits, such as clearing one's throat, adjusting his tie, and so on. Further, many machines are at work there as well.

The room may be more complex than rooms with major machines in them, Howie observes, next illustrating his point. He also prefers the "mazelet" that one must walk through to the bathroom to the double-door system. He notices that corporate bathrooms exhibit various differences from home bathrooms, and suspects there are reasons behind the differences. He notes toilet paper perforations and praises to the sky the individual or group that invented them in a footnote.

Howie describes the location of the mezzanine's corporate men's bathroom. It is near an elevator, and sometimes someone is lucky enough to enjoy the privacy of being in an elevator alone. He then describes some silly things both he and L had done when in elevators alone. Vending machines line the walls near it instead of elevator doors, but Howie ignores them until he needs a snack. They possess their own complexities, almost office buildings in miniature. Howie describes the uniqueness of the vending machines in the hallway next. In a two page footnote, he describes seeing later versions of one of the models he observes. The last vending machine in the hallway is new and impressive. However, it has its design flaws.

Despite not noticing the vending machines most of the time, they do play a role in his consciousness to a low degree that gives him a sense of continuity. However, he laments that the cigarette machines are replaced with another food vending machine.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 concerns how impressed Howie is with the mechanical engineering in the modern corporate bathroom. He describes various features of it in grand detail, speculating that the mechanical engineering there might be more impressive than anywhere else in the office building. He then discusses the differences between corporate and home bathroom, but realizes he can only speculate on the reasons behind the differences. After this discussion, he describes the location of the bathroom in the mezzanine and notes various features of the architecture around it. He spends some time focused on vending machines. It is unclear how this chapter fits in with the others; perhaps it continues the theme of packing adult thoughts into Howie's mind in order for him to achieved adulthood, but it simply is not clear.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 begins in the men's room with the flush of a urinal. A man whistles "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" and Howie points out that tunes like that can float about in the men's room all day through propagation. Howie opens the men's room door rather forcefully, startling the whistler, Alan Pilna. He navigates his way into the bathroom; a corporate VP—Les Guster—is brushing his teeth in the sink next to him. The act is unbusinesslike, and it surprises Howie that Guster has the gall to do it.

Next Howie goes to the urinal and begins to relax into the experience. However, then Don Vanci starts in two urinals next to him, and then Guster turns off the water. Bathroom sounds filled the air, newspapers, sighs, urinating, farting. In a footnote, Howie notes how surprised he is at how unashamed men are of their bodily functions in the bathroom.

Howie is unnerved by Don because he has not started urinating and now Don will know it. He will wonder what Howie's problem is; then, much to Howie's embarrassment, Don starts urinating "forcefully." Howie blushes and is upset that he cannot relax. Later he will have to come back to pee when no one is around. He has been in similar situations forty-five times before, but he then discovers that if he imagines urinating on the man next to him, he can always pee. He then pees with a "world-conquering rope of ammonia" and finishes just as Don does. They greet each other, then Les and Don leave the bathroom without washing their hands.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 ostensibly covers the social subtleties of the men's bathroom. He describes how small tunes whistled can propagate among men throughout the day; he notices how much courage it takes for Les Guster to brush his teeth in the bathroom and appear so unbusinesslike, but the main conflict of the chapter is Howie's difficulty beginning to urinate when others can hear him.

It often embarrasses him, but he has discovered a trick for how to avoid this. He succeeds peeing vis-à-vis his coworker Don, and feels that he has avoided humiliation. He notes that Don leaves the bathroom without washing his hands, which is a significant faux pas. This chapter, like the previous one, does not seem to build on any obvious theme save the general one of illustrating the connections between various thoughts and the secondary theme of increasing the ratio of Howie's original adult thoughts to his childhood thoughts.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

After Howie finishes urinating, he has the four sinks to himself. He washes his hands and notes the fine style of their paper-towel dispenser and paper-towels, which he claims are an honor to use. As Howie comments on other machines that aid in the hand-washing and drying process, he turns to the hot air hand dryer, noting how long it takes to dry one's hands.

He used to read the text the World Dryer Corporation provided to pass the time, but he now dislikes the text. It claims that one of the purposes of the hot air hand dryer is to save the world from towel waste, but Howie sees through the lie. He is disgusted by the dishonesty of it all. The Dryer people also forget that the purposes of hand towels are multi-faceted, stretching beyond hand drying. Instead, many just use toilet paper, which proves to be just as wasteful.

This was why Howie loves the beautiful hand towel dispenser in the corporate bathroom. He is surprised his company can afford it, given how much their workers are paid and how little value they bring in. He decides the best explanation is that the corporate office wants to signal that it is better than "hot dryer" places; the dispenser signals their status. He fwwla the same way about how new employees are pampered with products just after they are hired, especially with one thousand copies of their own business card. Despite his worries, however, he freely uses the paper towels, often wastefully.

He particularly enjoys catching the end of the last towel and the beginning of the next, noting the difference between the two, despite its subtlety; he then compares this pleasure to some others and approves of it. He believes that eventually businesses will return to towel dispensers. In a footnote, Howie comments on the new tightness of straw covers.

Next Howie wets one of his five hand towels in hot water, adds soap, and rubs his face, saying, "Oh God" and feeling wonderful. He then comments on the pleasure of warmth applied to the face. It works often like acupuncture is supposed to in relieving stress but can also focus the mind on an important image.

Howie then recalls the broken shoelace coincidence and recalls the experience of the breaking of his left shoelace. He realizes that his walking and shoe-tying often places a high degree of stress on a single quarter inch of the lace and thinks this realization helps him towards a final realization. Yet there must be some way to distinguish between tension exerted through tying and through walking. Howie considers how he walks to look for answers. All the while, he continues washing his face and rinsing his glasses.



His contemplation is interrupted when Abe, his boss, comes out of his stall; Abe asks if he is going to lunch and Howie tells Abe he has to buy shoelaces, mentioning the odd coincidence. Abe claims that he buys a new pair of shoelaces each day, and has them flown in from an Indian man from Texas; apparently, Abe always jokes in this way save on matters related to work. As Howie leaves the bathroom, he realizes he is whistling "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." Abe starts whistling, "I Knew an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly."

## Chapter 11 Analysis

The chapter can be taken to have three important realizations: (i) the falsity of the dryer text; (ii) the signaling and efficiency purposes of the hand towel dispenser; and (iii) the new focus on the shoelace coincidence. Hand dryers sometimes contain text that one can read while drying one's hands, and it usually states something along the lines that it saves hand towel waste, but Howie thinks this is nonsense because hand towels serve many important purposes and people use toilet paper when they need them anyway.

He is disgusted by what he feels must be known as a lie, reinforcing the reader's sense that Howie's thought life is somehow devoted to smashing falsehood and revealing mysteries. The second realization involves Howie's thought that the reason his corporation has an expensive hand towel dispenser is to distinguish itself from places that have hot air dryers, a kind of class signaling. Finally, Howie returns to the shoelace coincidence and hones in on an explanation that the combination of his shoe-tying and walking places unique stress on a particular part of the shoelace.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Back on the escalator, an hour after leaving the men's room, Howie is listening to the escalator's motor and considering how it is built. At the top of the escalator, he observes people walking around down in the lobby and notes patterns of movement forced upon them by the structure of the room, including the revolving door. He still has his hand on the handrail and considers whether the escalator steps and handrail move at different speeds; he observes that they come apart earlier while standing still and letting the escalator move him forward.

Before then, he steps up the escalator stairs. The escalator "supplemented" rather than replaced your movement. He wonders what the aims of the escalator creators were, and figures that they did not want people to stop moving, and became convinced the people willfully ignored this fact. He then notes some cases when he got stuck behind people not moving.

However, this is only how he thinks a year before. He uses the escalator four times each day now and sometimes six. It makes sense to stand still, particularly when you must use the escalator often. He has only sympathy for those rushing up the stairs.

Howie moves two thirds down the path to the mezzanine; the maintenance man is behind him, cleaning up. There are metal disks that divide the up and down escalators which Howie comments on at some length. He comments on the movements of his shadow. At the end of the chapter he has four thoughts in succession, the last alone being new. The new thought is imagining a huge popcorn exploding in space. He has not yet considered this image on its own, and he explains its appearance from eating popcorn an hour earlier.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Howie returns to considering features of the escalator and his associated thoughts. This takes him forward to a new point in time—after his lunch break rather than before. The last chapter occurs in the men's room before the break, this chapter afterwards back on the escalator. Two main features of the chapter stand-out: Howie's realization that standing still on the escalator makes sense and his original thought of a piece of popcorn exploding in space. Howie appears to see both as advances of an important sort, both involving original accomplishment.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Chapter 13 opens with the popcorn buying incident—Howie had not intended to purchase popcorn in the first place. He begins his story with his rushing out of the revolving door. It is noon, and fifteen plaza trees stand in front of him. Many are sitting on benches there, eating their packed lunches. Howie notes a construction crew on a building nearby and hankers for a light snack, and so he gives a dollar to the popcorn vendor. He receives no change, and appreciates this.

Howie next turns to walk towards the CVS, eating popcorn and watching new cars; he notes the feeling of the popcorn in his mouth. In a two page footnote, Howie discusses some early memories illustrating that one can eat popcorn that has sat under various different environmental conditions.

The walk to CVS lasts ten minutes; Howie throws away his popcorn bag and goes inside. His goal is to find the shoelaces, but since he visits CVS's often, he is surprised that he does not know where they are. Most of his visits to CVS are to buy earplugs once a week, because sometimes he sees hearing as a symptom.

Howie uses earplugs to sleep and to concentrate at work, but he does not wear them at lunch and it makes his thoughts change because he can hear his environment. Transitioning into a discussion of his choice of ear plugs, Howie notes his delight at discovering Pillow Soft earplugs and discusses some of his experiences using ear plugs to sleep.

Ear-wax remover stands next to the ear plugs; Howie uses the stuff too in order to hear better when he needs to. He prefers the nurse's tool, however, but embarrassment keeps him from using it more often. In fact, many of the items in the CVS are embarrassing, particularly for women, such as disposable vinegar douche kits. The CVS possesses a tantalizing quality to it. The shampoos are next to him and he notes their many varieties and how shampoos reflect different social cultures, particularly across time.

Howie imagines how product managers must feel as their product goes from being widely used to not being used at all since the generation of users has passed away. He also notes that he used soap on his hair until he worked at the mezzanine, when he switched to using Johnson's baby shampoo. The CVS is like the diary of stores. Other stores sell things that you use to dress up your life, whereas the CVS deals in honesties.

Howie finds the replacement dress laces he is looking for. They are a bit cheap looking, but they will do. He also buys shoe polish. The cash registers all have rows of people at them, so Howie chooses the attendant's line who appears the most intelligent. This will



get him out quickly. The Indian woman he selects is a pro, moving extremely quickly; Howie marvels at her efficiency. He admits that he already knew of her attending prowess from shopping at the CVS before.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 tells us some of the main events of Howie's actual lunch break. Until this time, most of the story has focused on the escalator, leaving the office, speaking with Tina, concerning himself about Ray, using the men's room, and so on. In the beginning of the book, we found Howie in the CVS and Chapter 13 brings us back.

Howie steps out of the office building, buys popcorn and then makes various observations about the CVS, about the intimate products it contained, about product variety, and about the honesty of the CVS, how the things bought there were often things truly needed, not just things meant to communicate status, such as the items at Crate & Barrel.

He discusses his use of earplugs, which is of some interest because apparently Howie likes to block out sound during most of his day and night. He sleeps with earplugs and keeps them in during most of his time at work. This is a man who spends an inordinate amount of time isolated within his mind, as if this was not already obvious from the book up until this point.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Howie notices that the walk back to the office seems longer than the walk to CVS. He has bought a hot dog and is eating it on the way back. He buys a cookie too, and then buys milk to go with it at Papa Gino's, as mentioned before. He goes to the brick plaza and sits on a bench. Howie then notes some architectural detail of the bench and looks at the view of his building, particularly the mezzanine floor.

He has fifteen minutes left and so opens his book, Marcus Aurelius' Meditations. He notes in a footnote a memory about eating and reading at the same time in which his mother gives him some relevant advice on the subject. Finding his place, Howie reads the line: "Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life ..." which he strongly disagrees with and regards as destructive. However, it is probably sobering to a man in his position. His eating is interrupting him a bit and he notes that the problem with reading is the ease of interrupting and having to pick up where one left off.

This observation leads Howie into a significant footnote, that he begins by recounting the odd personal habits of various philosophers, like Spinoza, Wittgenstein and Adam Smith, noting that they could be brilliant and virtuous in some domains, but ridiculous in others. He mentions that Gibbon loved footnotes. Howie then comments that reality is not as smooth and integrated as most literature is. Instead, life is full of its own footnotes, italics, exceptions, and tangents. Footnotes understand the pleasures of detours in life and thought, or "peripheral vision." Digression allows one to be thorough.

Howie has bought other classic works before, but has rarely gotten far into them; instead, he likes them on his windowsill. He enjoys their appearance, but he is attracted to the Aurelius book by its description of how Aurelius presides over a corrupt society while his own virtuous character shocks others into silence. One could speak of Aurelius's inner life with confidence, unlike speaking of other men. As a result, Aurelius's Meditations, the author claims, is among the "truest" books in the "whole range of religious literature."

The first line of the Aurelius book grabs him with its content and its structure. After this observation, however, the story returns to the cookie and milk, which Howie finishes. He next decides the sun is too hot to replace his shoelaces outside. The first line of the Aurelius exclaims that "Manifestly, no condition of life could be so well adapted for the practice of philosophy as this in which chance finds you today!" Howie mulls over this sentence in his mind, reflecting on all the little evens of the day. He does not know what he can do—philosophically, anyway—with these experiences.

Howie wonders whether Penguin paperbacks of the classic sort are profitable, and then reflects on whether he has had the previous thought often before. He recalls some possible cases. Howie reflects that his quest of having new thoughts requires a theory





of the "periodicity" of certain thoughts, or of how often they arise in his mind. With such measures, one can know the relative frequency of his own thinking. Then he considers making a chart of frequencies, which he lists on the page, including L, Family, tongue brushing (third place), and on the way down.

However, the idea of such a list is problematic as thoughts cannot be sectioned off from one another so neatly; they cannot be classified in this way and these thoughts are innumerable anyway. He can only practice philosophy in terms of introspection and so this is what he does while he waits to return to work. Howie observes that many people look the same from the outside, but the relative frequencies of their thoughts will tell you quite a bit about them; he comments on L's reports of her bizarre but recurrent thoughts.

Thought periodicity is not all that matters, conversational periodicity does as well. Howie and L had various periodic conversations of differing frequencies. Large cultural events could impose themselves on many conversations at once, and many events of this sort were cyclical over generations. Howie senses that he will think about his shoelaces quite a bit in the next month, perhaps three hundred and twenty-five times and the Aurelius line ninety times, he explains in a footnote.

He discusses his last shoelace thought, which occurs when he is looking in an MIT Lab research report at work, and reviews the research on the "pathology of worn ropes." He then gives the relevant research and his exciting reaction to it, his desire to quit his job and pursue it. He discovers that scientist, Z. Czaplicki, has written an article in a journal on "Methods for evaluating the abrasion resistance and knot slippage strength of shoe laces." This man, Howie exclaims, "had to know." Czaplicki has made Howie's problem his life's work. He does not have to worry about the problem anymore; Z. Czaplicki in Poland has it under control. Howie can relax.

Howie has to go in. His fingers are filthy with cookie residue. He fits stuff in his CVS bag, stands up, throws away his trash, observes a bee, enters the lobby and travels up the escalator.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Chapter 14 is the climax of the book, and the reader must read very carefully to find it, for much of the main idea is contained deep within the longer footnotes. The chapter begins innocently, focusing on Howie's lunch on the plaza outside of his office. However, it transitions into discussing the book he is reading—Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*—and how he comes upon it. Before discussing this particular book, he discusses another book he is reading, Lecky's *History of European Morals*, which contains a fine appreciation of the value of footnotes.

Howie observes that footnotes are ways of representing reality that literature often misses. Literature typically represents the world through smooth, progressive paragraphs, but life is not that way. It consists in trivialities, side-issues, interconnections with other people and thoughts outside of its main subject, tangents,



breaks, abrupt thoughts that must not be lost, and so on. The reader will realize that the author has made use of footnotes in the book to make precisely this point. The *Mezzanine* is a work of realism, not fantasy, because it attempts to represent the inner life of the human as it actually is, with all of its messiness, chaos, interconnected complexity, inanities and so on. This is important because it explains why the book is structured in such a unique way—it is not to be different or unusual but to be accurate.

The Aurelius, however, is even more significant. Howie is intrigued by the book because it records the inner thought life, the struggles, of a great and virtuous man surrounded by the corrupt. One wonders if Howie does not conceive of himself in a similar way. When he opens the book and finds the line telling the reader that there is no time better to do philosophy than the one at present, however randomly one arrived there, he thinks to himself that he could not turn the events of the day into anything philosophical. However, he eventually realizes that this is not so, that he can do philosophy through introspection. However, there is a meta-realization at work in the text. It is quite clear that *The Mezzanine* disagrees with Howie—Aurelius is right, Howie's experiences, no matter how trivial, are as good times to do philosophy as any, and so the book is compiled of these bits and pieces of triviality and tangents in order to make precisely this point.

The reader should wonder at this point if the author wrote the entire book in order to illustrate that philosophy, reflection, insight, and mental progress are possible at every single possible moment of life, were one to simply slow down and consider one's thoughts in detail. In fact, the reader might be able to imagine engaging in just this process herself, of slowing down, observing her thoughts and then allowing them to play out until they taper into another thought, which at its edges cannot be distinguished from the previous one.

Howie remarks on the "periodicity" of thoughts as well, about how often he considers various matters throughout his life and how the distinct thought and conversational periodicities of different humans make them unique. However, this leads Howie to speculate in another footnote to the climax of the shoelace theme. Throughout the entire book, Howie is torn up by the shoelace problems. Why on earth have his shoelaces snapped so closely to one another?

Deep in the final footnote of the chapter, the reader will encounter the answer. Howie discovers in a research report that someone has written a research paper on the "pathology of worn ropes" which leads him to follow up on further research until he discovers an article—"Methods for evaluating the abrasion resistance and knot slippage strength of shoe laces"—written by Z. Czaplicki. It theorizes about a method to answer Howie's very question. This gives Howie a profound sense of relief. He no longer needs to worry about the shoelaces. He is freed from care. Someone else has the mystery under control and is devoting his life to it. Howie can move on.

The end of the chapter brings Howie back into the office building, riding up the escalator, just where the book began, bringing it full circle. The thought generated by the escalator has reached its end. The reader can now see that in one way, *The*

Mezzanine is a series of thoughts all originating and ending with the escalator. Is the book composed of many individual thoughts? Or one big thought? Howie says himself that thoughts cannot be counted easily and perhaps not at all.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

As Howie leaves the escalator, he sees a cigarette butt rolling around. He steps on the mezzanine and watches it. He sees the maintenance man at the bottom of the stairs and waves; the maintenance man waves back.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

The last chapter has great significance despite being a mere paragraph in length. It is Howie's first thought after the escalator thought—the observation of a cigarette butt rolling around quickly, faster than a jar of mayonnaise rolling along in the supermarket. The thought is innocent, but it contains the potential to explode into detail, just as the previous fleeting thought did, becoming an entire book.



# Characters

## Howie

Howie is the main character of *The Mezzanine*, and in many ways is its only character. *The Mezzanine* contains very little dialogue, as it is mostly focused on Howie's thoughts and mundane experiences during his lunch hour. Occasionally co-workers and his girlfriend L figure into his thoughts, but not terribly often. More than anything, Howie is focused on objects like the escalator to the mezzanine, his CVS bag, his left shoelace and his copy of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*.

Howie is indeed a strange man, obsessed with analyzing his thoughts, seemingly for a variety of reasons. He wishes to de-sentimentalize his childhood memories in order to reconcile himself to a proper understand of nostalgia; he has a plan to think a steady number of new thoughts each day to attain the new Majority where he has a majority of adult thoughts, and he focuses in great detail on mundane matters in order to touch the profound through the ordinary.

The reader learns very little about Howie's external identity in the book. There is no indication of what he looks like, what his job is, what his family or love life is like or the major personal, religious, and political attitudes he may have. That is part of the point of the book, to focus on those features of the person that are rarely noticed in order to bring out their meaning. The lack of external descriptions of Howie focuses the reader on his inner mental life.

## L

L is Howie's college girlfriend whom he still is still with, although it is not clear in what capacity. L and Howie share many things and she brings him many insights. In chapter three, Howie describes his various mental "advances" which includes learning that he has added his own sub-steps to the process of tying his shoes.

L tells him that sometimes people clean their houses in order to feel better when they are down. Howie at that time lives in a college apartment with several of his friends and one day, actually when he is feeling rather good, he decides to clean the apartment to see how it feels. Lo and behold, he feels much better. He is excited to tell L and when they next speak, they discover that they are both spontaneously cleaning their apartments at the same time. Howie takes this as a sign that they are meant to be together.

L and Howie both sing and act out when they are alone in elevators, rejoicing in their privacy and they are both wont to have deep, disturbing thoughts on which they often reflect. When L suggests that milk increases one's mucus level, Howie's love affair with milk begins to end. As he reads the first line of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, he realizes



that he can introspect and do philosophy even when he is talking to L. Later in the book, Howie speculates that he will have thoughts of L 580 times a year.

## **Donna**

The CVS attendant who helps Howie check out.

## **Tina**

An office secretary Howie speaks to when he signs out to go to lunch; she suggests that he go to CVS to get shoelaces and they discuss Ray's injury.

## **Ray**

The janitor in the mezzanine who hurts his back; Howie discusses Ray's injury with Tina and signs a get well poster Tina has made for him.

## **The Maintenance Man**

A man who is cleaning the escalator when Howie is traveling up it after his lunch hour.

## **Dave, Sue, and Steve**

Howie's co-workers who wave to him on their way to lunch. Howie's awkward response leads him to rip his left shoelace.

## **Don**

A co-worker who pees next to Howie, which partly prevents Howie from peeing until he imagines peeing on Don in order to relax himself.

## **Abe**

Howie's boss, who takes nothing but work seriously.

## **Les Guster**

A corporate VP who brushes his teeth in the men's bathroom.



## **Howie's Mother**

Howie's mother teaches him not to eat and read at the same time; he disregards this advice.

## **Marcus Aurelius**

The famous Roman ruler who possesses great virtue during a time of corruption; his Meditations inspire Howie to introspect about his thoughts in order to do philosophy.

## **Z. Czaplicki**

A Polish engineer who researches shoelace tensile strength; the discovery of Czaplicki's research allows Howie to let go of his shoelace obsession.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Mezzanine**

Generally, a mid-level floor in a building, the mezzanine is the mid-level office floor where Howie works.

### **The Escalator**

There is an escalator to the mezzanine from the entrance of Howie's office building. Reflections on the escalator are a major source of material for the book.

### **Howie's Office**

Howie's work office is where his shoelace breaks.

### **Tina's Office**

The secretary's office where Howie signs out for lunch and speaks briefly to Tina, partly about his shoelace and partly about Ray, the maintenance man.

### **The CVS**

The pharmacy and convenience store where Howie buys shoelaces.

### **The Men's Bathroom**

The bathroom on the mezzanine where Howie has trouble urinating and picks up a tune to whistle.

### **Howie's Apartment**

The apartment where he and L live.

### **The Plaza**

The area outside of Howie's office building where he reads and eats lunch.





## **Shoelaces**

Howie's shoelaces break within twenty-four hours of one another; the coincidence is an obsession of Howie's for nearly the entirety of the book.

## **Popcorn**

Howie's snack on the way to the CVS.

## **A Carton of Milk**

Howie buys a carton of milk from Papa Gino's to go with his cookie; he ruminates on the significance of milk cartons in his past.

## **A Cookie**

Howie buys a cookie to go with his lunch and buys milk to go with his cookie.

## **Bags**

Howie has several bags that he carries up the elevator to the mezzanine, one of which is his CVS bag, another carries his copy of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations.

## **Earplugs**

Howie wears earplugs most of the day to be alone at work and focus on his thoughts.

## **Thoughts**

Thoughts are the main items in the book, which Howie both has and reflects on.

## **Childhood Thoughts**

Howie dislikes his childhood thoughts because he sees them as marks of immaturity and falsity; he attempts to replace them with new adult thoughts.

## **Adult Thoughts**

Howie aims to replace his childhood thoughts with adult thoughts in order to achieve adulthood.



## **The New Majority**

The future period of Howie's life in which most of his thoughts derive from adult experiences rather than childhood experiences.

## **Footnotes**

Howie quite likes footnotes because they more accurately reflect real experience, as real experience involves detours of thought.

## **Marcus Aurelius' Meditations**

A famous book that inspires Howie to focus on his thoughts as a means of doing philosophy.

## **Vibratiuncles**

Weak vibrations of sensory information that reverberate throughout the brain. One might understand vibratiuncles as a major phenomenon at work in Howie's mind throughout the book.

# Themes

## The Complexity and Connectedness of Thoughts

One of the ambiguities that arises in *The Mezzanine* is how to count thoughts; this is discussed fairly briefly but it is important to the book as a whole. At one point, Howie wants to characterize how often he will think certain thoughts over a year long period, but then he abandons a chart he creates to model the "periodicity" of his various thoughts because he realizes that thoughts cannot be so neatly sectioned off from one another. In fact, it is almost impossible to discover where one thought begins and another ends.

This illustrates a point made implicitly throughout the book, that even the most ordinary, repetitive and trivial thoughts occur within an incredibly complex context of related ideas, concepts, events, experiences, reasons, beliefs, desires, arguments, and emotions. Thoughts melt into one another, fluctuate, change, create new ties, and lose other ones. *The Mezzanine* presents with striking clarity the absolute fluidity and vague boundaries between mental entities, along with showing the organic, random, chaotic but progressive, exciting and insightful life of the developing brain.

This is so clearly seen from the shoelace thoughts and the escalator thoughts, perhaps the two "foundational" thoughts of the book. So much begins within the escalator and the shoelaces, and yet after the first thirteen chapters of the book, these thoughts are still with Howie, and continue to yield insights until they both play a role in the climax of the book within Howie's mind. In some ways, one might conceive of the book as a map of a single network of thoughts with the escalator and Howie's broken left shoelace at the core. *The Mezzanine*, then, stops being a story altogether and becomes the mere description of a heretofore unexamined territory of the mind.

## The Relationship between the Pointless and the Profound

The author of *The Mezzanine*, Nicholas Baker, often implicitly argues in his novels that there is a much more intimate relationship between the pointless and the profound than is typically understood. In his first novel, Baker makes this point most directly. Late in the book, the reader is confronted with the opening line of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*: "Manifestly, no condition of life could be so well adapted for the practice of philosophy as this in which chance finds you today!" When Howie reads the line he wonders how the events of his life that day could be important and how he could hope to practice philosophy. The answer to his question appears to be given in the book, when his method of introspecting the day-to-day and minute-to-minute experiences in his life gives rise to an entire book of thoughts strung together during a single lunch hour.



While the novel initially appears to be about nothing, it is not. Howie finds significance in the struggle to understand why his shoelaces break randomly so closely to one another. He describes the subtlety of social interactions in the corporate men's room, his internal reactions to eating a cookie, how his milk carton causes him to recall the days of the milk man and how the milk man faded into obscurity; he is able to touch on the relationship between personality and thinking, the nature and individuation of thoughts, the subconscious aims of behavior, and so on, all by simply stopping to focus on his own thoughts about ordinary events.

## Coming of Age Mentally

Later in the book, Howie tells the reader about the day when he becomes an adult. He is twenty-three, on the subway, looking around at men's shirt cuffs, wondering about how they were starched and observing that women's watches are too small. At that moment, he realizes that he has reached a developmental period in his life where his further advances in thinking will be of increasingly diminishing significance. In this moment, he realizes he is an adult and in this way becomes an adult.

However, once Howie becomes an adult, he realizes that most of his thoughts still come from his childhood and he sets out to change this. Howie does not much care for his childhood thoughts; not only are they childish, but they are often overly sentimental and riddled with inaccuracies. So Howie sets out to de-sentimentalize them by thinking about them in detail. He also aims to have a regular, large number of new adult thoughts each day such that—by his calculations—at age forty, he will naturally think thoughts the majority of which derive from previous thoughts as an adult, not as a child. This is Howie's age of "new Majority," as he calls it, and for him it is the sign of becoming a man. As odd as it may sound, *The Mezzanine* has a definite "coming of age" theme to it; Howie is trying to mature, to reach a new developmental stage; he feels like a child and dislikes it intensely; he wants to grow up.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view is the first-person, but a first-person perspective that is primarily reflexive, or focused on itself and its observations only through second-order thoughts. Howie may appear from the outside to be an ordinary office worker, but his internal thought life exhibits a degree of complexity that would appear insane and exhausting to others. He is obsessed with his own thinking, in particular on the mezzanine escalator and about his broken shoelaces. More broadly, Howie is focused on trying to find meaning in the trivialities of his life. He is trying to grow up by creating new adult thoughts to replace his old childhood thoughts. We learn a great deal about some of Howie's likes, dislikes, philosophical views and observations, but we learn very little about his properties that most novels focus on when building a character.

The author, Nicholas Baker, appears to bear important similarities to the character, at least in terms of what he is interested in writing about. Nicholas Baker is well-known for stream-of-consciousness writing that is focused on capturing—as starkly and effectively as he can—day-to-day and even minute-to-minute real life, first-personal experience. He focuses on the mundane in order to bring out the profound in many of his books. *The Mezzanine* is Baker's first novel, and since then his novels have hewn to similar themes.

## Setting

The primary setting of *The Mezzanine* is actually Howie's mind. The major observations made in the book are connected to the outside world, but only in a removed way, as Howie's observations are always mediated by at least one layer of thought and sometimes multiple layers. For instance, at one point in the book, Howie breaks his left shoelace, thinks about fixing his shoelace, thinks about why both shoelaces break within such a short time of one another, wonders what the significance of the coincidence is, wonders why he is so obsessed with the coincidence, considered how many times he would think about the coincidence in the future and resolved the coincidence by researching textile engineering articles on the tensile properties of shoelaces. Observations of the outside world always are accompanied by the observation of the associated phenomenological experience, and observation rarely stops there.

However, the book has external settings as well. The primary external is the mezzanine, the mid-level floor of the office building where Howie works. For the entire book, Howie is either in his office, around his office, on the escalator or walking around outside the building or on nearby streets. Sometimes the book references his apartment and other places, but not often. Probably the most significant setting, however, is the escalator to the mezzanine, about which Howie makes a staggering number of observations.



## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning of *The Mezzanine* is quite significant. First, Howie has a top-notch vocabulary, often using words that few will know and word processors themselves hardly realize. Some of his vocabulary words are references from obscure philosophers and psychologists (like "vibratiuncles," a word used to refer to a subtle vibration of sensory information, coined by philosopher and associationist psychologist David Hartley). He also makes up words, and uses words as strange parts of speech. There is a reason for this: one theme of *The Mezzanine* is the complexity and subtlety of even mundane thought. The reason for the complex wording is to communicate that the subtleties of thought are hard to map with words alone.

The larger structure of the language in *The Mezzanine* is significant as well. The book proceeds as a stream-of-consciousness, with one thought leading to another. Sometimes whole chapters appear to be about a single sub-thought deriving from a larger master-thought. Within these chapters the reader will often find footnotes, some of great length, perhaps two and once even four pages. These footnotes are quite significant, however, and should be paid close attention to by the reader. Towards the end of the book, the author subtly explains the importance of footnotes, because their role as linguistic "detours" more accurately maps the tangential, tangled thoughts of day-to-day life than novels without footnotes. The climax of the shoelace struggle is also found in a footnote. These linguistic choices of the author are made deliberately.

## Structure

*The Mezzanine* is written in the classic, but unusual stream-of-consciousness style. It has no plot and appears to be about nothing at all, despite its underlying subtleties and profundities. The main character, Howie, is describing his thoughts, his thoughts about his thoughts and his thoughts about his thoughts about his thoughts, all in parallel and connected with one another. These thoughts expand from a simple ride up the escalator in the beginning of the book until their climax in Chapter 14, and the book ends with the upswing of a new thought at the top of the escalator.

The entire book takes place over the course of a single lunch hour in a day of Howie's life, while he is at work. The book covers a number of events during this time—Howie's left shoelace breaking, leaving his office, speaking with Tina, a secretary, while he signs out, going to the men's room, struggling to urinate, washing his face, going down the escalator, walking into the office building plaza, buying popcorn down the street, going to the CVS, walking around, picking up shoelaces, buying them from "Donna" the attendant, receiving a stapled bag, walking back, buying a hotdog, then a cookie and then some milk from Papa Gino's, sitting down on a bench outside of his building, reading his book, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* for fifteen minutes, entering his building again, walking up the elevator, and waving to the maintenance man. This is the "real life order of the events," whereas the events in the story are all over the place, but begin and end at the escalator on Howie's return.



## Quotes

"The escalators rose toward the mezzanine, where my office was." (3)

"... but the truth was that it was only the latest in a fairly long sequence of partially forgotten, inarticulable experiences, finally now reaching a point that I paid attention to it for the first time." (9)

"In the stapled CVS bag was a pair of new shoelaces." (9)

"I had evidently evolved two little substeps of my own that nobody had showed me." (18)

"The fact that we had independently decided to sweep our apartments on that Sunday afternoon after spending the weekend together, I took as a strong piece of evidence that we were right for each other." (21)

"These were the eight main advances I had available to bring to bear on my life on the day I sat repairing the second shoelace to wear out in two days." (24)

"So my pleasure in riding the escalator that afternoon was partly a pleasure of indistinct memories and associations ..." (36)

"...if I could locate the precise moment in my past when I conclusively became an adult, a few simple calculations would determine how many years it will be before I reach this new stage of life: the end of the rule of nostalgia, the beginning of my true Majority." (47)

"And this was when I realized abruptly that as of that minute ... I had finished with whatever large-scale growth I was going to have as a human being, and that I was now permanently arrested at an intermediate stage of personal development." (54)

"Middle age. Middle age!" (59)

"That guy has a problem." (84)

"It was for me then, and is still, one of the greatest sources of happiness that the man-made world can offer." (93)

"Yet people refused to see this." (101)

"Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes." (120)

"They knew that the outer surface of truth is not smooth, welling and gathering from paragraph to shapely paragraph, but is encrusted with a rough protective bark of citations, quotation marks, italics and foreign languages, a whole variorum crust of "ibid.'s" and "compare's" and "see's" that are the shield for the pure flow of argument as



it lives for a moment in one mind. They knew the anticipatory pleasure of sensing with peripheral vision ... Digression—a movement away from the gradus, or upward escalation, of the argument—is sometimes the only way to be thorough, and footnotes are the only form of graphic digression sanctioned by centuries of typesetters." (122)

"Manifestly, no condition of life could be so well adapted for the practice of philosophy as this in which chance finds you today!" (125)

"Here was a man, Z. Czaplicki, who had to know!" (132)





## Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of shoelaces? Who is Z. Czaplicki and why does he matter?

Why do you think the book is written in stream of consciousness style?

What is the significance of the escalator? To what extent is it simply a storyline device? To what extent is it symbolic?

What do you think the climax of the book is? Explain your answer.

How does Marcus Aurelius' Meditations fit into the story?

What is the order of events during Howie's lunch hour in real time? In the book? What is accomplished by changing the order?

What is, in Howie's opinion, so great about footnotes? How are footnotes an analogy for the book as a whole?

Do you think The Mezzanine is a single thought or many thoughts? If the latter, how many? How does one count thoughts anyway? Can it be done? Does Howie think it can be done?