

# **The Mysteries of Pittsburgh Study Guide**

## **The Mysteries of Pittsburgh by Michael Chabon**

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# Plot Summary

In Michael Chabon's unusual novel, "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh," Art Bechstein has just finished college and is looking forward to a summer of freedom and play. He has left an unsuccessful relationship and finds himself free in his college town of Pittsburgh with an insignificant part-time job at a local bookstore and a new group of friends. His father belongs to the Mafia and, although Art tries to have a relationship with him, his father's shady background comes back to haunt him in unexpected ways. His mother died when Art was young, and his relationship with his father is only perfunctory and somewhat distant. Living in Washington, DC, his father comes for an occasional visit and lunch with Art. Art's "Uncle" Lenny, who seems to care for Art, resides in Pittsburgh.

Art's world, in his own eyes, has become colorful and fascinating now that he is free from school. He has an unusual fascination with the everyday people he meets and takes on as friends. As he watches events unfold, it is almost as if he is writing a novel with his life, seeing everything from the perspective of a newly liberated, almost grown young man, hungry for real-life experiences. He has been focused on academics for a long time, and being finished with that life feels surreal and liberating to him. Small details of the events in his life do not escape his notice, such as the bellhops in the extravagant hotel where he lunches with his father, who are dressed like monkeys.

In this story, Art befriends a young man named Arthur Lecomte, with whose social graces and homosexuality he is fascinated. He also meets Arthur's friends, one of them an alcoholic biker named Cleveland, whose bold exploits are legendary with this small group. Phlox, an odd and punkish young woman, becomes Art's girlfriend for a time. Arthur, Art, Phlox and their cohorts spend time walking the streets of Pittsburgh, exploring the "cloud factory," and the huge ravine where the most of Pittsburgh's poverty-stricken reside, and generally learning about life and the colorful array of people who live it.

The troubled biker, Cleveland is involved with criminal activity that is linked with Art's gangster father, and Art's father manages to intervene in a burglary. Cleveland is killed by a fall from the Cloud Factory tower, trying to outrun the police.

Art finally understands that his own mother was mistakenly killed by gangsters, as he truly realizes the sordid quality of activities his father's people are engaged in.

Ultimately, what Art is seeking is the meaning of true friendship, which is something he has never really experienced. The story of this particular summer is told as he recalls it, and he is sure, in the end that he has "exaggerated everything."



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Art Bechstein gets a few facts established in order to begin his story: His father, Joe Bechstein, is a Jewish gangster who lives in Washington, DC; Art's former girlfriend, Claire, has moved out of their apartment and their relationship has ended; Art has just finished college and, it is summer, so he is now free. These facts lay the foundation for his story of the summer after college graduation.

Art has lunch with his father at the elegant hotel where the wealthy Joe Bechstein stays when he is in Pittsburgh. During their lunch together, his father mentions he has seen "Uncle Lenny," who is not really Art's uncle, but lives in Pittsburgh and is related through business to Art's father. Art makes it clear that he does not think much of his education, which he has been working on for some time. When his father asks what he will do with his time during the summer, Art says that he anticipates "a coming season of dilated time and of women all in disarray," which is exactly what he will be pursuing. This is clearly a turning point for Art, who is making a transition from being a student to what he perceives as some real freedom.

Art has noticed a girl in the library to whom he is attracted, who works behind an window that is covered with an iron grill. He also notices a young man who works there — it is almost as if he is noticing everything around him for the first time. When he leaves the library, Art witnesses a street fight over a woman, with cops in attendance, and when the scene settles down, he strikes up a conversation with a bystander named Arthur Lacomte, who turns out to be the same person he noticed working in the library a few minutes earlier. Arthur is clearly gay, but Art is attracted to his demeanor and confidence. They seem to want to be better acquainted, and Arthur invites Art to go out with him. Art lies to Arthur, saying he is going to meet his girlfriend, however, realizing that he has been avoiding risk taking and being in incomprehensible situations all his life, Art agrees to have a beer with Arthur.

At thirteen, Art had fully realized that his father has some kind of secret identity. Art's mother died just months before he was thirteen in an auto accident, according to his father, but Art has always known the story was not true. His father reveals his true profession as a mobster on the day of Art's bar mitzvah, which Art carefully conceals from the world from that time on. Because of this shameful secret, young Art grows up assuming that every new friend will have some kind of secret, and Art is curious to find out about peoples' secrets.

Art's new friend Arthur introduces him to Abdullah, who takes them both on a recklessly fast ride through town in his convertible, with Art riding precariously in a converted trunk. They attend a mutli-cultural party, and Art is fascinated by the mixture of people



Art learns from Arthur about "Phlox," the girl who works behind the grilled window at the library. He suddenly has a new group of friends, some of whom have foreign names and strange nicknames, such as Mau-mau (Phlox), Dudu (Abdullah) and Riri. Arthur, Art and Abdullah drive to Riri's extravagant home where a party is taking place. The party is fully of educated, colorful people of every nationality. Since Arthur LeComte's academic interests lie in diplomacy, he likes to mingle and observe people and their interactions, studying these rich foreign students. Riri's home is elaborately ornate, filled with expensive art and artifacts. Art, although seemingly totally out of his element in this crowd, decides he and Arthur LeComte will be good friends.

## Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

It seems as if Art is noticing things he has never seen before, as if he has risen from a mental fog somehow. The size and perspective in the hotel, although he has been there before, gives him fodder for his imagination. We know that his father's influence on him is strong, because he has said so, but his father obviously does not approve of him, calling him a "devout narcissist," "doomed to terminal adolescence," which we are beginning to gather from his naive-sounding prose. He is highly intelligent, but perhaps has been very sheltered by spending so much time in school studying economics. He describes his scholarship as "hilarious" and his major as "sad and cynical." He feels he has missed a lot, and now intends to experience more.

Art has entered a flamboyant world with which he is entirely unfamiliar. The people at Riri's party each identify with their own nationality, but Arthur Lacomte sees himself as an autonomous "atom," bouncing among them. The party, although lavish, has a sinister feeling, and Art apparently feels secure with Arthur, whose grace and modesty Art admires. It is possible that Art might have admired anyone he would have run into at this particular, poignant moment in his life. He seems to have no particular direction or plans, and flows along with whatever the day brings him, seemingly delighted with the variety of experiences, regardless of the fact that he has taken a very dangerous ride, has become dangerously drunk and attended a huge party where he knows no one and is unknown. He has begun his period of "dilated time," watching each event and personality unfold before him.

The unusual and amazing artifacts on display at Riri's are symbolic of all of the mysteries and exotic adventures that Art might be imagining for himself as he transitions into his new life.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Arthur takes Art through the party looking for someone named Jane Bellwether. Jane, who would have been an ideal match for Art in his father's eyes, is girlfriend to the notorious Cleveland, who is not at the party but who is obviously very popular among these people. Jane is going to go to New Mexico the following day with her family, and Arthur will be housesitting for them. Arthur invites Art to visit him while he stays at the Bellwethers.'

Art observes some negativity between Arthur and Abdullah over someone named Richard, who is Cleveland's cousin, and the tension has to do with the homosexual relationships among the three of them.

Art is regaled by Jane and Arthur with wild tales about Cleveland and his hilarious exploits across the country. All of them eventually become quite intoxicated, and Arthur invites Art to go with him to a gay bar. Art responds that he is not gay; however, he does remember a time when he was fourteen and was fairly certain that he was gay. Because of that memory, Arthur's invitation startles Art for a moment, but they agree to just be friends. The raucous party winds down and the pool, once "beautiful wealthy blue fun, was now garish and green and almost empty."

Art is working during the day at Boardwalk Books, a low-cost chain bookstore. It is a boring job and fits with his nightmares of boredom. His education exceeds that of the owners' and his fellow employees, who are studying to be paramedics.

Art has moved to a new apartment, and suddenly finds himself noticing Pittsburgh and loving it. Picking Arthur up for lunch at the library, Art is introduced to Phlox, who he learns is interested in him, as well. He learns that Phlox has had several identities, including that of a "punk," calling herself Mau-Mau during that period.

Art and Arthur look down into Pittsburgh's ravine from a precipice into what Arthur calls the Lost Neighborhood. Arthur says he and Cleveland used to go down there when they cut high school. They discuss the Cloud Factory, an industrial building with a stack that generates white puffs and has an unknown purpose.

Arthur says he is having a party at the Bellwethers' where he is house sitting. He also mentions that he and Abdullah have slept together in the Bellwether's master bedroom. Cleveland has been forbidden to come the Bellwethers' home by Jane's parents. Art is enthralled with Arthur, intrigued by his homosexuality and wants to be a part of this group of friends.



## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Art has tried to experience "fun" by getting next to it at Riri's party, but drinking too much takes the bright edge off the experience. He cannot have the lovely Jane due to her amazing boyfriend, Cleveland, whom Art still has not met. Arthur is still of great interest to Art, and brings up a remote possibility that usually stays in his subconscious mind regarding his own sexuality. Arthur seems to suggest that Art might come around to his way of thinking. Cleveland is still a mystery, but Art senses that Jane and Arthur may see Cleveland as above themselves, just as Art sees Jane and Arthur as above him.

Art's insecurity is revealed more clearly in this chapter, notably in his need to stay drunk and his comment to Jane that his father was "in finance," revealing again, his shame over his father's occupation. The chapter's title, "Some People Really Know How to Have a Good Time," is a statement Arthur had made like a "slogan" when Art first met him, and refers now to the party that has gotten out of hand.

Looking into Pittsburgh's precipice and the cloud factory are symbolic of the fantasies and potential troubles that Art can choose in his new life. He is fascinated with all the aspects of the life that is unfolding before him, as he revels in the blissfulness of being "free." He is fascinated with Arthur's homosexuality and his willingness to break the rules. Looking down at the tiny scene in the gully, he never wants to be small, but wants to grow "bigger and bigger and bigger." His hunger for life at its fullest is blossoming.

The fact that these people do things that are forbidden and daring, such as having sex in the bed of the absent Bellwethers, is intriguing to Art, who has sheltered himself from real friends all his life. His interest in their mischief foretells of future involvement on his part, as well as some new awareness.



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Art searches his disheveled apartment for an old picture of Godzilla's egg, and heads out early to work at the bookstore. Missing his father for just a moment, he decides to make his way to the Cloud Factory in an effort to learn its real purpose, but is unable to figure it out. The bookstore employees are noisy and Gil, an engineering student, shows signs of a scuffle. Two of the employees, drunk and dressed in drag, call Art a fag, and Art is nervous about the possibility of this being true. During his workday Art ponders whether his relationship with Arthur makes him gay by association.

In the afternoon, a huge motorcycle pulls up in front of the bookstore, and the biker, who leaves the huge machine running, comes in asking for a book called "Son of a Gangster, by Art Bechstein," revealing that this biker knows about Art's father. Art assumes that this is some mob-related revenge against his father, and that the biker has come to kidnap and kill him, so he shakily gets onto the bike with him, as he is told. As they speed along, the biker laughs and reveals himself to be the legendary Cleveland.

The friends gather at the Bellweather's home. "Happy" is a beautiful collie that the Bellweathers have taken in, trained and pampered. Happy has become neurotic like his owners, and crazy Mrs. Bellweaer, at one time, was spotted beating Happy on the head with a hammer for making a mess in their basement. While the Bellweathers are away, Arthur is expected to follow a list of written rules, one of them being to keep Happy locked in the basement because she is in heat.

Cleveland is a burly young man, with a chipped tooth and an air of toughness. Art asks Cleveland how he knows about Art's father, and Cleveland informs him that Art's childhood friend, David Stern, is an associate of his. Arthur comes downstairs and is surprised to see them, having been in bed with Abdullah upstairs. They all eat and drink together and Cleveland tells Art he has had sex with Phlox, although they are all assuming now that Art and Phlox will have a relationship. Art learns that Cleveland is in love with Jane Bellweather, and that he hates her parents. They all go outside, and Cleveland summons the neighbor Teddy, who raises pitbulls. Cleveland decides that Teddy's pitbulls should pay a visit to Happy while she is in heat.

## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

It is interesting to note that Art searches for a picture of Godzilla and its egg. Perhaps this is a leftover from his childhood that he wants to relive for a moment to break the tension involved in this newly accelerated process of growing up.

It becomes clear that Art lives with a subconscious fear of his father's gang activities when he is certain that Cleveland has come to kill him. We learn that he does have





some feelings for his father, when he decides to obey his father's rules about not stepping on the golfing green, and through his momentary pang of missing his dad.

Cleveland, with his black hair and his knowledge of Art's father, forebodes trouble for Art. Although he is friendly with Arthur and can be a nice person, he is somewhat menacing and dark, and seems to want to get into some kind of trouble. It seems a strange coincidence that he is such an integral part of the group of Art's new friends, and that he happens to know all about Art's father. It is also important to note that he seems to have taken such an interest in Art.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Happy, the Bellwethers' collie, is mated with the neighbor Teddy's three pitbulls as Cleveland, Art, Arthur, Abdullah and Teddy drink beer and look on. Teddy's mother, finding her son in this situation, demands the Albuquerque phone number for the Bellwethers so she can tell them what has happened. However, the Bellwethers have already arrived home and are furious about the state of their house and their dog. Cleveland, who has been banished from their home, brazenly asks where Jane is, and the demented Mrs. Bellwether tell him Jane has died of dysentery. Cleveland plays along, pretending sadness. Both still drunk, Art and Arthur go to Art's apartment and for a moment, begin to have a romantic interlude, which Art cuts short.

Art tells the bookstore employees that his kidnapping by Cleveland was only a prank to scare him. After work, Arthur and Phlox come walking down the street, dressed up. Art feels love for them. The three of them go out to drink beer. Arthur keeps Phlox in suspense over the previous night's activities at the Bellwethers'. Art and Phlox begin to play an intense game of footsie under the table. When she finally learns what happened at the Bellwethers', Phlox is disgusted by the mating dog story. She and Art dance, and sit together in a corner. Phlox warns him never to call her by her former nickname, Mau-Mau. In the meantime, Arthur has met someone named Bobby who he leaves the bar with; Phlox and Art leave together to walk home. Phlox mentions that Arthur's homosexuality is disgusting.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The Bellwethers' neighbor boy, Teddy, is only fifteen and is drawn into Cleveland's adolescent play like a pawn. Cleveland uses other people (and dogs) for his own entertainment, as illustrated by his kidnapping of Art from the bookstore. Pretending to believe Mrs. Bellwether's story about Jane's death is humorous, but basically, Cleveland's character is one that may not bode well as one of Art's friends. He seems drawn to extremes as a way to have fun, and fun is something Art has been missing out on.

The relationship between Art and Phlox is finally manifesting, and her strangeness attracts him in an odd way. She has undergone more than one personality change, which is noticeable due to the now-empty piercings and the abandoned nickname. She now seems to now be playing a sophisticated, well-dressed college student, although we do not really know who she is. She is majoring in French, and tells Art she is a starlet. Phlox seems to fit with Art's tendency to be living in a fantasy.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Art is critical of Phlox for majoring in French, since she can only end up being a low-earning French teacher. Art feels that the French Literature she will have to read will have an alienating effect on her attitude toward love, and that she will misread some of it, turning it into dark romance. Art goes to her apartment and gets to know her through her possessions. She finally appears from the bathroom, looking like the wife of a soldier, and they, presumably, make love.

Later, while Phlox cooks breakfast naked, Art reaches his father at the hotel and they plan dinner. Phlox uses conversational tools, such as well-learned quotes, and is quite bright, but may be self-conscious. She admits to having been through phases of being a reborn Christian, being a punk, a biker's girl, a seamstress, prep school student and housewife.

Art meets with his dad, who offers to buy him a comb. Art decides to ask him if he knows any of Uncle Lenny's "apes" in an effort to find out if he knows Cleveland. His father comes from Jewish crime families and is now a liaison between the people in DC and in Pittsburgh. When Art tries to tell his father about Phlox, his father is doubtful and lets Art know he is worried about him. He asks Art what he is doing this summer and can't believe he is satisfied to be working at a bookstore. Art begins to cry, and they leave the restaurant. Art tells his father that he would probably hate everything he is doing this summer, and informs him that he will be sleeping with his girlfriend. His father is not impressed.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

We are seeing a different side of Art in this chapter. He is superior and condescending regarding Phlox's chosen college major. He clearly is seeing himself as "above" Phlox, at least academically. When they are about to make love, he sees her as a WWII soldier's wife, and is intrigued with a fantasy of secretly invading someone else's home.

In the meeting with his father, Art seems like a small child. He is so grief-stricken over his father's disapproval of him that he cries and has to leave the restaurant. Obviously, he and his father have a lot of unfinished business, which might be why he is drifting into this strange world of so-called friends.

Making friends with Arthur and hanging out with these particular people would have been out of character for Art prior to this summer. It is not clear what state Art was in when he last saw his father, but it sounds as though Art may have had an emotional breakdown. The author is hinting that Art might be sliding downhill mentally, emotionally or otherwise, based on his father's reaction to him and the reference to his uncombed hair.



# Chapters 10 and 11

## Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

Phlox considers her relationship with Art to be love. She feels threatened by Arthur's obvious desire for Art. She reads to Art "The Story of O," her favorite book, which is sensual and sexual; she is obviously trying to draw Art in and make him attracted to her.

While Art and Arthur are drinking together, Arthur hints that Phlox is crazy, subtly criticizing her. When Arthur leaves the group abruptly to go to mass, Art and Cleveland continue drinking and talking. Eventually Cleveland tells Art he likes him, and Art tears up with emotion. Rather than walking home, Art accepts Cleveland's offer to stay over at Cleveland's father's home.

Cleveland's father was a closeted-gay psychiatrist, and his mother committed suicide by hanging herself. Art seems fascinated with this family and wonders where Cleveland's mother killed herself. At three in the morning, sensing all of the discontent in the old house, Art decides to explore Cleveland's childhood home. He finds the bedroom of Cleveland's sister, Anna, and falls to sleep there, moving later back downstairs to the sofa. He learns that when Anna was young, after their mother had died, Cleveland almost drowned her, and threw rocks in her face, temporarily blinding her, his rage out of control. Anna, the only person who liked Cleveland, had her sight restored through emergency surgery. Quite hungover from alcohol the next day, Art tells Phlox he will be leaving with Cleveland and Arthur for Cleveland's father's summer house. He needs a break from Phlox.

On their long car trip, Art enjoys riding in the backseat. He learns from listening to them that Arthur and Cleveland met in Catholic school when they were young. They arrive in the woods, not quite at the cabin, and Cleveland gets out to walk the rest of the way to his father's house for unknown reasons. Inside, Art and Cleveland stare at a photograph of Cleveland when he was sixteen, and still happy.

The three friends enjoy this time, swimming in the lake, shooting at empty cans and drinking heavily and continuously. Art learns from Arthur that Cleveland enjoyed writing until his favorite writing teacher died; now, the death of his mother and his father's lifestyle have given him further excuses to grow fat and do nothing with his life, which is frustrating to Arthur. Art and Cleveland discuss exaggerated images of "bigness" they have both had, and share some dreams and thoughts. Cleveland tells Art he would like to meet Art's father, admitting he is doing work for the "underworld," picking up and delivering for Art's "uncle" Lenny Stern. Art is not pleased with the idea of Cleveland meeting his father.

Jane Bellwether, back from New Mexico, shows up unexpectedly at the vacation home and gets into a physical fight with Cleveland, angry over the dog incident. Jane obviously loves Cleveland but disapproves of his behavior. Jane privately asks Art if Cleveland is



dealing drugs, and Art truthfully tells her no, but does not tell her he is involved in criminal activity. Jane and Cleveland continue to fight and make up. Arthur thinks things between them cannot last much longer.

## Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

Arthur expresses feeling the "stealthy entrance of creepiness into his unsecured summer," and has a sense that things are probably about to go wrong somehow. Unsecured means having no plans, no obligations and total freedom, which may not be as great as he has thought. Cleveland's attack on his sister when he was fifteen was turned into a funny story when he tells Art, but it is seriously demented and reveals his early rage. Phlox is exerting more pressure on Art than he wants. His sense of waiting for the next telltale footfall indicates that he knows something dreadful must be ahead.

Jane's arrival brings chaos, but also brings fresh food and vegetables. The trouble that is brewing is that Cleveland seems to think that he can do something big through Art's connections with the mob. It is clear that Arthur is expecting something to happen with Cleveland and since Cleveland sees himself as "evil incarnate," we, as readers, are slightly uncomfortable about Art's safety at this point.



# Chapters 12 and 13

## Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

Art is happy to see Phlox when he gets home from his short vacation. He makes an effort to enjoy her bad taste in decor, and they play a wrenching game of Twister. He has settled into a routine of spending nights with Phlox, the "evil love nurse," working at the bookstore during the day, and spending time with Cleveland, Arthur and Jane. The four of them meet Art after work, dressed up and walking in pairs. Cleveland mentions he wants to meet with Art on Wednesday, but does not say why.

Out to dinner, Phlox and Art are planning to see Ella Fitzgerald later in the evening. While they eat in a restaurant together, Arthur and Phlox are not getting along, and Art sides with Arthur in an argument over a song. Arthur tells Phlox something uncomplimentary that has been said about her, and Phlox begins to cry. Her feelings hurt, she decides to leave. Art asks Arthur to apologize, which he does, half-heartedly. Art and Phlox escape the "industrial" loudness of cicadas and kiss in the lobby of a restaurant they have ducked into to escape the noise. Arthur seems to have been picking on Phlox. They skip the Ella Fitzgerald concert.

Arthur is now house sitting for a wealthy couple, the woman being the local television weather person. He has finally conquered a recent case of scabies. After the rough night at the restaurant with Arthur and Phlox, Arthur calls Art to apologize and they agree to get together later in the day.

The bookstore is having problems with leaking pipes, a small fire and vandals. The employees are asked to leave early the morning after the fire. Walking in the summer heat to Arthur's temporary house, Art sees Abdullah who is driving by in his Fiat convertible. Art and Arthur go for a walk and remember the party at Riri's where they met. Art tells Arthur that he loves Phlox, and that somehow Arthur was the reason they are together. Arthur admits he did not think Art would like Phlox.

The two decide to go swimming at the country club and Art realizes he is in love with Arthur, and is aroused by him. Art recalls being at this place years ago as a boy, and vomiting on his mother.

The two return to Art's apartment, where they smoke marijuana together. Stoned, Arthur takes a call from Art's dad, and pretends he is Art. Art's father says he is coming to Pittsburgh for a week. Arthur confronts Art about being dependent on his father when he could be doing something less frivolous with his life, with which Art agrees.

## Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

Art seems somewhat relieved to see Phlox this time. His vacation with Cleveland and Arthur has been intense, and he is glad to get back into a familiar routine. He is allowing



himself to love her, even though her taste and lifestyle is totally different from his own, as well as somewhat tacky. He is also enjoying not have to totally compartmentalize his friends, but Arthur and Phlox's continuing competition for Art is causing problems.

The stifling heat of summer in Pittsburgh is palpable in these chapters, including the activity of the cicadas. The din from the cicadas is symbolic of the refuge Art finds with Phlox from his confusing thoughts and the need to think about his life - he simply escapes with Phlox and his friends into the lull of their lives, rather than finding one of his own. They are creating the white noise in his life that is temporarily drowning out his need to deal with personal issues.

There is a recurring theme of meals and restaurants in this story; they all seem to eat in restaurants every day. When confronted with the truth about his dependence on his father, Art's reaction was to become "insanely hungry."



# Chapters 14 and 15

## Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

When he talks to Phlox on the phone, Art tells her he has spent the day with Arthur and she invites him to her apartment where her roommate is having a party, complete with pot roast and vegetables. After telling her that she cannot meet his father, Art and Phlox go to the Italian restaurant to meet with his father after all. Phlox and Art's dad get along well, and Phlox asks many questions about Art's deceased mother. His father is sad that Art has not told her about his mother.

While Phlox is in the restroom, the notorious ganster Uncle Lenny and his wife Elaine show up and sit with Art and Joe Bechstein. There are two thugs with guns nearby, wearing the family's coat of arms, presumably there to protect Joe. Elaine talks about Italians she has known who might be related to Phlox. Lenny begins to talk about what an angel Art's mother was, and Art goes to the restroom to vomit, obviously disturbed by the appearance of Lenny and the thugs. Later in bed, Art tells Phlox that the old Patti Page song they are hearing makes him nostalgic for a time he never knew, which is what everything he loves does to him.

Art waits near the cloud factory for his meeting with Cleveland. He and Phlox have screamed at each other, since she did not want him to go. Cleveland shows up, still drunk, saying he is broke, and proclaiming his love for Jane. They ride to a part of town Art has never seen, a poor neighborhood along the Allegheny river. They climb staircases up ridges and finally reach a small house set into the side of a hill on stilts. Cleveland has come to this poverty-stricken family to collect on a loan; he tells Art later that the unemployed man and the two women who live there are siblings, and he is not sure to whom the baby belongs. Art is appalled that Cleveland can do this, and Cleveland thinks he does it because it is fun and fascinating, and also because it is bad, like him. Art realizes as they visit these homes that the people really are fascinating, and that, although they do not like Cleveland, there is something comfortable between him and them. One woman says Cleveland resembles his father, and gets "uglier every week."

## Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

Something about his mother and her death is too painful for Art to manage. He is so sensitive that he is unable to talk with his father without crying, and the mention of his mother's qualities makes him physically ill. Although the reader already knows that Art has some issues about love and friendship, it is becoming more apparent that his mother and her death are at the heart of some of his deepest pain.

Art is now seeing the underbelly of his father's family's wealth and does not like it, but is somehow fascinated with it, in spite of his disgust. Seeing real people living their lives in these low circumstances is something he has never experienced. His outrage does not



drive him away from the scene, but he stays with Cleveland while the debts are collected. This may be the most of real life he has ever witnessed.



# Chapters 16 and 17

## Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

Cleveland sees other men at one of the rundown houses who look similar to him, mounted on motorcycles. Cleveland begins running toward them, falls and steps on his glasses. One of the men, named Feldman, tells Art there are four people in a house that Art recognizes as one they had been to earlier where the elderly woman lived. When Art goes into the nasty house with Feldman, he sees Cleveland fighting with a huge black man named Lurch, and the elderly couple cowering. Feldman pulls a gun and tells them to stop. Cleveland tells Feldman that he has already "juiced" the couple earlier for seventy-five dollars.

Feldman asks Art's opinion, since he is the son of "Joe the Egg." Art tries to deny much contact with his father, but they tell him what room his father is staying in at the hotel. Lurch is abusive to the older man, pulling his hat hard over his head, and they leave. Art learns that Lurch and Feldman became friends when they were in rival motorcycle gangs. When they are alone, Art asks Cleveland what the point of this has been. Cleveland wants him to see that he can command power and respect just because he is Bechstein's son. Cleveland is still insisting on meeting Art's father, which Art refuses. Art realizes that he has not insulated himself, but instead has left himself wide open because of his need for friends and his need to experience Cleveland's world. He feels close to Cleveland when they are on Cleveland's motorcycle, Art in Cleveland's sister's helmet.

Cleveland lives in a shanty in the woods decorated with cartoon figures, filled with clutter and books and evidence of various roommates. Art considers escaping while Cleveland is getting cleaned up, but settles for calling Phlox, who does not answer the phone.

Cleveland dons a tie and they knock at Art's father's hotel room door, where they can hear men talking. One of the gangsters answers the door and tells Art his father is busy and will see him later. Cleveland knocks again, however, and Art's father summons them in, where uncle Lenny and five other men were sitting. One of them, Frankie Breezy, recognizes Cleveland. In a very strained conversation, Art tells his father that Cleveland needs a job. One of Art's father's acquaintances, Mr. Punicki, who has been feuding with Frankie Breezy, has a biker son himself. Frankie says aloud that Cleveland is a "squeeze," and doesn't belong there. However, Mr. Punicki says he will give Cleveland a job, and hands him a written note. Art's dad is furious wants to see him at five, but Art refuses and tries not to cry. Art and Cleveland stop at the hotel bar, Art in a state of fear and Cleveland in a "nervous reverie." Cleveland realizes that he has damaged Art's relationship with his father.



Art calls Phlox but she is angry with him, so he goes to see Arthur. Arthur hugs and holds him and they have sex in the weather woman's bed. He sees Arthur at the window signaling the news to the neighbors of what has just happened.

## Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

Obviously, not only Cleveland knows about Art's father, but all of the other thug gangsters know him, as well. This is a frightening revelation that even Art has not yet really absorbed. He seems to sense he is on a crash course, and of course, wishes he could see Phlox, who he tries to replace as his mother figure when he is uncomfortable. Cleveland does not try to sugar-coat himself - he calls his house Casa del Fear, and he has stolen everything but his motorcycle. Art knows he is bad, but is drawn to him nonetheless. Cleveland is determined to meet Art's father because he thinks it will somehow be to his advantage. He will go find him with or without Art.

Knowing better, Art feels forced to take Cleveland into his father's room among a group of gangsters and asks his father to give Cleveland a job. This is obviously about the worst thing he could do in his father's eyes, and although Art has to hold back tears, he goes through with it for his "friend," who is not much of a friend. Art has not had enough friendship or love in his life, and now will do almost anything for his friends. He refers to Phlox as his God. He finally gives in to his loving feelings for Arthur out of sheer desperation for the affection and intimacy he needs so badly, especially now that he has offended and possibly estranged his father. He has mixed feelings about sex with Arthur - he is elated to be the one not in control, and at the same time is crying and heartbroken.



# Chapters 18 and 19

## Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

After sitting with a stranger who tells Art a symbolic story of how women have the heart of policemen, Art goes to Phlox's house. Phlox knows immediately that he has been with someone else. She seems to know it was Arthur, and they spend a strange, strained day together. When Art arrives at the bookstore he sees his father buying a stack of books. He agrees to meet him on Wednesday.

Art sends roses to Phlox, and ends up eating a spicy Chinese lunch with Arthur. Phlox appears before them, angry and hurt, and knows about Art's lies and about the two of them. Arthur tells Art not to bother calling him. In an instant, Art has lost them both.

Cleveland arrives at Art's apartment and they make cheese sandwiches. Cleveland delivers a note to Art from Phlox, which explains how angry and disgusted she is with him. She feels he needs help and that his homosexual relationship with Arthur is disgusting and wrong. She tells him goodbye and to call her years from now. Cleveland has been working for Carl Punicki and is dirty, half stoned and drunk. Art finally agrees to let Cleveland read the letter from Phlox, which Cleveland thinks is simply an ultimatum. Art is crying; Cleveland is suggesting he choose between Arthur and Phlox, and he thinks Art is only experimenting with his sexuality. Cleveland tells Art he has learned how to deactivate an alarm system for "Poon," who is a jewelry fence, and whom Cleveland plans to steal for. When Art objects, Cleveland threatens him not to tell his father, or he will tell about Art's affair with Arthur. Cleveland leaves, taking Phlox's letter with him.

Art flips a coin to decide who it will be, Phlox or Arthur, and, although Phlox wins, he still decides on Arthur.

## Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

Art's anticipated rise in friendship and intimacy has exploded in his face and he is faced with some realities he did not expect. He cannot choose between Arthur and Phlox because they each provide him with a certain fulfillment of his needs and he loves them both for it. Perhaps, ultimately, he does not really love either of them, but has needed their friendship so badly that he interprets it as love. Phlox has been through losing a boyfriend to a homosexual affair in the past, and either intuits the situation or is told by Arthur or Cleveland. People seem to know things in this story, implying that the circle of tight friendship is one of which Art is kept outside.

Cleveland's announcement that he is going to be burglarizing houses for Punicki is mortifying to Art. Cleveland comes over and, as usual, seems like a friend to Art, but his motives are always about himself. This time, he has come over because he is hungry, and because he has some need to tell Art of his illegal activities. Although he wants Art

to think he is a friend, his threats are real. Art's social world is crumbling, and he decides he is in love with Arthur.



# Chapters 20 and 21

## Chapters 20 and 21 Summary

Art and Arthur have a luxurious affair in the weather woman's apartment, eating well, having their laundry done and having sex. Art is nervous, energetic and afraid, with a new excitement for the city. The weather woman's black maid sees the two of them in bed and screams her apologies. Art feels "frightened and lucky all the time." The weather has turned humid and misty, like Venus, and odd things seem to be happening around the city. Art is finding sex with Arthur an increasingly strange and a bit more violent.

Art's father wants to see him, and has extended his visit so they can see a movie together, but Art tells him he will be bringing a friend; when his father objects, Art calls off the movie, Cleveland molesting him throughout the phone conversation. Art feels that with Arthur, he is free of his father, Cleveland.

Arthur's mother comes to deliver his mended clothing, and Art makes them all coffee. Seeing how different and haggard Arthur's mother is, Art realizes that Arthur has invented himself and his identity. Arthur begins to mock Catholicism and brings his mother close to tears. Arthur's mother is a simple woman who cleans nice homes for a living. Art tells Arthur later how he had imagined Arthur's childhood; Arthur says that lavish childhood belonged to Cleveland. The two take a walk into a lesser neighborhood, and see Cleveland in a pickup truck with a vicious dog in back. Art fears he will never see Cleveland again. The move out of the weather woman's home, and after staying with Art at his apartment for three days, Arthur moves on to another house sitting job.

Phlox tricks Art into thinking he must settle a missing book at the library or he will not graduate. He is overjoyed to see her and says he loves her. He is happy to be with a woman again and they make love in a small room upstairs in the library. Later that evening as he walks to Phlox's house he experiences nostalgia for something that has been dead a long time. He isn't sure if he is really this in love with Phlox or if he is finally settling on his heterosexuality. Art tells Phlox about Cleveland taking her letter, and lies that Cleveland did not read it. They have only been separated ten days. Later, Art has anal sex with Phlox, and he leaves, wishing the summer were over, then feeling ashamed for wishing it. Arthur is on the phone when Art gets home. They take a walk and Art confesses he has slept with Phlox; Arthur is upset and asks Art not to leave him, but Art asks him not to make him choose. Art cries and is confused, wondering if he is just caving into his father's values by trying to be heterosexual. Arthur tells him he failed a foreign service exam; they make love on the step where they are sitting; Art throws up and they go home to bed.



## Chapters 20 and 21 Analysis

Arthur, in his naivety, mentions that black people confuse him. He has cooked elaborate dinners, and generally gives the impression that he has lived in relative comfort all his life. Together they seem to be at home in a lavish lifestyle.

The author portrays a steamy, vaporous humidity in Pittsburgh, which can be symbolic of the state of the two men during these last days at the weather woman's house. Art, who has been pushing the envelope all summer, now manages to talk to his father on the phone while Arthur seduces him - a very daring act for him. When Arthur's mother turns out to be a regular, working person. Arthur is obviously embarrassed by her, since she has blown his image, but Art enjoys the irony.

Once again, seeing Cleveland with a vicious dog portends trouble, and Art becomes sad that he may lose Cleveland. This so confuses him that he turns off to Arthur and withdraws from him. Art is fickle, not because he bounces from one to another, but because he wants love from all of his friends.

Art's sexuality is a huge question for him. He wants it all; when he is with Phlox he wants her; when he is with Arthur, he wants him. He is operating on his feelings from moment to moment, not understanding if or how they all fit together. He has no idea who he is.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Cleveland has returned, groomed and well-dressed, on his motorcycle to the town of his early childhood. He is in his dark frame of mind and is planning to do something bad, for which he has steeled himself with alcohol. He parks at a small shopping center and proceeds to walk an hour through the woods that lay behind it. He thinks of himself as a jewel thief, and is expecting great amounts of money. Cleveland's teacher, Pete Arcola, has been oddly anxious, but their boss, Punicki, has set up elaborate precautions for the fencing operation they intend to pull off. Arcola and Cleveland have wondered if Frankie Breezy has been making threats, but Cleveland was more nervous, for some reason, that Art's father might be around, watching him. Finally arriving in the vicinity of the house he plans to rob, Cleveland checks it out from a tree. They have chosen it because there are no watchdogs. Cleveland wistfully watches the family inside sharing dinner. As he sneaks through the yard he daydreams about buying a trailer and traveling the country with Jane. Finding the home's library window open, he sneaks in and takes back out a few very large books to stand on. He pries open the bedroom window and begins to gather jewelry - heirlooms and anniversary presents. He finds a doll, pops its head off and pours the jewelry into it, and when he drops down onto the lawn he hears a siren.

Joe Beckstein has been in an angry rage, and has told Frankie Stern to make sure Cleveland learns a lesson. Frankie guesses the lesson was really intended for Art, which it was. Since Frankie and Punicki are not friends anyway, Frankie makes sure Cleveland gets caught.

As Cleveland runs through the woods holding his baby doll, he gets lost once, and when he gets to his motorcycle and takes off he realizes he does not know where he is going and he is too drunk. He calls Art, who is staying home avoiding sex of any kind. Cleveland says he is coming to get him, so Art gets on his battle dress and joins Cleveland on the back of his motorcycle, not asking about the doll. Cleveland says he suspects Joe Bechstein's involvement, but Art thinks his father has maybe wanted him to be more involved in the family business all these years. Cleveland ditches the doll and leaves Art near the Cloud Factory with quarters, telling him to call all the wise guys and tell them to lay off.

Art's father won't accept a collect call. Art hears sirens and sees Cleveland being chased. Standing on the museum steps trying to see what's happening, he sees Cleveland emerge from a nearby street with a helicopter hovering over him. Cleveland tries to ride toward Art; the police arrest Art. Art watches as Cleveland scales the side of the Cloud Factory, still carrying his doll. Reaching the top, above it all for a moment, Cleveland slips and falls from the tower.





## Chapter 22 Analysis

Art has never been anything but fascinated with Cleveland's badness. He has been amazingly unafraid to go places with him and to be his friend, even when he knows what Cleveland is up to. The author does not say how naive Art is, but Art says so in so many words. He clearly could not grasp the danger of the situation he would be in if he went with Cleveland and even when he gets arrested, he is urging Cleveland to come down the steps instead of going up. It seems like a gangster movie, the way Art is watching it all take place.

Art has described Cleveland's "will to bigness," almost with admiration.

It is also interesting how Cleveland never really realizes how estranged Art is from his father, convinced until the end that Art could somehow pull some sway with the mafia. Cleveland's estrangement from his own family is partly what draws Art to him. They are both lost, lonely, insecure and needy little boys in mens' bodies.

Art is realizing that he loves people, other than his family.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

Art does not remember resisting arrest, but wakes up with a sore head from blows of a police truncheon. He sees Uncle Lenny in his hospital room, who has gotten him a good room. Lenny assures Art that he has friends who will take care of things, including the cop who hit Art in the head. Confused and upset, Art asks Lenny why his father had Cleveland killed. Lenny says poor Cleveland was a beginner and brought the heat on himself. Art demands to know who called the police on Cleveland, and Lenny defers to Joe Bechstein, who will soon arrive. Lenny gives in finally and admits that Art's father was only looking out for him. Art confronts Lenny with the fact that his own mother was mistakenly killed instead of his father.

Art hears his father all day trying to get in to see him, but Art has instructed the nurse he wants no visitors at all. His father finally leaves, and Art silently dresses and gathers his things and leaves the hospital. When he arrives at his home, Arthur is there. They embrace, crying over Cleveland.

Arthur tells Art that Art's father's thugs visited him and told him to leave town. Phlox's letter, which had been on Cleveland when he died, revealed Art's affair with Arthur. Art is surprisingly calm, realizing his father knows about his homosexuality. Art says he wants Arthur to go to Cleveland's funeral with him. Afraid, the two of them check into the Duquesne hotel where Art's father always stays. They leave for Spain together, taking only a few valuables.

Art realizes that who he is now is a result of his love for Arthur and Cleveland, with a trace of Phlox. He will not see his father again and Arthur is in Majorca. Art knows he can father himself, but he can never be a "world," like Phlox. He visited her world, and has left only her stocking.

He and Arthur did go to Paris, and on to Barcelona, but they eventually had only Cleveland in common.

Cleveland's funeral was like a circus, the service conducted by a dwarf great uncle, Cleveland's sister Anna in his leather jacket, and an assortment of characters in attendance, including the stoic Jane. Art now regrets missing the event.

Art recalls that he spent that summer in a sensual abandon - the people he loved were celebrities and the places he sat with them were movie lots and monuments, but he has probably exaggerated it all because of his nostalgia, which "obliterates the past."



## Chapter 23 Analysis

This conclusion to Art Bechstein's summer was also the end of his childhood. His disgust for Lenny and his father, and the waste of losing Cleveland makes it very clear to him that he no longer wants anything to do with any of them. Refusing to see his father in the hospital is a triumph for Art; he is finally speaking his truth and letting it be known that he is not under his father's authority ever again. Art is also realizing that he will soon be able to cry, to properly grieve the loss of his mother and now, of his father, as well. he realizes that what Phlox left him with was better than what he was left with from his homosexual affairs. His way of ending the story by telling us that it was probably all exaggerated is not simply comical, but emphasizes how stark and vivid this summer was for him and how it has stayed in his mind and changed him permanently.



# Characters

## Art Bechstein

The protagonist and narrator of this story, Art Bechstein is a complex young man with an unusual set of circumstances. Art's relationship with his father is tenuous and sensitive. Art almost always cries when he is with his father, who seems disappointed in Art no matter what he does. Art's mother was killed when he was thirteen, and he has not been able to speak about her ever since. Although his father lied that she had been killed in a car accident, Art does not know what happened to her, but he knows that whatever it was, it was connected to something secretive. He knows that the false identity his father wears is one that he wears with Art, as well. Art spends a lot of time trying to discover who his father really is. When he tells Art he is in the mafia, Art is enthused, but due to his father's shame about it, Art becomes ashamed of it, as well.

Being socially inept as a kid, Art now berates himself for his failure to "encounter, to risk, to land myself in a novel and incomprehensible situations - to misunderstand, in fact.." The story begins when Art realizes that he needs to put himself in interesting situations and observe interesting people; he has realized that he has kept to himself too long, and now has a free summer to find out what it's like to be a regular person out in the world with friends.

Art is very polite, quite shy and extremely sensitive. He has been emotionally damaged by the loss of his mother, and has never talked about her. Her death has been shrouded in secrecy, and he holds the truth in the back of his mind for years without speaking of it. In this particular summer, all of the holding on Art has been doing as a child finally breaks away. He angers his father to the point where the relationship is beyond repair. He explores the dark side of the criminal world, drinks incessantly and throws caution to the wind, after living such a guarded, withdrawn life. Art learns a lot in one summer about friendship, love, sexuality and himself, as he tries to choose between Arthur and Phlox, feels love for the outlaw Cleveland, and dares to stand up to his father, who he has tried to please for so long. He had planned to become a responsible adult in the fall, but this summer of freedom forces him to reconsider working with his father, and reconsider his values.

After leaving with Arthur for Europe, their relationship eventually dissolves. Art realizes after his relationships with Phlox, Arthur and Cleveland that it is not love eludes us, but friendship.

## Arthur LeComte

Arthur meets Art Bechstein on the street after Art has seen him working in the library. Arthur is openly gay, and has a well-dressed, confident charm about him that Art is immediately drawn to. Arthur survives by working at the university library and house



sitting while people are on vacation, sometimes in the suburbs and occasionally in very upscale homes. While in those environments he feels free to sleep in the beds of the owners with his sex partners, and generally uses the places as party venues. However, he is well-spoken and intriguing, and seems to have come from an aristocratic background. Arthur hints to Art many times that he is interested in having more than a friendship with him. He seems to know that Art does have homosexual feelings and will eventually come around. Arthur's and his gay friend, Abdullah, use one another for sex, but remain just friends. However, there is tension between Arthur and Phlox as they vie for Art's love.

Arthur's plan is to become a foreign ambassador. He moves in a circle of international friends, primarily rich kids whose parents have sent them off to college. He seems to stay somewhat above the party scene, always polite and observing others' behaviors. He became close friends with the wild Cleveland Arning when they were young, outcast students in Catholic school.

Arthur is quite sensitive. He feels guilty when he allows Cleveland into the Bellwether's home; he goes to mass in the middle of a drinking session with his friends. We learn that he actually comes from a very humble background, and that his mother cleans homes, a fact of which he is ashamed. His sophisticated facade is cracked in front of Art when his mother visits him, bringing him mended shirts. She is religious, humble and slightly poor and, although Arthur loves her and wants to please her, he must maintain his other identity.

Arthur tells Art that he sees himself as a free agent, an "atom" that bounces around among his friends. Art describes Arthur as courtly, frank, condescending, elitist and having a lack of candor, all of which he admires. We learn through Jane that Arthur spent a wild year in Mexico and caught hepatitis; there are implications he is promiscuous.

## **Cleveland Arning**

Close friend to Arthur LeComte, Cleveland sees himself as evil incarnate. He lusts in a deep way for something bigger and better, and sees increase in everything, including his growing belly. Cleveland is desperately in love with Jane Bellwether, but not enough to change his life for her. He is always going after the big prize. He rides a big motorcycle, wears big glasses, drinks a lot and pushes his way into peoples' lives for his own benefit. When Art first met Cleveland, Cleveland had appeared at the bookstore on his motorcycle and appeared to kidnap Art. His blustery manner is fairly effective in getting people around him to do what he wants. Now that he has gotten to know Art, Cleveland thinks he can hit the big time because Art's dad is a mafia boss. Cleveland is already working indirectly for Art's uncle Lenny, but he wants to meet the more powerful man and, in his insistence, ends up ruining any chances he may have had, as well as damaging Art's relationship with his father forever.



Cleveland was a privileged child raised with every luxury and convenience, but his mother committed suicide and Cleveland turned bad. Cleveland injured his sister when they were younger, and has constructed an image of being a bad person, which he fully intends to live out. It is not clear whether he was aware of the destructive direction he was heading in. His friends talk about his exploits as if they look up to him.

When Cleveland tries to burglarize a home for jewels, one of Art's father's associates who does not like Uncle Lenny makes sure that Cleveland gets caught by the police. The police chase Cleveland all over Pittsburgh but, ironically, it is a fall from the Cloud Factory that kills him, not a policeman's bullet.

Cleveland is very much an opportunist. He likes Art, but actually only befriends him in an effort to get more business from Art's father. He wants to get rich and move away with Jane, but he is doomed, if only by his commitment to trouble. He was a very damaged child who is somehow determined to meet a violent death.

## **Phlox Lombardi**

Phlox Lombardi is employed at the university library, like Arthur. She is eccentric in her dress and mannerisms, and has clearly been trying to figure out what her identity really is. Prior to meeting Art, she was called Mau Mau and was a punk with piercings. Now she dresses in feminine, somewhat gaudy clothing and has changed her image to that of a more fashionable girl. Phlox has created her own world as a reflection of herself. Her apartment and everything in it reflects a certain girlishness, and she wears lots of lipstick and perfume. She often speaks in quotes from literature because it is more comfortable for her. She has romantic visions of love, and very quickly decides she is in love with Art. She has had many boyfriends and seems to know a lot about boys and sex. Phlox is suspicious of Arthur's intentions toward Art from the beginning, and she battles to keep Art as her boyfriend, even becoming estranged with Arthur over their mutual jealousy.

Phlox was poised and pleasant when she met Art's father, and wanted to know more about the family, to which she would like to belong. When she realizes Art and Arthur are having an affair, she is somewhat heartbroken and reveals that this may have happened to her before. Even after they break up, she tries to get Art back, setting up a false phone call to him from the library. Phlox is also coming of age in this story, and we hope she will leave Pittsburgh and find a career.

## **Joe Bechstein**

His father has tried to spare Art the life of a gangster by sending him to college. He wants Art to have relationships with better women than Art's earlier girlfriend, Claire. Also referred to as "Joe the Egg," Joe is kind-hearted, but is still a gangster. He wants the best for his son. He has given Art mixed messages about the mafia. On one hand, he would like to show Art the ropes and have him working for him after college but, on



the other hand, he would like Art to never have to be exposed to that kind of life, for him to have unsoiled hands.

Joe is very disappointed in Art over the fact that Art never tells anyone about his mother. In fact, he is disappointed in Art, in general, which never fails to make Art cry when they meet. He desperately wants a relationship with his son, but in the end, he is responsible, indirectly, for the death of Cleveland, just as he was responsible, indirectly, for the death of Art's mother. One could say that Joe Bechstein meant well, but his chosen field was no way to raise a child.

Rather than tell Jane what Joe Bechstein does, which was manipulate "Swiss bank accounts with money that comes from numbers, whores, protection, loan sharks and cigarette smuggling," Art simply tells her his father is in "finance."

## **Lenny Stern and Elaine Stern**

Lenny Stern, or "Uncle Lenny," is not truly Art Bechstein's uncle, but is a close friend of the family's through their gangster connections, and has known Art since he was little. Uncle Lenny is a large man, as is his obnoxious wife, Elaine. At one point Art describes his large pastel pants and white shoes. Lenny tries to be a nurturer to Art, who really wants very little to do with him. Lenny and Joe want Art to care about "Aunt," Elaine, which he does not.

Lenny is a loan shark and owns jewelry stores. Lenny and gangster, Frankie Breezy, have young men, like Cleveland, collecting inflated debts from the poor people who are forced to borrow from the mafia.

Lenny has come to visit Art in the hospital after Art is beaten by the police for trying to defend Cleveland. Lenny makes sure things are taken care of; he gets a better room for Art, and says he will take care of the cop who beat him. Uncle Lenny is a typical gangster character from the movies. He is not altogether bright, and can be brutal, but he does care about Art and does not want him to suffer. Lenny inadvertently lets Art know that his suspicions about his mother being killed accidentally, instead of his father, were true.

## **Carl Punicki**

Punicki is in the room when Cleveland and Art force their way into the gangster's meeting so that Art can meet Joe Bechstein. Punicki and Frankie Breezy, who has been giving Cleveland "work," have a territorial dispute. When Art announces that they have come because Cleveland wants a job, Frankie Breezy and Joe Bechstein get very angry, but Carl Punicki steps in and promises to give Cleveland a job. Joe Bechstein has been forced to do business with Punicki and none of them are necessarily friends with Punicki, so the fact that Cleveland, who is already working for Frankie, comes in looking for a job, does not set well with Frankie or Joe. Carl is the one who teaches



Cleveland how to be a "jewel thief," and sets him up with his first burglary job, which gets him killed.

## Jane Bellwether, Mrs. Bellwether

Jane Bellwether is a most unlikely girlfriend for Cleveland Arning. She is drawn to him because he is dangerous and because he is an outlaw, but she comes from a proper family who does not want her to associate with Cleveland. She is an attractive and smart young woman, but she is addicted to Cleveland's bad-boy personae, and sneaks away to be with him, even after her parents have gone so far as to tell him Jane is dead.

Jane knows that Cleveland is up to no good, but when she confronts Art and asks him if Cleveland is selling drugs, Art is relieved to tell her the truth - that he was not. He does not tell her that Cleveland is working for the mafia, however.

Jane's mother is neurotic and their family is almost comical. She and her mother go to New Mexico together and, when they return, they find that their precious collie dog who was in heat when they left has been purposely impregnated by the neighbor's pit bull, thanks to Cleveland. We learn that Mrs. Bellwether has, at some point, hit the dog in the head with a ball-peen hammer, but the dog is her pride and joy somehow.

## Abdullah

Abdullah appears early in the story and is Arthur's on again-off again lover. He is French Lebanese, wealthy, and drives a convertible, recklessly. He spends the night with Arthur while Arthur is house sitting for people who are away on vacation, including the Bellwethers. "Dudu" hangs out with a group of students who come from foreign countries, such as Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Africa and Guatamala. A comical character due to his broken English, he holds Arthur in high regard. When Arthur threatens him to stay away from "Richard," Abdullah tells Jane to tell Arthur he cannot have a claim on everyone like he thinks. Dudu is important to the story because he is Arthur's fallback when he is alone.

## Frankie Breezy

Frankie Breezy is a mobster who is in the room when Cleveland and Art force their way in trying to get an audience with Joe Bechstein. Frankie Breezy has been feuding with Carl Punicki for years over a region in the Monongahela Valley with regard to their mob activities. When Art announces that Cleveland wants a job, Frankie becomes extremely angry, not only because they have intruded on a private meeting, but because Cleveland is already one of his workers, a "squeeze" he employs to collect on loans. His presence in this scene is important because it becomes clear that Cleveland and Art do not realize that they are playing with fire by pushing their way into this undercover meeting of mobsters, nor do they know about the strained relationship between Frankie





Breezy and Carl Punicki. It is an insult to Frankie that Cleveland comes in looking for a job, obviously hoping for a better one than he has.

## **Carl Punicki**

Carl Punicki is a major jewel fence who has been feuding with Frankie Breezy over territory. When Art and Cleveland interrupt the meeting of the mobsters, Carl might be amused that Cleveland has humiliated Frankie Breezy by looking for a job when Breezy already employs him. Punicki offers Cleveland a job, and trains him in security systems and how to burglarize.

## **Riri**

Riri is an Iranian friend of Arthur LaComte and Abdullah, and the first party that Art attends with his new friends is at her beautiful mansion which is situated next to the college campus where her father is a professor. She is beautiful and her home is erotic and ornate. She is hosting a house full of people from all nationalities. Arthur and Abdullah seem to fit right into this group and Art is intrigued by the nature of friendship, as he drinks and parties with these people. Art describes her as having an "eagling" kind of beauty, "hooked and dark, and mean about the eyes."

## **Velva**

Velva is a black maid for the "weatherwoman," whose house is being watched over by Arthur. Art and Arthur are in bed having sex when Velva enters the room unexpectedly. She screams and runs from the room. They are not sure if she plans to call the police, or what she will do, but they find it comical. Velva goes about her business with no further reaction.



# Objects/Places

## Pittsburgh, PA

A culturally diverse city, Pittsburgh serves as a backdrop for Art Bechstein's wild summer after college graduation. The home of Carnegie Institute and the Carnegie Mellon University, where Art and most of his friends have gone to school, Pittsburgh is, in some ways like any other American city. The district within the city called Oakland sits at the top of a huge ravine, which is spanned by three bridges. Down in the hole is a "Lost Neighborhood, the Cloud Factory, train tracks and a huge amount of garbage." The ravine has long staircases from the city streets down to the There are apartment buildings, some of which were upscale in their day. Art lives at the Terrace, which overlooks some of the city.

The home of the Bellwethers' is in a nice suburb. Riri's lavish home is in a an expensive area just off campus. The weather woman's flat is quite elegant. Uncle Lenny lives in the Hill District. The Duquesne hotel where Joe Bechstein stays is elegant and expensive. There is a typical mix of districts that make this town like every other town, except for the ravine, which is symbolic for Art's dive into his inner self throughout the story. There is a tavern section of town where Art and Arthur go the first night after they've met, and down from that, the Boardwalk Bookstore.

Art and Arthur spend time sitting on the steps looking down into the ravine, watching children play baseball and watching the Cloud Factory. The ravine is important to the story because it is where we begin to see Cleveland heading for trouble. Cleveland takes Art down to the Lost Neighborhood on his motorcycle, and at one point, takes the steps and falls. This neighborhood is where Cleveland collects on loans made by loan sharks for the mafia. Cleveland takes Art on a collection run with him so that Art can see what his father is responsible for, and so that he can pressure art for a meeting with his father, Joe Bechstein. Although the story takes place in Pittsburgh, Art's home town is Washington, DC, which is where his father has a permanent home.

Pittsburgh has its share of crime and drama, demonstrated by the scene early in the story wherein a policeman is injured and a fight is taking place in the street. Also, this is where Cleveland eventually tries to burglarize a house, which has a miles of woods between it and a shopping center.

## Hillman Library

The Hillman Library is part of the University. It is where Art first sees Arthur reading a book, and where Phlox works behind a grilled window repairing books. Although the library is not busy at this time of year, it is where many college students have spent many, many hours studying. It is large with marble steps and tiled floors, and is quite familiar to Art, who has spent the year, apparently focused only on his studies. The



quiet, subdued atmosphere at the library reflects the nature of Arthur's life up until this point.

## Cloud Factory

The Cloud Factory, named by Arthur, is a large stack that blows great white puffs of cloud intermittently, and no one is sure what is made there. It sits on the edge of the ravine of the lost neighborhood, and is the tower from which Cleveland finally falls to his death. It is symbolic in this story because these young people still have their heads in the clouds, with no clue about the real world or what it's like. They live in a fantasy world of partying and very little responsibility. The Cloud Factory is a name that an imaginative child would give to this industrial site which, in reality, is probably not pleasant, but in Art's budding awareness, seems surreal and fascinating.

## Boardwalk Bookstore

The Boardwalk bookstore is where Art is employed part-time as a clerk. He works with people who are studying to be paramedics, a draft dodger turned religious, and a stern woman named Valerie. It is a meaningless job for him, and he only works just as much as necessary so he can go back to his blossoming social life. The employees here tease Art about his sexuality and he is not sure if his association with Arthur has caused them to draw conclusions. Art gets kidnapped by Cleveland from the bookstore; he sees his friends coming down the street while he is working there; the bookstore catches fire and he is sent home - the bookstore serves as a base away from his apartment from where Art can spring into his social life.

## Duquesne Hotel

The largest and most lavish hotel in Pittsburgh, the Duquesne is where Art's father, who is obviously very well off, stays when he visits. This is also where Art and Cleveland make their ill-fated visit to Joe Bechstein and meet Carl Punicki. The hotel is lavish and perhaps, garish. Its facade of chandeliers and bellhops seems to be out of the 1930s, which reflects Joe Bechstein's personality. Like the beautiful hotel wherer mobsters meet and make decisions, Joe Bechstein is hiding his true life behind a facade of wealth and refinement.

## Lost Neighborhood

The city of Pittsburgh has a deep ravine that is spanned by several bridges. Down in the ravine is a neighborhood where the less fortunate live and play. There are steps down to the neighborhood, where Art and Arthur sometimes sit during the day. This is where Art goes with Cleveland on his motorcycle to watch him collect money from poor people who owe the loan sharks. Art realizes that he never wants to be one of these poor people, and his compassion for them is increased when he sees firsthand how they live.



He does find them interesting and colorful, but is ashamed that his father's money is partially a result of exploiting them.

## Terrace

The Terrace is an apartment complex where Art Bechstein lives, that was formerly an upscale development. It was where he moved to when he finally left Claire's apartment, and where Arthur came and stayed a couple of days with him. Art was not really pleased about having Arthur in his personal space, even though he cared for him. The Terrace is now just a middle-class apartment complex in a decent part of Pittsburgh, and represents a step toward freedom for Art, who has managed to leave an unsatisfying relationship and find a place of his own.

## College French Majors

Art in his narrative, goes on something of a tirade about people who major in the French language in college. He feels somewhat disrespectful toward Phlox for choosing this major, and sees that French students tend to become a stereotype. He expects that she will become immersed in what she considers a romantic field of study, and will learn all the trite French romances and poems and will speak French whenever she can to impress people. The bottom line, for Art, is all she will ever be able to do with a degree in French is teach, which will not bring her much money.

## Father-Son Relationship

Art's relationship in this story is very sad. Art wants nothing more than to be loved by his father, and he misses his mother terribly. The emptiness in his life affects his entire adolescence, and now, as a young man, the emptiness has finally reached a head. He does not talk directly of his relationship with his father, but only shows us how distant they are, with polite phone calls, polite formal lunches, and Art's ever-present fear of his friends knowing about or meeting his father. Art so needs his father's love and approval that he finds it hard not to cry when his father confronts him. Joe Bechstein loves his son, but because Joe cannot be a genuine person due to his profession, he keeps art at an emotional distance. Art, as this story progresses, learns to do the same with his father, finally rejecting him entirely.

## Homosexuality

Art Bechstein provides an interesting look at homosexuality in his narrative. He remembers wondering, and then deciding as an adolescent, that he was gay, but then deciding that was not the case after having been with a couple of young women. However, the stirrings inside of him rise up again when he meets Arthur LeComte and he ends up admitting his homosexuality and choosing Arthur over Phlox. Michael Chabon implies that homosexuality for Art is a result of his father's withholding of love,

and in Cleveland's case, the reason for his mother's suicide. He has Art choosing his sexuality, rather than knowing clearly what his preferences are. In his real life, Chabon has a wife and family, so it is not clear whether this story reflects his own past or not. Homosexuality is clearly one of the "mysteries" of Pittsburgh for Art Bechstein.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Many of the characters in this story are in the process of growing up, but Art Bechstein's telling of the story is primarily focused on the changes he experienced in himself during his summer after college graduation. Art has been a socially-handicapped boy, not only because of his mother's untimely death but because he holds secrets about his father and his family. He has been unsure of his sexuality, afraid of displeasing his father, and wary of women. He has not been sure where he fits in socially, since he comes from an atypical family. Completing college has helped him have the confidence to finally take the steps that he needs to figure out how people have fun and what it is that makes people friends, since he has not allowed anyone to get close to him. Even Claire, the early girlfriend whom he has left when the story begins, was not someone he was really close to.

Art's curiosity is piqued when he hears Arthur and Jane both comment about people who "really know how to have a good time." He is also fascinated by the relationships between Arthur, Cleveland, Jane, Abdullah and Phlox. Initially, as he meets and gets to know them, he places them on a huge pedestal, feeling that they have something he does not have in terms of confidence, friends, and some kind of perceived social status. As his relationships with each of them gels, he sees things about them that are imperfect and learns that none of them is exactly who they appear to be. His idolatry can be compared to a first-grade student who looks up to a fourth grade student - there is an air of mystery and drama about these more mature people that Art wants for himself.

Although Art had an inkling about his homosexuality back in high school, he had decided he was straight and had put the issue away until meeting Arthur LaComte. Art wants so much to connect with people that his relationships with Phlox and Arthur are equally gratifying. He has not been loved or cared for, and certainly not nurtured, for many years. He is too old to be nurtured by his father, or pseudo-uncle and aunt, and now that he finds the kind of affection he needs, he is too confused and happy to be able to choose between them. On the other hand, Art has learned that even good friendships come with strings attached and are not always as great as they seem. Cleveland uses him, Arthur may be using him, Phlox needs him and, although they all like him, he is ultimately still on his own.

Once he has seen that even friendships are fleeting and that everything keeps changing, Art finally finds the strength to reject the need for his father, who will never really come through for him emotionally. Art bravely chooses Arthur and leaves the country with him.



## Secrets, Lies and Hiding

At the very heart of Art Bechstein's personal and social problems is the lie about his mother's death, as well as the lies he must tell to keep secret the nature of his father's business. As a result of lies, Art holds a great deal of confusion inside of himself throughout his childhood, and as a college educated man, finally realizes that he cannot live in this withdrawn state all of his life. Only when Art refuses to see his father while he is in the hospital, does he finally speak his truth about how he feels about his life and his family. Throughout the meetings with his father, rather than say what is true for him - that he suspects his mother was killed by the mob and is in so much pain over losing her that he can't talk about her — Art breaks down and cries in pure sadness and frustration. The lie of his family almost ruins him and, if he had not undertaken to make new friends and break loose, he might have lived his entire adult life in misery and confusion. Art's curiosity about other people lies in the possibility that they are hiding something interesting under their personae, and he finds out that he is correct in suspecting that.

Cleveland's hidden pain is also connected to the loss of his mother, and the conclusion that he has drawn about himself, which is that he is evil. For all of his blustery biker ways and tough-guy facade, Cleveland is a sad little boy whose guilt makes him self-destructive.

Phlox is not exactly a liar, but she constructs her personae to match her current interests. While we know that in the past she has been a "punk" called Mau-Mau, she now pretends to be a sophisticated student of the French language, and has changed her entire wardrobe, makeup and personality accordingly. She goes from repeating snippets from French literature to crude innuendos, sometimes forgetting that she has changed. She does joke that she is a starlet and, of all the characters, she might be the most honest in the long run. Her emotional letter to Art vaguely admits that she has been through this same type of rejection in the past, and she does not hide that she has had many relationships with men. She is also bluntly honest about her disgust with male homosexuality.

Arthur LeComte is hiding the fact that his family is poor. Arthur is sleek, smooth, sophisticated, reserved and confident - or at least that is how he presents himself. We find out when his mother visits that everything he exudes is simply based on a decision he has made about how he wants to appear.

## Exploring Sexuality

Many layers of sexuality come through in this story. Art Bechstein, obviously, has some sexual exploring to do at this time in his life. He has never really been sure whether or not he is a homosexual and his love for Arthur, and even for Cleveland, make him question who he is. His desperate need to make love with Arthur is fairly graphically described, which coincides with the awakenings Art is experiencing in every aspect of the story.



Phlox has obviously had a rich sex life up to this time, since she seems very experienced in erotic arts and talks of other lovers. We get the impression that Phlox was perhaps even promiscuous before meeting Art Bechstein. She is not beautiful, but does not have any inhibitions about sex, or things like cooking naked and making sexual innuendos.

Arthur is promiscuous, and does not try to hide it. He sleeps with Abdullah when there is no one else, and tries throughout the story to get Art to sleep with him. He is not particularly concerned about what people think of him, laughing at the maid who sees him in bed with Art. This story takes place somewhat prior to the more promiscuous period of the sixties, but people are beginning to be much more open about their sexuality even then.

Cleveland and Jane are obviously intimate, but the most interesting thing about Cleveland is how he manages to get back at Jane's parents through their dog. Cleveland is not even supposed to be at the Bellwether home while they are gone, but he is there visiting Arthur, who is house sitting, and decides to allow the neighbor's dog to impregnate the Bellwether's very pampered collie who is in heat. It is a crude thing to do, as well as a violation, and Cleveland uses sex between the dogs to confirm, once again, what an evil dude he really is. Cleveland's mother committed suicide because his father announced his homosexuality, which perhaps contributes to Cleveland's determination to be a macho man.

## Parents and Children

The behaviors of quite a few characters in this story are affected by their parents and their upbringing. The author wants us to see that people are all deeply affected by their parents in some way or another.

Jane Bellwether, whose mother is quite neurotic and whose father may be simply passive, is drawn to the bad boy, Cleveland, because she has been overly protected in a family that tries hard to see itself as upscale and high-class. Jane even goes so far as to sneak away from her family, against their orders, to see Cleveland and spend time with him at his father's lake house. They have been dating for six years, and Cleveland has progressively grown fatter and more lax about his life, as well as becoming more involved in criminal behavior. Still, Jane is drawn to him.

Cleveland's mother having committed suicide, devastated him in an odd way. His anger at her and at his well-to-do homosexual father resulted in such bad behavior that he has decided he is a bad guy who belongs working for the mafia and being a burglar. He has rejected the wealthy lifestyle he knew as a child, and lives in meager circumstances, getting money from the jobs he does for the mob.

Arthur LeComte is so ashamed and embarrassed about his mother's poverty that he has built an entirely new personae that is the opposite of the truth. He does not





outwardly appear humble or middle class, but dresses, speaks and behaves as if he is a wealthy young man.

Art Bechstein, of course, is a very damaged young man, having lived a life with very little love and affection since the death of his mother, and having to keep secrets and lies for his father, not to mention having to meet his father's high expectations. In the beginning of the story, Art is assuming that once the summer is over, he will have to go to work in some capacity for his father. His father expects it, and he is accustomed to abiding by his father's wishes. By the end of the story, he has escaped that fate, a more enlightened man. Art's parents have everything to do with who he is, up until the point when he rejects his father entirely, which makes this story somewhat uplifting.

# Style

## Point of View

Arthur Bechstein, the protagonist of the story, is writing strictly from his own point of view in first person. He is omnipotent in his ability to see into the minds of his characters and, although he primarily describes his own experiences with them, we learn a lot about his friends through dialogue and through Art's "thinking" and evaluating of the characters. We are always aware that we are reading his own perception of the story, but the reader assumes it is all true. For example, even though Art was not with Cleveland during the jewel burglary, and never had a chance to find out how it all went, he describes it in great detail as if he were there. These are the times when the reader knows that Art is just imagining how this would have gone, but we buy into it, regardless. However, in the last paragraph, Art Bechstein admits that, as usual, he has exaggerated the whole story, so in a comical way, we do not know how reliable he is as the narrator of his own life.

## Setting

The story is set in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania perhaps in the early 1980s. Although there is a reference to marijuana and some other indicators, there is not much in the way of cultural reference points to define which decade. This particular college, Carnegie-Mellon University, seems to be a fairly orderly place of higher education, at least through Art's eyes. There is a reference to the "punk" stage that Phlox went through, piercing her nose which might indicate the '80s or '90s, however, it is also interesting that Art and Phlox had tickets to see a live performance by Ella Fitzgerald.

The characters walk around and live in the city of Pittsburgh, which has several distinct regions. We experience them spending time in a lovely park, looking down into the "lost neighborhood" built in a deep ravine on one industrial end of Pittsburgh. The only part of the college campus that the reader is exposed to is the university library, where Phlox and Arthur both work. Boardwalk Books, where Art Bechstein works, is in a middle-class area of town; the Duquesne Hotel where Art visits his father is in a more upscale financial district of Pittsburgh. The setting, although it is specifically Pittsburgh, is the typical American college town in the summer.

## Language and Meaning

Michael Chabon pulls no punches with his writing. Although he is eloquent at describing people and events, his finest moments are in the dialogues among him and his friends. The narrator also tends to hold monologues in his head, which are also brilliant.

Chabon uses small details to make us think about more than the words he has written, with simple techniques such as,



"He turned to Phlox and made a grave face. 'Is Art polite with you?' 'Hmm. Oh, yes, unfailingly.' My father lifted his eyebrows, smiled, and turned bright red. 'Ah,' he said."

At this moment we do not know exactly why Art's father has asked this question, or why he has turned bright red, but we can guess that he has touched upon, at least in his mind, the possibility of intimacy between Art and Phlox, and has embarrassed himself. Chabon can be subtle, but is very effective, using fewer words than many authors. Another example, earlier in the same scene, Chabon writes,

"Phlox and I arrived only two minutes late, and came with a sigh into the cool and the garlic."

With this very short sentence, the reader knows they are hurrying to be on time for Art's father, are relieved to get there, and we immediately feel and smell the restaurant, which is a lot to accomplish in so few words.

Although Chabon writes as though he is talking, Art, the narrator, is quite articulate and expressive for a young college student, and we are always aware that he is far above average in his intelligence and perception.

## Structure

This story is 297 pages long, and is divided into 23 fairly evenly sized chapters. It is written in a chronological order of events, starting with the end of Art Bechstein's last year of college, and proceeding through the following summer. One would not know what each of the chapter titles means without reading the chapters, as the titles are subtle and humorous.

Art Bechstein grows up in subtle ways as the story goes on. He is quite immature in the beginning of the story, even at one point going to his apartment to retrieve a picture of Godzilla's egg. He begins the story in something of a vacuum, and gradually, as he meets friends and experiences different aspects of life with them, breaks out of his shell and begins to take more control of his life.

Early in the story Art submissively allows himself to be kidnapped by a stranger, who turns out to be Cleveland. Later in the story, he puts on his "battle dress" to help Cleveland out of the mess he has gotten into, bravely trying to save him from the police. We see Art, who initially cries every time he is with his father, begin to make bold moves, like riding in the back of a fast-moving convertible with strangers, exploring his sexuality, sharing his wild dreams with friends, going on a mission for the mob with Cleveland, drinking heavily, and generally breaking every rule that he has abided by all his life.

Although the events described by Art are what dominate the story, the progress of Art Bechstein's maturity is subtly woven in and through the fabric of the story and we realize, after the fact, that this is what has happened - that he has grown up.



## Quotes

Cleveland, Cleveland, Cleveland! They had spoken of nearly nothing but his exploits. Cleveland riding a horse into a swimming pool; coauthoring a book on baseball at the age of thirteen; picking up a prostitute, only to take her to the church wedding of a cousin; living in a Philadelphia garret and returning to Pittsburgh six months later, after having hardly communicated with any of his friends, with a pair of dirty tattoos and a scholarly, hilarious, twenty-thousand word essay on the cockroaches with which he'd shared his room. Pg. 38

"I'm going to turn this town upside down," I said. "Then in the fall I have to become a responsible adult. You know, have a career. My father claims to have something lined up."

"What does your father do?" said Jane.

He manipulates Swiss bank accounts with money that comes from numbers, whores, protection, loan sharks, and cigarette smuggling.

"He's in finance," I said. Pg. 33

I looked at Arthur. There was a faint golden stubble on his cheek and a flush at the pink skin of his throat. His eyes were clear and pale, as though he had not been drinking I felt something. It flew around my chest like a black bat that has got into the house, terrified me for an alien moment, and then vanished. "I don't think so. I'm straight, Arthur. I like girls." He smiled his politic smile. "That's what they all say." He reached up and almost touched my hair. I shrank from his hand. "Okay, you're straight." It was as though I had passed or failed some test. Pg. 41

I smoked and looked down at the bottom of Pittsburgh for a little while, watching the kids playing tiny baseball, the distant figures of dogs snatching at a little passing car, a miniature housewife on her back porch shaking out a snippet of red rug, and I made a sudden, frightened vow never to become that small, and to devote myself to getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Pg. 52

No one ever satisfactorily explained to me the enormous hole, bridged in three separate places by long iron spans, that makes the whole southeastern end of the Oakland section of Pittsburgh into a precipice. Between the arrogant stupid prow of Carnegie-Mellon University and the ugly back end of the Carnegie Institute, between the little shrines to Mary in the front yards along Parkview and the park itself, lies the wide, dry ravine that contains, essentially, four things: the Lost Neighborhood, the Cloud Factory, train tracks, and a tremendous amount of garbage. Pg. 48

"Dad." Now that he really had me going, hiccuping and sniffing, so people turned around from their tables to look at this distinguished father speaking calmly to his wild-haired son, now in tears; now that he had reduced me to my childhood role and demonstrated to me just how far I had fallen in his esteem, he relented, tenderly,



speaking as though I had just wrecked my bike or got beat up at school and he was softly applying the fragrant Band-Aid. Pg. 106

"What kinds of things did he used to write?" "Oh, essays, I guess you'd call them, odd essays. I told you about the one on cockroaches. We had this teacher in high school, a terrific woman. He started writing because of her." "And," I said. "And later she met with, of course, some kind of disaster." "Which kind?" "Death." He rolled over and faced away from me, so that I could only see the back of his head and hear his voice only in an unsatisfactory and into-the-wind way. "So, theoretically, that's why he stopped. But that's just his same old Cleveland bullshit. Every one of his failings has a perfectly good excuse. Usually some kind of disaster." "Like?" "Like his mom kills herself, his dad becomes about the scariest queer I've ever seen — and I've seen scary ones, believe me — so Cleveland is pardoned from ever having to do anything good, or productive, ever again." Pg. 126

Everything about her was like a B-girl or a gun moll, a courtesan in a bad novel, or an actress in a French art movie about alienation and ennui; her overdone endearments and makeup; all that was in questionable taste and might have embarrassed me or made me snicker, I had come to accept entirely, to look for and even to encourage. She delighted me as did bouffant hairdos and Elvis Presley art. When she came out of her bedroom dressed in a nylon kimono and huge slippers of turquoise fur, I was almost dizzy with appreciation, and the gaudy plastic Twister mat at my feet seemed to be the very matrix, the printed plan, of everything I liked about her. Pg. 143

The pair of women came first, one strangely dressed, in pined clothes of three or four eras, talking and examining the wrist and bracelet of the other, who wore a candy-striped skirt and bright yellow sweater. In the wind, their hair trailed from their heads like short scarves, and their faces looked cynical and gay. The two men followed behind, one with a great black lion head and black boots, and the other in white Stan Smiths, looking flushed and wealthy and bathed in sunlight, and each holding his cigarette in a different fashion, the heavy man with a negligent looseness, the thin man pointedly, wildly, as though the cigarette were a tool of speech. My God! I thought, in that spinning instant before they turned and waved to me. Who are those beautiful people? Pg. 148

"Ha. Nothing. Um, I've—I've been here before," I said. "A long time ago. I threw up on my mom at a bar mitzvah." My mom. I had not said this in years. It just slipped out, in my confusion, and I bit my lip. Pg. 163

She had not only met my father, which I hadn't wanted, but Lenny Stern, and if she just turned around she would also see Them, the two ugly men with guns, who were the lion and the unicorn of my family's coat of arms. Pg. 179

"They're both his sisters," he said. There was a short silence while I digested this. "Whose...?" "I don't know. Maybe it's not even his. You should see them on a good day, though. Today they were all stoned. On a good day, that place is like a circus." This made me angry. "Cleveland. You — This is horrible. You're taking advantage of this unemployed guy, you walk into their house once a week and you ruin their day, I'll be



they have huge fights after you leave, and you think the whole thing is funny. You get a kick out of it. Those people hate your guts. They hate you. How can you stand to look at that guys' shit-eating grin every week?" "The world of business is built on shit-eating grins." Pg. 189

In that one long second before he lost his footing and fell head over heels over head, the spotlight hit him strangely, and he threw a brief, enormous shadow against the perfect clouds, and the hair seemed to billow out from the shadow's head like a black banner. For one second Cleveland stood higher than the helicopter that tormented him; he loomed over the building, over me, and over the city of secret citizens and homes beneath his feet, and the five-foot shadow of the doll kicked and screamed.

Pg. 286

When I remember that dizzy summer, that dull, stupid, lovely, dire summer, it seems that in those days I ate my lunches, smelled another's skin, noticed a shade of yellow, even simply sat, with greater lust and hopefulness — and that I lusted with greater faith, hoped with greater abandon. The people I loved were celebrities, surrounded by rumor and fanfare; the places I sat with them, movie lots and monuments. No doubt all of this is not true remembrance but the ruinous work of nostalgia, which obliterates the past, and no doubt, as usual, I have exaggerated everything. Pg. 297



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the symbolism of the Cloud Factory, as it relates to Art's experience, as well as Cleveland's.

Why does Art Bechstein cry almost every time he is with his father? Why does he stop?

Discuss Phlox's character. Is she a genuine person?

Discuss Cleveland's self-destructive attitude and his goals in life. Why is he like this?

Eating food together is something that takes place in the story many times. What significance does this have in terms of the relationships of the friends?

Why did Art Bechstein go most of his life without speaking of his mother?

What role do mothers play in the lives of other characters, besides Art's?

Discuss the changes, if any, in Art Bechstein, and how they came about.

Why does Art agree to help Cleveland with his botched burglary?

Who ends up being the most complex character in the story?