

# **The Names Study Guide**

## **The Names by Don DeLillo**

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# Plot Summary

The Names by Don DeLillo is a spiritual thriller that follows an American businessman, James Axton, as he becomes embroiled in a string of ritual murders in Greece and the Middle East. The book is a tragicomic meditation on the changing political and spiritual landscape of the international community at the beginning of the 1980s.

The Island, the novel's first book, begins with James living in Athens and working in the Greek-Turkish region as a risk analyst for the amorphous Northeast Group. A former writer, he chose this post to be close to his son Tap and his estranged wife Kathryn, who works on an archeological dig on the Greek island of Kouros. He maintains a group of American friends in Athens, most of them international envoys for American businesses. Also connected to this group is a mysterious, belligerent Greek called Eliades.

One day, the body of a mental defective is found bludgeoned to death in Kouros. Owen Brademas, the sullen leader of Kathryn's dig, thinks it may be connected to a group of transients he met near a monastery who were obsessed with ancient languages. Tap is in the process of writing a fictional story of Owen's life. Owen, Kathryn, and James begin to suspect this murder was some sort of religious ceremony. The Island ends with the painful revelation that Kathryn is accepting a job in Canada, ending any hope of reconciliation with James.

In the second book, James meets with an old friend, the filmmaker Frank Volterra. Volterra has spoken to Owen about the death cult and wants to make a movie about them. James has heard rumors that the cultists are in the south of Greece and makes a journey down there. At this time, he discovers the method behind their murders: they kill people whose initials match the name of the village where they die. In Jerusalem, Volterra sets up an interview with a former cultist. The man tells him that there are many cells of this cult operating in many places. At this time, James's friend Ann Maitland has begun an affair with Eliades, who wants to know suspicious details of James's life.

In the third book, "The Desert," James goes to India to meet with Owen Brademas. He finds the man exhausted from some desert experience. Evidently, Owen finally found the cult in the northwest of India. They spoke to him about the sanctity of language and invited him to join them. However, when the time comes to kill the next victim, Owen could not do it. He is now ready to die, having gone to an extreme to take contact with a spiritual past.

When James returns to Greece, he learns that his employer has been funneling his risk analysis information to the CIA. This explains with the Greek nationalist Eliades has been asking after him. In his last days in Greece, James sees one of his friends shot by a gunman who may have been trying to kill James.

DeLillo ends the novel with "The Prairie," a short excerpt from Tap Axton's novel about Owen Brademas and his inability to speak in tongues as a young Pentecostal back him.



# The Island, Chapter 1

## The Island, Chapter 1 Summary

The Names by Don DeLillo is a spiritual thriller that follows an American businessman, James Axton, as he becomes embroiled in a string of ritual murders in Greece and the Middle East. The book is a tragicomic meditation on the changing political and spiritual landscape of the international community at the beginning of the 1980s.

The novel begins with James Axton driving in Athens with a group of a American colleagues. They discuss the fact that James has yet to see the Acropolis. Charles Maitland reprimands him for his senseless dithering, but Ann Maitland understands. This coterie of international businesspeople is conjoined by their mutual knowledge of the ways of the ever-more dangerous world.

James takes a boat to Kouros, a small island where his estranged wife Kathryn lives with his son Tap. Kathryn is an archeologist working on a progressively unproductive dig. Tap is a precocious nine-year-old who is writing a novel. He is annoyed that Kathryn and Tap have developed a coded language called Ob to speak to each other. At their flat, he critiques Taps new pages and tells Kathryn about his recent research trips to Pakistan and Turkey and his boss Rowser. She relates the meager discoveries the dig has made.

The family walks along the harbor, and James considers how Kathryn has developed such absurd personal drive since their separation. He believes she is growing more judgmental of him daily. In America, as they were preparing to part, he compiled lists of 27 grievances against him that he suspects she harbors. At night, he read these lists to her. Now they are in Europe trying to maintain some familial structure.

## The Island, Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter of the novel introduces the reader to the habits of James Axton's life. Based out of Athens, he has a group of friends who are bound by their collective fluency in air travel and survival in disparate cultures. They are aware of a shift happening in the world, from a simple Cold War dichotomy to a series of fundamentalist nationalists with a rabid distaste for the West. It is happening in Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Afghanistan among other places.

The reader also learns about James's home life. His estranged wife is clearly developing a life that does not include him on the island of Kouros. The move from Canada to Greece has allowed her to blossom into a dogged anthropologist and workaholic. She brings their son Tap along to her archeological dig and speaks to him in a secret language similar to pig Latin. All of this makes James's attempts to reconnect with them on weekends seem pathetic, destined for failure.

The first chapter also establishes the Acropolis as a symbol in the narrative. Both James and Ann Maitland cannot bring themselves to see it despite the fact that they live in Athens. This reflects the sentiment - stated by James later in the novel - that their lives do not immerse them in a new culture. They are always separate. This also establishes a bond between Ann and James.



# The Island, Chapter 2

## The Island, Chapter 2 Summary

Owen Brademas is the organizer of the archeological dig of which Kathryn is part. A morose, introspective man, Owen often spends evenings with Kathryn and James, speaking together until the early hours of the morning. Owen is astounded by Kathryn's continued willingness to work, even as the dig appears completely fruitless.

One morning, James goes to the dig site to see what Kathryn and Tap do while he is away. That night, Owen sits with the family and plays his recorder. After Tap goes to sleep, James inquires as to Kathryn and Owen's plans after the dig. They are not forthcoming with information. Instead, they discuss religion. After some meandering conversation about culture and faith, Owen begins a story about his visit to a monastery and Kathryn goes to her room. James would like to follow her, but he listens to Owen.

Owen went to the top of a mountain to visit a functioning monastery. Past a certain point, he cannot drive any further; so he elects to walk. Along the way, he passes by a series of caves. Three people emerge from one cave, a woman and two men, and they are not Greek. Owen tries to ask directions of them, and one responds asking if he can translate something for them. They speak an antique form of Greek. He talks to them about language studies, and they are enthralled.

The next day, James tells Kathryn that he has been fantasizing about her as they walk together. They talk about family, James's father, and Tap. Evidently much of Tap's novel is coming from the life of Owen Brademas. Kathryn wonders if she and James will become inseparable now that they are separated. James tells her where he is going next on his travels. His job involves assessing risk of political unrest for American companies looking to do business abroad.

As James packs that night to return to Athens, Owen drops in on him. James asks him if he will try to find his cult-like people in the mountains again. Owen says they mentioned moving on. They wonder together about their infatuation with letters and languages.

## The Island, Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, DeLillo introduces the other major character of the novel, Owen Brademas. An archeologist and perpetual gloom, Owen seems in many ways an older version of James. He is completely estranged from family, and though he is no longer enthralled with his work it is the only substantive part of his life. The question of whether Kathryn and Owen are sleeping together - one a reader cannot help asking - is never answered. Clearly, regardless of the ambiguities for his relationships, Owen and James like each other, and Owen's morose aura is fascinating to the whole family. Indeed, it is the subject of Tap's novel.



This chapter provides the first mention of the strange nomadic linguists that will haunt the periphery of the novel. These strange wanderers inhabit caves and huts, and their love of language is inextricably connected to something far more dangerous than Owen, James, or Kathryn can imagine. This off-hand story will take on eerie resonance as strange murders begin happening throughout Greece and beyond. It will create a mystery that neither Owen nor James can resist.



# The Island, Chapter 3

## The Island, Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, James is back in Athens. He and Charles Maitland discuss modern marriage, an arrangement that must be cobbled together to please the interests of each party. James promises to have dinner with Charles and Ann and goes to see his boss, Rowser. Rowser is something of a spook; he travels under false names and practices caution worthy of a CIA operative. They meet in a hotel bar, and James discusses his recent trip to Istanbul. Rowser counsels his employee to get divorced from Kathryn as soon as possible.

Apparently, Rowser personally recruited James to work as an analyst for the company, Northeast Group. James was then living in Toronto and did not want to leave Kathryn. He declined the job. Soon thereafter, though, they were parting ways, and James decided to take the job as a way of staying close to Tap. Rowser and James wrap up their meeting at the office. Rowser plans to leave the next day.

That evening, James goes to a restaurant with the Maitlands. Also in attendance are the Bordens, the Kellers, and a mysterious bearded Greek called Andreas Eliades. James notices Ann Maitland speaking to Eliades in Greek. They all speak about traveling as a sort of compiling of dead memories. Lindsay Keller, the youngest of the crowd, cannot stand to think of travel this way. Eliades and James speak at length about America's place in the world. The Greek seems contemptuous of the US's neglect of his country, victimized so often by the Turks. James attempts to explain his work to the strange man. As he leaves with Charles and Ann, James sees Lindsay and David Keller emerge from the ocean where they have been swimming in their clothes. Eliades watches in the distance. The Maitlands, Kellers, James and Eliades all share a brandy before leaving.

The next day, David and James sit together, discussing the Middle East. The culture and its political instability of late have rendered it deeply undesirable to American corporations. This has, after all, been the period of the hostage crisis, Russian occupation of Afghanistan, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque by fundamentalist militants. David talks about his first wife and Lindsay. He asks James the reason for his separation from Kathryn. James admits that he slept with one of Kathryn's close friends. The friend told Kathryn, they had an altercation, and that was that. David wonders what the purpose of these eastward trips. The deserts seem too vast and empty for him.

In the final moments of this chapter, James stands at first light on his balcony. He decides that this day will be him.

## The Island, Chapter 3 Analysis

If the cult linguists of Kouros represent a dangerous spiritual past in the novel, George Rowser and Andreas Eliades represent an equally dangerous secular future. Rowser,





the man who recruited James to the Northeast Group, resembles nothing so much as a CIA spook. He travels under assumed names and insists on always meeting with James in person. DeLillo fleshes out Rowser's decidedly unpleasant persona by giving him a comical penchant for classical architecture.

Eliades, on the other hand, represents the growing anti-West sentiment in Eurasia. He despises America for its constant neglect of Greece's troubles even as it needs the country for its proximity to Israel and the Arab powers. David Keller fleshes out the status of the world later in the Chapter. This novel takes place during the birth of Islamic fundamentalism. The two-week siege of the Grand Mosque in Kuwait was one of the first public displays of radical Muslims willing to shed their own blood and others to impose traditional Islamic law in oil-wealthy countries. In this environment, Western companies are nervous and rely on people like David and James to get the straight story on how safe life is for Americans.

As a reader, we begin to understand the contention that these analysts might genuinely be in danger from passionate nationalists like Eliades. Soon, though, this danger will take a back seat to the danger presented by the cult.



# The Island, Chapter 4

## The Island, Chapter 4 Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 4, a murder has occurred on the island of Kouros, and a village called Mikro Kamini. In her flat, Kathryn speaks to James about the killing. She is shaken up by it; the victim was a mental defective who was not even from the village. James begins to needle Kathryn about the importance of her work on the dig. Owen, by now, has largely checked out of the project. Tap comes over with his friend Rajiv and they take James on a walk with them.

That night, Owen confides to Kathryn and James that his strange cave people have left the island. He wonders whether their sudden disappearance is connected to the murder. Later that night, Kathryn tells Owen that Tap's novel is about him. The three discuss the idea of writing, and Kathryn seems to be flirting with her boss. Owen believes the language cultists are on the Greek mainland at present. He considers a story of a linguist who hired a young boy to risk his life to study a cuneiform text on the upper reaches of a ruin. Such are the lengths to which lovers of the written word will go. James privately marvels that he can barely read the Greek on the back of a Quaker Oats box. He also considers his relationship with Kathryn and how he has never felt truly present without a woman by his side.

After Owen leaves, Kathryn and James discuss her plans for after the dig. She thinks that she and Tap may move to London, where he can attend school. They wonder together where this estranged marriage is heading. Before going to sleep, she kisses James quickly. He returns to his hotel, standard procedure.

Later, Tap visits James in Athens with Rajiv and his father Anand, an art professor for the University of Michigan who is assisting Owen. Anand and James discuss the dig, and Anand mentions that another bludgeon murder occurred on another small island a year earlier. The victim is a crippled girl. After James drops Anand and Rajiv at a friend's house, Tap asks if they can just drive for a while. James brings him back to his flat.

Later, James drives Rajiv and Anand to the airport. Rajiv is going back to India for school while his father continues with the dig in Kouros. Anand quietly confides to James that Owen has had more contact with the cave people than he is letting on. Evidently, they had been on Kouros for almost a year. That night, Tap interrogates Anand about eastern religions, their practices and extravagances. James wonders if his son will ever ask about their own vanilla Christianity. The next morning, he watches Anand and Tap return to Kouros, which Anand has assured him is safe.

Later, James goes to Istanbul on a research trip. There he meets some old acquaintances and marvels how his social group is adept at reducing every culture to a one-anecdote summary.



After returning to Athens, James visits Charles Maitland, who has just returned from Abu Dhabi. They discuss a recent trip James has taken to Cairo. Of late, Charles has been cultivating an image of world-weary indolence. To such end, he has stopped flying his private plane and goes day without shaving. The shift annoys Ann. Charles also seems to be working less, and James offers to talk to Rowser for him. James hangs around as Charles takes a nap. After Ann returns, she and James catch up with a sort of anxious flirtation. By the end of the conversation, she admits to James that she is having an affair - not her first - and Charles knows.

James ruminates on his relationship with his concierge. James knows nearly no Greek, and the concierge knows no English. Thus, James has the same inane chitchat with the man every day and only asks direction to places for which he knows the Greek word, even if that is not where he is going. That night, he thinks of Ann Maitland, her lovers, her travel, and their shared past.

## The Island, Chapter 4 Analysis

The first ritual murder of the novel is mentioned in the first words of this chapter, and Owen immediately connects it to the cave people he met on his way to the monastery. Anand Dass, another member of the dig, mentions that Owen has had more contact with the group than he lets on. This sets up a dichotomy between James and Owen - two kindred spirits - that will grow more unnerving as the cult becomes more clearly allied with linguistics and epigraphy. Owen speaks numerous languages, and James can barely speak enough Greek to get by living in Athens.

This chapter also fleshes out the characters of Charles and Ann Maitland. Charles has entered a mid-line slump, it appears, and has resolved himself to take on a listless and weary air. As a result, he sleeps in the middle of the day, rarely takes assignments, and never flies his plane anymore. The other result of this shift in personality is that his wife has begun an affair with another man. This revelation clearly elicits some sort of jealous response in James. DeLillo is foreshadowing their eventual involvement.

Also confounding James is the sensation that his wife is at once moving back to him and away from him. Kathryn wonders aloud with him what is happening with their separation. She kisses him goodnight before going to bed. On the other hand, James must still return to his hotel at the end of the night, and Kathryn - foreseeing the end of the dig - is discussing moving to London. This sets up an ambiguous situation, with James clearly hold out hope for his marriage though he has no indication that it is warranted.



# The Island, Chapter 5

## The Island, Chapter 5 Summary

At the beginning of the chapter, James recalls how people love to give Kathryn their shirts. They feel honored when she accepts them, that she has taken a piece of them with her. When James visits her and Tap in Kouros next she is wearing a shirt given her by their mutual friend Frank Volterra. Volterra is a temperamental filmmaker who lived with James and Kathryn in his independent days. He is obsessed with film and gained notoriety by chronicling in a documentary his affair with an aging Manhattan doyenne. Now he has made his way to large Hollywood productions. James rarely sees Volterra's films, but Kathryn is a staunch defender. Apparently, Volterra recently visited Kathryn in Kouros, bringing his strange new girlfriend with him. He has recently fled the set of a film.

Kathryn confides to James that Volterra has been speaking with Owen about the linguist cult. They spoke for hours. James asks her if she saw Volterra's last movie. She did; James was busy watching television at the time. Kathryn speculates that this island has freed her to enjoy life purely. Owen arrives, and the three discuss the role of America in the world. Owen concedes that the world often detests the US not because it is empirical, but because it is a myth. America pervades so much of the international scene that other nations cannot help but blame it for unrest or displacement. They discuss the cult, which Kathryn now believes to be some form of modern-day human sacrifice religion. Owen does not think the people he met are particularly concerned with a god, though. He has recently learned of a similar murder in a village called Wadi Rum in Jordan, an old woman. He told Frank Volterra of this killing, and it is possible the director is in Jordan now.

The next day, James and Tap climb to one of the upper hills of Kouros. There they walk past a large swarm of bees, and James struggles to reassure the boy that they are safe. That night, Kathryn, James and Anand have dinner together by the harbor. Anand is clearly intending to leave the island soon and return with his family to the States. As they converse, he lets it slip that the dig will be shut down soon.

After dinner, James is infuriated that Kathryn knew that the dig was ending and did not tell him. She tells him they could still go to England, and Tap will be able to see him regularly. The argument devolves into accusations and name-calling. James follows Kathryn into the bathroom and tells her she'll never be taken seriously because she is a woman. She tells him that his work is disgusting, that she would hate herself if she did what he did. He accuses her of sleeping with Owen and Volterra. She calls him an alcoholic. She tells him she is used to being disappointed by life.

Back in Athens, James walks with Lindsay Keller while David runs. Lindsay has a laissez-faire attitude to her life; nothing much bothers her and she does not make advanced plans. They plan to have a big dinner with friends. Evidently, David is



prepping to be night-dropped into Iran; his bank wants to be the first to set up shop in the country once the political climate settles. He wants James to spend time with Lindsay in his absence; he thinks they could be great friends. That day, James sees a man watching him from a car. It appears to be Andreas Eliades.

One night, Kathryn calls James to tell him she has accepted a teaching job in British Columbia. He is polite, and she says they will find a way to ensure that he will see his so often. In the final moments of this section, James sees his wife and son off. He is now alone.

## The Island, Chapter 5 Analysis

In the beginning of this chapter, the character of Frank Volterra is mentioned. He will not appear in person until the next book, but James's description of him creates a portrait of an enfant terrible who claims to stand for art but actually stands for shock. He has recently abandoned a film shoot and is now consumed with the idea of the death cult after speaking with Owen. Owen reveals something strange about the cult: it appears to be in Jordan now. Clearly this revelation will expand the reach of the narrative.

Owen makes an important point about America in this chapter as well. He states that the America of the modern era is not so much a country as a symbol of a country. Its reach extends to far that it comes to mean all things to all people. It is imperialism, degradation, freedom, philistinism, and hope. This is why so many people who have never met an American will profess opinions about them.

This chapter ends the first book of the novel. Kouros is the Island in question, and both the dig and the cult are vacating it. The book ends with the dissolution of James's marriage. It appears that he and Kathryn will not be the separated couple that cannot be apart from each other. He came to Greece to be near his family, and now they are leaving. The remainder of the novel will be his attempt to fill this void in strange and dangerous ways.



# The Mountain, Chapter 6

## The Mountain, Chapter 6 Summary

At the beginning of the second section, James flies to Jordan to meet Frank Volterra. On the first leg of his flight, the man in the seat next to him suddenly dies as they pass over the desert. When he arrives in Amman, James buys a map of the country to find the names of towns that Owen has mentioned to him.

James meets Volterra in an Indian restaurant. The director has been making regular trips to Wadi Rum to look for clues in the most recent ritual murder. He is sick and tired of doing the films people expect him to do. He wants to go to the desert and the mountains and chronicle this strange cult. Unfortunately, local authorities don't want Volterra snooping around, and his translator Salim has been useless. He thinks he has found a member of the cult, though. Owen gave him the name of a professor in Amman who has referred him to a man called Vosdanik in Jerusalem. Now, James has requested assignments in this area from Rowser to allow him to stick close to Volterra.

Two days later, James, Volterra, and Volterra's girlfriend Del Nearing take a car to Israel. From there they take a bus to Jerusalem with a group of Baptists. Caught in the tumult of the old city, the three get separated. James finds Del, and the two subtly flirt as he tells her he needs to leave the next day. When the two return to the hotel, they find Volterra has located Vosdanik.

At a small restaurant, Vosdanik - a small man with a fedora - explains divinity and language to James and Volterra in long monologues. He explains that God is found by poor, lonely men in vast empty places. He explains that to this cult of lonely men, words are the vessels of divinity. Language has always evolved because men need it to express faith. He explains that to understand words is to understand the cult. From these diatribes, Volterra gleams that the cult is in Syria. That night, James dreams of Vosdanik and his words.

The next morning, James chats with Del as they wait for Volterra. The two lovers have had a spat because Volterra feels that Del, a Jew, is insufficiently awed by Jerusalem. As they drive to the hill town of Jebel Amman, where James needs to catch his flight, Volterra explains his plans for after his career completely tanks. After the film industry is done with him, he is going to find an American suburb and open a dry cleaner. There he will be the mysterious dry cleaner who doesn't talk about his past until the day some inquisitive customer discovers he used to be a big-time director.

At the airport, James asks Volterra to join him in Athens. Volterra declines; he has to find the cult. After they part ways, James notices that his initials are the same as the initials of Jebel Amman.



## The Mountain, Chapter 6 Analysis

In Chapter 6, Frank Volterra arrives at the narrative in person. Volterra is more caricature than character, a perfect foil to Owen Brademas. While Owen seems to be studying his way toward understanding the cult, Volterra is plowing full-speed ahead like a bumbling P.I. His only concern is to make a movie of this group, and to do so he will wander the whole of the Gulf asking anyone he sees. James, who has resolved to stick close to this search, decides to accompany him from Amman to Jerusalem. His dynamic with James is no more than a little ambivalent. James seems to suspect that the director has carried on some sort of affair with Kathryn

Along with Volterra is Del Nearing, a genuinely strange person. Her absurd actions and statements and her youth will make her an oddly compelling prospect for our narrator.

The strange character of Vosdanik explains the philosophy behind the methodology of the cult in this chapter. His long digressions about the intermingling of language and God infuriate Volterra, who just wants to know where the cult is. Vosdanik explains that he who masters a language can master a world. This notion leads James to his discovery in the last moments of the chapter. Delillo leaves us to interpret this discovery before the protagonist states it outright.



# The Mountain, Chapter 7

## The Mountain, Chapter 7 Summary

Back in Athens, James meets Ann Maitland at a café. As they talk, James begins to wonder whether adultery is simply a way we make our travel seem more memorable, pointedly drawing attention to Ann's affair. He also discusses his new attitude toward solitude. He has decided being alone is simply an awareness of everything around you. It is a crowded experience. Ann's son, Peter, shows up. A university student, Peter is disparaging and secretive toward his mother and James. Charles arrives next, and he vocally laments his son's condescension. Peter is nonplussed, and he mocks his father's oblivion, another thinly-veiled reference to Ann's infidelity. Peter and Ann go for a walk.

Later, James checks in with his anglophile secretary Mrs. Helen. Owen shows up at the office. He has just returned from the Mani, mountains on the southern tip of the Greek peninsula. He was researching ancient alphabets there. James tells Owen his theory regarding the cult: they kill people whose initials match those of the town in which they are killed. This makes sense, except that it seems a ridiculous reason to kill someone. There also seem to be different cells of the cult who function in slightly different ways. He tells Owen about Vosdanik's linguistic-divinity monologues.

What confounds James is that this cult does not seem to be a band of methodical, lurid butchers. They kill very carefully, luring people to distance villages for some strange reason. By the time the killing has happened, it is nearly an afterthought. The methodology is the important part.

Owen explains to James that he has always felt that he can see the logic behind chaos in the world. When he was young and went to his parents' Pentecostal church, he understood the faith of Christianity in a logical way, but as the services leaped with revelry Owen felt cut off. His parents and the preacher spoke in tongues, but he was unable. He could not find the magic. He understands now that the tongues were a learned behavior, but he wonders if they were connected to the divine.

James asks Owen what his plans are. Owen intends to leave Greece soon for Bombay, where he will study Sanskrit and other ancient languages. James calls him out for misleading Volterra. The group of cultists in Jordan is not the same as the one in Greece, or the one in Syria. He suspects there may be another in India. James and Owen continue arguing for hours.

James drops in on the Maitlands. They have been stockpiling rugs, for fear that soon these weaving communities will be inaccessible to Americans. James guesses that Andreas Eliades is the man with whom Ann is having an affair. Charles is livid, not so much by the idea of the affair as by the idea that James would figure out who it was. They go to a movie together, and James returns home to his flat.





## The Mountain, Chapter 7 Analysis

In Chapter 7, the reader sees the extent to which the Maitland marriage has deteriorated in the restaurant scene with Peter Maitland. An arrogant university student, Peter mocks his father openly for his cuckoldry. Indeed, Charles is experiencing a complete loss of dignity due to Ann's affair. Later in the chapter James goes so far as to theorize in front of him that Andreas Eliades is the other man. Charles is livid. He knows he is being cuckolded, but the painful part is that everyone else seems to as well.

During this section, James consults with Owen regarding his theory on the cult's method. This discovery is a breakthrough for James who, as stated earlier, is at a disadvantage investigating a cult that works from an antique language of which he is not even fluent in the modern form. Clearly, though, Owen has greater faith in James than in Volterra, whom he sent to Jordan simply to confirm the existence of the cult outside Greece.

In this chapter, too, the reader learns the identity of the titular mountain: the Mani. Clearly these southern mountains will be a key site in the search for the cult going forward.



# The Mountain, Chapter 8

## The Mountain, Chapter 8 Summary

At the beginning of the chapter, James and Tap are driving south toward the Mani on Christmas Day. They silently watch the landscape change from European to Turkish. At one point, a massive storm sets in, and the two have to pull over and wait it out. They are now in an area of stone roads and small villages. They find a decent-sized town, and James goes into a small tavern to ask about local hotels. Speaking almost no Greek - and entirely lost in the local dialect - he leaves with no new information. As they drive out of town, James has the feeling they are being watched. Tap asks who he is named after. James explains that his name - Thomas Arthur - comes from Kathryn's father Thomas Arthur Pattison (who they called "Tap"). They drive along the southern coast, half-heartedly looking for a hotel. It is raining again, there are no signs, and the map appears useless. James asks Tap about Kathryn; she has not been assigned a dig yet. Suddenly, the car passes a fallen boulder with two words scrawled across it. James is struck with a sudden fear; he knows it is connected to the cult.

James and Tap eventually find a place to stay on the coast. They have dinner that night with an old grocer and his wife. It is a pleasant evening. That night, James lists out everything he knows about the killers. They are people who seem transitory, anonymous. They do not seem to be from anywhere. The next morning as he drives with Tap, James runs over a dog.

Later at his office, James wonders what he was thinking taking his son to a place where the cult might be located. He works late into the night, trying to forget about his growing obsession. Later, he sits at a party with Lindsay Keller. They talk about her mellow life in Greece. David comes across the room and invites James to join them in Frankfurt in a couple weeks. They can find a bar and watch American football all day. James says he'll have to think about it. James is happy in this period. He makes new friends and has a few torrid nights with married women.

One day, James drives back down to the Mani. He finds the boulder with the name, but it has been painted over. He continues to inspect the area. He comes to some houses on stilts and knows that he is in the area where the cultists lived. He asks some locals if foreigners regularly pass through. They say some have recently left: two women and a man.

James meets Volterra in a nearby café. Volterra has all but decides to make a film about the cult, though he has not decided whether he would go so far as to film them in the act of killing; he wants to leave the ending ambiguous. He figures he can negotiate with the cult regarding the particulars of the film. When James asks the director how he would even get in touch with them, Volterra says he has a member called Andahl in his confidence.



Volterra and James meet with Del, who is clearly thinking of returning to America. Volterra has not yet figured out the method behind the killings. He thinks it is some sort of cultural revenge. He and James talk about their days with Kathryn, and James mentions that she still has his shirt. After Del and Volterra go to sleep, James decides he will stick with them a while longer.

## The Mountain, Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter marks the only time that James makes an attempt to pursue the cult alone. It is one of the rare occasions that his narration betrays fear, not for himself but for his son. He has the feeling that the cult now knows he is on their tale, that they may try to stop him and those close to him from learning any more. This would include Tap. The Mani, like Kouros in the first book and the Thar Desert in the next book, is a location that is essentially connected to the cult. It is devoid of modern conveniences and is thus a perfect place for god-haunted men, as Vosdanik stated in the last chapter.

His discovery of the fallen boulder on the road of the Mani may be a breakthrough for James. The words on it, Ta Onomata, may very well be the name of the cult. When he returns to inspect it later, it is painted over, implying that the cult definitely does not want outsiders to see it.

The reader also notices a character shift in James during this section. The loss of his family and his growing obsession with the cult have made him more content. He has begun to exercise and have affairs with married women. He, like Kathryn before him, has become freer with himself in Greece.



# The Mountain, Chapter 9

## The Mountain, Chapter 9 Summary

James meets with Andahl in a café. The gaunt man thinks that James is a writer; this is what Volterra has told him. James tells him that he is a friend of Owen Brademas. Andahl asks him if he has discovered the meaning behind the killings, and he responds with his theory regarding the initials. Andahl seems to confirm this and explains how the cult is an amorphous thing with many cells. Members die off, leave, and return. This allows them to go about their work without authorities intervening.

James asks Andahl about the words at the Mani that were painted over. Andahl says that some member of the cult, wandering off, left them as a clue. The cultists painted over them. He refuses to tell James the origins of the group, saying they will speak at another time. He does expound on the actual process of smashing a person's head in, assuring James that they are not seasoned killers. The murder is a long, awkward process carried out by amateurs. Before leaving, he tells James that he would be a suitable alternative to a filmmaker in telling the story of the cult, if the group decides the story would be best as a book.

After Andahl leaves with Volterra, James sits with Del. She explains that Volterra is a man who is loyal to friends and expects boundless loyalty in return. He saved her from a drug-ridden, dead-end life. She will not leave him. Volterra returns and announces that Andahl will set up a meeting with the rest of the cult tomorrow. James believes this will never happen. Volterra is already planning where he will get his camera and sound men.

James ruminates that although he thinks Andahl is already long gone, the man has given the cult a human face. Volterra tell the story of how he was nearly trampled by a herd of goats the other day. He and Del drive off, and James prepared to return to Athens.

Back in the city, James visits Dick and Dot Borden. They, too, have been collecting rugs and textiles. Dick introduces him to Hardeman, an American analyst largely based in Northern Africa. They go to a restaurant, where Janet Ruffing, the wife of an absent American businessman, does a belly dance for the table. James decides he wants to sleep with her, and for the rest of the meal he doggedly explains how he needs her to have sex with him. She protests that she is not the cheating type, but with more liquor her resolve weakens. Throughout, James notices Eliades watching him and Lindsay quietly judging him. As the night ends, James manages to maneuver Janet Ruffing into an alley where they have sex.

## The Mountain, Chapter 9 Analysis

We learn more about the cult in this chapter. At the Mani, James interviews Andahl, a man who claims to be a member of the cult. He explains the loose-knit structure of the group, its separate cells, and its transient membership. He also confirms James's theory about the initials. Andahl is under the impression that James is still a writer and tells him that the group is determining who best can tell their story: a writer or a filmmaker. This interchange creates a truly postmodern device: bold self-reference. If the narrator is approached by this character to write the narrative of this novel, the novel itself can be viewed as an object within the narrative.

The odd relationship between Volterra and Del is elucidated with surprising tenderness in these pages. Del Nearing has seemed more than a little off in her actions (writing to her cat) and her strange statements. Volterra is an outright caricature of the self-aggrandizing auteur director, but a Del tells their story he saved her from a junky life style. Indeed, this chapter creates an image of Volterra of a fiercely loyal friend and lover, a man who demands much of those around them but never lets them down.



# The Mountain, Chapter 10

## The Mountain, Chapter 10 Summary

At the beginning of the chapter, James is in Rhodes with David and Lindsay Keller. David cannot understand why he misses the countries where he has assignments; they are all dangerous terror havens. He finds he cannot get interested in peaceful countries.

Later, Andreas Eliades takes James out to dinner on the pretense of seeing how his Greek is progressing. The meal is a plethora of brains, intestines, and other compelling viscera. After a short period of pleasantries, Eliades proceeds to attack James for his country's culpability in Turkish aggression against Greece. He says that, historically, Greece has been the whipping-boy of dominant political powers, presently the Americans. James says that Greece has always been a centrally located country, important strategically. He tries not to engage the Greek, but Eliades remains dogged throughout the long meal.

The next day, James chats with his landlord about the riots in Athens. The man asks him where he travels next. He tells him China because he cannot think of the Greek word for Kuwait. He later drives with Charles Maitland, who is going to Beirut for a job interview. They wonder why all the names of countries are changing lately.

The day James gets back from Kuwait he gets a call from Ann Maitland. She starts by admitting that Eliades is her lover. Then she begins to ask James about his work, saying that Eliades has been curious. James asks her why this is; is Eliades connected to a paper or a government agency? He had heard that the Greek was moving to London, but Ann thinks it is Bremen. James is getting uneasy. Ann mentions that Charles has no shot at the job in Beirut. He just wants to get away from her. After they hang up, Del calls him with news that she is in Athens en route to the US.

Del comes to stay the night at James' flat. She is heading back to California while Volterra searches the Mani for the cult. Andahl, it turns out, did not set up a meeting like he promised. James tells Del that he has figured out the pattern of the killing but decided not to tell Volterra. She is compelled by this, a sort of delayed revenge for the strain the filmmaker put on his marriage. She begins flirting with James overtly, and James is tempted to go to bed with her. Still, he decides not to. Before going to bed, Del tells him that Volterra had every intention for filming the cult killing a victim. This revelation disturbs James greatly.

James begins jogging with David Keller and subconsciously scanning papers for murders that seem ritualistic.



## The Mountain, Chapter 10 Analysis

Much of Chapter 10 is concerned with the character of Andrea Eliades. At the beginning, when he invites James to dinner, it appears he is merely trying to needle him regarding American foreign policy. When James refuses to engage him, Eliades presses harder. One gets the impression that the Greek is trying to glean James's political leanings. At this point in the novel, he ceases to be merely a nationalist blowhard. Indeed, by the time Ann confesses that he is her lover and that he has been asking questions about James, a new nascent danger seems to have arisen.

In this sense, the novel has become a thriller with two different entanglements. Firstly, James has actively put himself into harm's way by pursuing the death-cult in Kouros, the Mati, and Amman. Now he has inadvertently stepped into the path of a possible counterintelligence agent or political dissident.

The second book of the novel ends with a strange and sexually tense conversation between James and Del Nearing. She has left Volterra to look for the cult alone, and James think little time will pass before the director gives up himself. Another search for the mystical violent heart of the past has run dry.



# The Desert, Chapter 11

## The Desert, Chapter 11 Summary

At the beginning of this section James Axton arrives in Bombay. He marvels at how air travel sets the traveler apart from the rest of the static world. He is in India to open a new office for Rowser, and Anand Dass meets him at the airport. Apparently, Owen Brademas has been in India for quite a while, now living in Lahore. Anand gives James his address. James recalls the night the Kathryn tried to kill him for having an affair.

In Greece, James meets Lindsay Keller and Ann Maitland at the British Council. They discuss the popular uprisings in Athens. After Lindsay leaves, Ann talks to James about Eliades, who is indeed stationed in London at present. She and James are now involved, it seems.

That night, James is at a restaurant with the Kellers and Hardeman, discussing the general difference in wording that history books use to describe invasions of light people versus dark. Hardeman invites the Kellers to London in the fall. James tries to glean from Hardeman what Eliades actually does for their firm. Hardeman seems wary of revealing too much, but James asks him to make some inquiries. In the taxi back from the restaurant, Hardeman falls asleep. The Kellers have a plan to put him on an international flight while he is passed out, but they cannot get him out of the car when it arrives at the airport. James recalls his time in the harsh Canadian winters when he was still married to Kathryn.

In Lahore, James meets George Rowser. Rowser wants to take in some Gothic and Victorian architecture during their meeting. He is taking new precautions with his life these days, even installing a remote ignition in his car. He tells James that he will be leaving the Northeast Group because of unspoken pressures. As they take in a mausoleum, Rowser quietly suggests that James might do better leaving the company at the same time. After all, they came in together, and the new guard might resent James's presence.

## The Desert, Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter begins with a telling rumination on travel. James declares that the act of traveling by air is an act of conscious separation. The traveler is modern, individual, solitary. So, then, is the protagonist. That is his great weakness. Later in the novel, he will confide to Lindsay Keller that he has never once given himself over to another person. Likewise, he does not give himself over to any location. Hence, he has never been to the Acropolis even as he purportedly lives in Athens. He never even truly gave himself over to his family; they had not trouble leaving him behind.

This chapter also contains the second appearance by George Rowser. This appearance is infinitely more ominous than the first. As he and James wander through a mausoleum





in Lahore, Rowser confides that he is leaving the Northeast Group due to certain "pressures" and recommends his protégé do the same. His reasoning for the recommendation is weak at best. The reader imagines that these unnamed pressures are more involved than Rowser lets on. As the story wraps up, the reality of Rowser's dealings will come to light, and James will realize he should have listened to his boss.



# The Desert, Chapter 12

## The Desert, Chapter 12 Summary

The next day in Lahore, James follows Anand's directions to Owen Brademas's house. He finds himself lost in the crowded streets, but two young boys take him by the hand and lead him to his destination. When he arrives at Owen's house, the door is open and the room is cluttered. Owen looks tired, but he speaks with a strong voice. He says that this room is the first in which he has felt comfortable and that at first he thought James was an angel of death. As James sits, Owen begins the story of his time in India.

Although Anand offers him a car, Owen chooses to travel to Rajsamand Lake by bus. Some of the oldest Sanskrit inscriptions in the country are there, and he assumes the cult will be as well. On the crowded bus, Owen begins speaking with Bhajan Lal, a man excited by the approaching solar eclipse. Evidently the bus is packed with people who want to see the eclipse at Rajsamand. Owen has told one of his colleagues that after the Lake, he does not know where he intends to go.

Arriving at Rajsamand, Owen looks at the Sanskrit inscriptions with a boy guide. After the sun goes down he sits under a tree and sleeps. He plans to enter the Thar Desert in three days. By now, he feels he must find the cult; it is the only constant in his life.

The next day, a man approaches him and offers to be his guide for a fee. Owen says he wants to go to Hawa Mandir, but the man insists there is no bust there. Owen resolves then to walk. That night he is approached by a caravan of traders who take him to his destination. Hawa Mandir is a village out of the fifteenth century. As Owen wanders among its stone huts, he is approached by a strange man who asks him how many languages he speaks. This man is from the Indian cell of the language cult.

His name is Avtar Singh, and he is a wild and messianic figure, reminiscent of an Old Testament prophet. He is incredibly intelligent and vicious. Also in the India cell are two former members of the Greek cell, Emmerich and a woman called Bern. Bern is ill and is mostly kept sealed in a silo. Owen keeps company with these cultists now. He and Emmerich spend much time discussing Sanskrit, the nature of the word, and divinity.

Singh meanwhile speaks to Owen at length - and shifting between languages - about the desert. To him, the desert is a house of death and a solution to the senseless self-definition of the world. To Singh, the plague of humanity is its need to define itself to the point where words cease to hold meaning. Cities are self-definition run rampant; the desert is the solution. Singh also tells Owen that their next victim, an old pathetic man, is headed toward Hawa Mandir as they speak. The letters match. Owen asks him why he is being included in the group's plan, and Singh replies that he is now a part of the cult.



By now, James is tired of telling the story, but James begs him to go on. Owen admits that even as a member he was not given the name of the cult. James wonders if the words he saw on the boulder in Mani might be the name. Owen thinks it is possible. James says that at this point he believes the cult is the only thing about which he has been consistently right.

Emmerich is tracking the old man, who in walking through the desert has grown weary. He fears that the man may be too far gone to make it to Hawa Mandir. Bern, all the while, is deteriorating.

Awaiting the arrival of the victim, Owen recalls his younger days at his parents' Pentecostal church, how he always felt so separate from the rest of the congregation. The Spirit never found its way to his tongue. Now, again, he finds that the spirit that guides this group cannot find him. When at last the old man arrives at the village, Owen is unable to leave his silo to join them in the murder. The next day the body is found with two bloody stones. With the body is the body of a comatose woman - presumably Bern - another dead cultist and Owen.

Having listened to the story, James decides to leave the dazed and exhausted Owen. The experience has completely depleted the older man. James, however, feels renewed.

## The Desert, Chapter 12 Analysis

All the building action of the previous eleven chapters has been leading to this: Owen's contact with the cult. He must cast off careers, friends, and guides to do so, but in Hawa Mandir Owen finds his murderous fanatics.

The leader of this sect is Avtar Singh, a gregarious and cruel man who resembles Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Singh is the heart of this world's ancient darkness, a formidable linguist and a controller of his surroundings. He declares Owen a member of the group and seems to will the decrepit goat-herder to his death. The life of a cultist, however, is more horrific than Owen could have imagined. One member, Bern, is vomiting blood nearly the entire time. No one in the group can explain why murder is necessary to fulfill the methodology of the cult.

When, at last, the victim arrives at Hawa Mandir, Owen cannot bring himself to take part in the ritual. Like his younger self at the Pentecostal meetings, he cowers as the revelry begins. The experience in the Thar Desert destroys Owen, the pilgrim of the novel. He experiences all the terror that our narrator - due to his linguistic weaknesses - cannot. Seeing the things he has seen and not being able to take part in them, Owen is exhausted and ready for death. His story is over.

James, on the other hand, is invigorated by the story. The destructive obsession that has gripped him since Kathryn's departure has finally reached a state of closure. He is ready to return to his life in Athens.



# The Desert, Chapter 13

## The Desert, Chapter 13 Summary

James is happy to be back in Athens, having dinner with Ann and reading some new pages from Tap's novel. He tries to imagine what his son's life is like in Victoria, British Columbia, deciding it must be very rainy. While at dinner with Ann, he learns that Charles has received a lucrative job in the Gulf. Both are happy for him. Tap's pages, meanwhile, delight James with their inventive misspellings.

Later, James has drinks with Charles Maitland. Charles seems truly in awe of some unspoken accomplishment regarding James. James beats around the bush, trying to glean what he should be proud of. Eventually, Charles blurts out to James that the Northeast Group has just been outed for funneling information to the CIA. He assumes James has been making a small fortune in government kick-backs. James realizes that the conversation in the Indian mausoleum was Rowser's subtle way of telling him to get out as soon as possible.

James returns to his office and informs Mrs. Helen that he will be resigning immediately. He advises her to do the same. He reasons that the CIA is the great myth of modern America. Anything awful or vicious in America can be explained away by attributing it to this shadow organization. Charles has not told Ann. Now James understands why Eliades was so keen to know about him; he fears that this is why the Greek seduced Ann. He needs to explain to Eliades that he was unaware his research was going to the CIA. James asks Ann for his number and checks the ramshackle flat he used to inhabit and calls many. He has no luck.

Later, James passes some time with Lindsay Keller, telling her about Tap and what little he knows about Kathryn's life. He explains that he has never really given himself over to love with anybody. As such, he has a dull understanding of it. Lindsay comments that she does not think new technology is shrinking the world like people say; she thinks it is making it bigger and more dangerous.

One morning, James is jogging through the woods. In the distant mist, he hears some gunshots and stops in his tracks. A young man appears with a gun, stops, and runs into the brush. James presses forward to see if anyone is hit and finds David Keller collapsed on the ground, shot in the shoulder. When David saw the gun, he took a run at the kid.

Later that day, a Greek official questions James about one of Northeast Group's clients. He tells them what he knows but leaves Ann out of it. James wonders whether the gunman was supposed to kill him. He wonders if David's running into the kid saved his life. He is paralyzed by the acknowledgment that he did not move when he saw the gun. He feels he's been handed a second life. In the final moments of this section, Ann and Charles finally visit the Acropolis.



## The Desert, Chapter 13 Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter James is actually content with his life. He has experienced some closure regarding his cult obsession. Now he can spend time with his new girlfriend and read his son's new pages. His peace of mind is shattered by the revelation that he has been an unknowing pawn of the CIA. This information explains Rowser's wariness and Eliades spying. It also costs him a job and limits his time left in Greece.

What follows this revelation is a possible attempt on James's life. This final moment of terror in the woods outside Athens seems to knock him out of his remaining torpor. He touches the face of death and survives.

The end of this book is the end of the novel proper. At the beginning, Ann and James agree that they could not bring themselves to see the Parthenon. In the end, they finally do. Both have come close to danger and are at last at peace with themselves. The world has proved as dangerous as they imagined, but they have survived.

# **The Prairie, Chapter 14**

## **The Prairie, Chapter 14 Summary**

The final chapter of the novel is an excerpt from Tap Axton's novel, complete with misspellings. It tells the story of Orville Benton, a fictionalized version of a young Owen Brademas. As a revival meeting with his family, Orville tries to speak in tongues but is ashamed to find he cannot. The congregants around him - even his mother - mock him for his inability. Frightened of the preacher's glare, Orville flees the church into the pouring rain.

## **The Prairie, Chapter 14 Analysis**

The novel ends with one last thematic layer. Owen Brademas has once again failed to experience a spiritual transcendence, and Tap Axton immortalizes this frustration in *The Prairie*. *The Names* is a narrative of language and faith. They are inextricable from each other, either on the island, mountain, desert, or revival meeting of the prairie.

Owen, James's other self, cannot find this voice in the wilderness. James seems to have found peace with his iniquity. He has, at least, made it to the Acropolis.



# Characters

## James Axton

James Axton is the central protagonist of the novel and its narrator. Everything is told from his point-of-view. James is a risk analyst for the Northeast Group. As such, he is based in Athens and does risk assessments in Turkey, India, and the Middle East. A former writer, he was recruited to this position by George Rowser. He accepted the job to be close to his son Tap and his estranged wife Kathryn, who works on an archeological dig on the Greek island of Kouros.

When the novel begins, James is part of a group of American friends in Athens, most of them international envoys for American businesses. He considers himself separate from his surroundings; he hasn't even been to the Acropolis. One day, the body of a mental defective is found bludgeoned to death in Kouros. Owen Brademas, the sullen leader of Kathryn's dig, thinks it may be connected to a group of transients he met near a monastery who were obsessed with ancient languages. Owen, Kathryn, and James begin to suspect this murder was some sort of religious ceremony. As James becomes more fixated on this theory, Owen's dig is shut down, and Kathryn accepts a job in Canada. James loses contact with her and his son.

After his wife's departure, James meets with an old friend, the filmmaker Frank Volterra. Volterra has spoken to Owen about the death cult and wants to make a movie about them. James has heard rumors that the cultists are at the Mati in the south of Greece and makes a journey down there. At this time, he discovers the method behind their murders: they kill people whose initials match the name of the village where they die. In Jerusalem, James actually meets with a former cultist. The man tells him that here are many cells of this cult operating in many places.

Around this time, James is growing more free-willed, jogging and having affairs with married women. His friend Ann Maitland has begun an affair with Eliades, a strange Greek whom he met at a party. Eliades wants to know suspicious details of James's life. Meanwhile, James's employer implies some major setback may befall their company.

James goes to India to meet with Owen Brademas. He finds the man exhausted from a desert experience in which he temporarily joined the cult. Hearing the man's story gives James some sense of closure regarding his obsession.

When James returns to Greece, he learns that his employer has been funneling his risk analysis information to the CIA. This explains with the Greek nationalist Eliades has been asking after him. In his last days in Greece, James sees one of his friends shot by a gunman who may have been trying to kill James. James considers himself lucky to be alive. He finally goes to the Acropolis with Ann Maitland, whom he is now seeing.



## Owen Brademas

Owen Brademas runs the archeological digs in Kouros on which Kathryn Axton works. A melancholy man, he is described by one of his employees as "The worst field director in my experience" (255). Even as the novel begins, the dig is proving fruitless, and Kathryn is the only dedicated soul involved.

Owen spends his evenings at Kathryn's flat, chatting with her, Tap, and occasionally James. Tap is writing a novel based on Owen's life. It focuses on Owen's inability to engage in his parents' Pentecostal faith. Owen meets the murder cult in a cave near a monastery on Kouros, and he is the first to connect them to the ritual murder on the island. He becomes obsessed with their methodology at the same time as James. Indeed, Owen says he and James are one and the same.

Owen's dig is eventually shut down, and he decides to go to India to study Sanskrit and look for the Indian sect of the cult. He tells the filmmaker Frank Volterra about the Syrian cult to get him to investigate it. Sporadically, after Kathryn leaves Greece, Owen checks in with James to compare notes on their search.

Owen at last finds the Indian cult in the village of Hawa Mandir and follows them into the desert. He becomes a disciple of their cruel leader Singh. When the time comes to kill a victim, though, Owen cannot do it, as he could not speak in tongues with his parents. James catches up with Owen in his cluttered flat in Lahore after this experience. Owen is exhausted and ready to be done with his life.

The final chapter of the novel is a fictionalized account of Owen in church with his parents, written by Tap Axton. His fictionalized self is called Orville Benton.

## Tap Axton

Tap Axton is the son of James and Katherine Axton. He is nine years old and is already writing a novel, a fictionalized account of the life Owen Brademas. Since his parents' separation, Tap has been living with his mother on Kouros and assisting with the dig. They have developed a secret language called Ob. His father regularly comes to visit them on the island and provides editing notes for the novel. After the dig is shut down, he returns to Canada with his mother. Later, he returns to take a long road trip - his favorite activity is driving - to the Mani in the south of Greece.

The final chapter of the novel is a selection Tap's writing.

## Kathryn Axton

Kathryn Axton is James's estranged wife. She left him after discovering they he had slept with one of her friends. Since moving to Kouros for an archeological dig, Kathryn has blossomed personally. She works infinitely harder than anyone else on the fruitless





dig. In the evenings, she converses with her field director Owen and James, if he is visiting. James clearly would like to see them back together. Kathryn comes up with the initial theory that the bludgeoning murders are rituals. She hides that the dig has been shut down from James, but at dinner with him and her colleague Anand, the truth slips. James is furious and the two quarrel well into the night, with Kathryn telling James she is disgusted by his job. Later, she accepts a university position in Canada, leaving with Tap.

## **Ann Maitland**

Ann Maitland is one of James Axton's friends in Athens. At the beginning of the novel, she concurs with James that she cannot bring herself to go to the Acropolis. She is married to James's colleague Charles, but their marriage is strained. Charles has reached a middle-age malaise and is not getting many assignments. Midway through the novel, Ann begins an affair with a Greek called Eliades. James is dubious of the couple and becomes more so after Eliades begins making inquiries into his work. Ann makes further inquiries of James. Eventually, Eliades moves to London, and Ann begins to see James. By now, Charles is looking into work in the Gulf. At the end of the novel, Ann and James finally visit the Acropolis.

## **Charles Maitland**

Charles Maitland is Ann's husband and James's colleague. As the novel begins, Charles is facing a middle-age malaise. He is listless and rarely goes on assignment. His wife begins having an affair - not the first - and he starts looking for work outside of Greece. He eventually lands a job in the Gulf. Near the end of the novel, Charles reveals to James that the Northeast Group has been funneling information to the CIA.

## **Andreas Eliades**

Andreas Eliades is a Greek nationalist who maintains friendships with James's coterie of corporate friends. He is ostensibly in refrigeration. When James first meets him, he suspects that he is sleeping with Ann Maitland. This suspicion is later confirmed. Twice in the novel, Eliades gets in to arguments with James regarding American foreign policy. As time goes on, Eliades begins spying on James and making inquiries into his profession. He breaks off his relationship with Ann and moves to London. Final revelations reveal that his is some sort of counterintelligence agent keeping tabs on a suspected CIA operative. He may arrange a hit against James.

## **George Rowser**

George Rowser is James Axton's boss at the Northeast Group. A slovenly, brusque man, Rowser is notable both for his spooky security precautions and his fixation on architecture. He recruited James after reading an early draft of his book. Rowser



regularly counsels James to get a divorce and often requires them to meet in inconvenient locales. Rowser retires from the Northeast Group in anticipation of the revelation that he has been giving information to the CIA. He subtly suggests that James leave the company as soon as possible.

## Frank Volterra

Frank Volterra used to live with Kathryn and James before they were married. He is an intense, self-involved, and somewhat dull film-maker who gained notoriety after chronicling his affair with a Manhattan doyenne in a documentary. It is unclear whether he and Kathryn ever slept together, but when the novel begins he is involved with a young woman named Del Nearing. He has recently abandoned the set of a Hollywood film, and after meeting Owen Brademas he determines to make a documentary about the cult. He and James travel to Jerusalem in search of them, and he continues to search long after James has left him. Volterra never figures out the method behind the cult killings, and the implication is that he never finds any cult member.

## Del Nearing

Del Nearing is Frank Volterra's lover and de facto assistant. A young Jewish girl from LA, she is saved from a dead-end junky lifestyle by Volterra. Others consider her strange and off-putting. As Volterra becomes more fixated on finding the cult, Del decides to return to California. She spends a night in James's apartment before leaving, and the two flirt but never have sex.

## Anand Dass

Anand Dass is one of Kathryn Axton's coworkers on the archeological dig and the father of Tap's best friend. He is a professor for the University of Michigan. At dinner with Kathryn and James one night, Anand lets slip the fact that the dig is being shut down. After the dig ends he makes his way to another job in Bombay. At one point, James visits him, and Anand gives him Owen's residence in Lahore.

## David Keller

David Keller is one of James Axton's colleagues and friends in Athens. An impetuous and athletic man, he goes swimming and jogs regularly in preparation for military-style drops into hostile countries. Near the end of the novel, David is shot in the shoulder by a young man in Athens. He survives, but James worries that this shooting might have been intended for him.



## **Lindsay Keller**

Lindsay Keller is David Keller's second wife, the youngest of the group of expatriates in Athens. She teaches English in the city and always has the air of an outsider at group functions.

## **Andahl**

Andahl is a member of the language death-cult that meets with Volterra and James in the Mani. He confirms James's theory about the cult's methodology and also that there are many autonomous cells. He offers to set up a meeting between Volterra and his entire cell, but he never follows through.

## **Avtar Singh**

Avtar Singh is the leader of the Indian sect of the language death cult. He speaks many languages and is imposing, friendly, and cruel. He becomes close to Owen Brademas and declares him a member of the group.

## **Janet Ruffing**

Janet Ruffing is the wife of a colleague of one of James's friends in Athens. She comes to dinner one night while her husband is away and belly-dances for the group. James is entranced, and he spends the rest of the night convincing her to have sex with him in an alleyway.



# Objects/Places

## Athens

Athens is the location of James Axton's apartment and the home of most of his colleagues. It is a city riddled with popular unrest, mainly led by students. Athens represents James's life separate from his family; it's nights are spent in restaurants with friends.

## Kouros

Kouros is an island in Greece. It is the location of Owen Brademas's archeological dig. Kouros is known as a dull conglomeration of villages that do not attract tourists. The first ritual murder of the novel happens on Kouros.

## The Mani

The Mani are a group of large hills (tits, as Owen describes them) in the south of Greece. James and later Volterra travel there because the cult is said to be planning a murder there.

## The Thar Desert

The Thar Desert is located in the northwest of India, near the border with Pakistan. Owen Brademas is led into this desert from the village of Hawa Mandir. There he learns the practices of the cult and goes slightly mad waiting for the next victim to pass them.

## Lahore

Lahore is the city in India where Owen Brademas moves after his dig on Kouros is shut down. George Rowser also arranges to meet James in this city to tell him he is leaving the Northeast Group.

## The Cult

The cult of the novel is a group of autonomous cells of obsessive linguists that live in Greece, India, and the Middle East. They are obsessed with the sanctity of language, how it develops, and how it is the vessel for divinity. Their only function is to bring people to a town bearing their initials and kill them. The cult itself becomes an obsession for several major characters in the novel: James Axton, Owen Brademas, Kathryn Axton, and Frank Volterra. The name of the cult is implied to be Ta Onomata.



## The Northeast Group

The Northeast Group is the corporate consulting firm for which James Axton works. The Group assesses risks - mostly regarding political stability - that American businesses face doing business abroad. Near the end of the novel, the Northeast Group is revealed to be collaborating with the CIA.

## Ob

Ob is a made-up language created by Kathryn and Tap Axton. It consist of adding the letters ob into the middle of words. James feels alienated when his wife and son speak in this language.

## The Dig

The archeological dig is what brings Kathryn Axton and Owen Brademas to Kouros. Seeking information about the ancient inhabitants of the island, the dig ends up yielding next to nothing. People begin walking off the dig; Owen loses interest, and Kathryn is the only person left dedicated to the project. Eventually, the dig is shut down.

## The Fallen Boulder

The fallen boulder is discovered by James and Tap Axton by a road in the Mani. On it are written the words Ta Onomata, which may be the name of the cult. When James returns weeks later, the words on the boulder have been painted over.

## The Acropolis

The Acropolis is the location of the Parthenon in Athens. At the beginning of the novel, James Axton and Ann Maitland discuss why they cannot bring themselves to see it. Near the end of the novel, they finally go to it together.



# Themes

## Expatriation

The Names pointedly covers the territory of Americans abroad previously examined by Henry Miller, Paul Bowles, Allen Ginsberg and so on. It is an expatriate novel for the latter twentieth century.

The characters of The Names are not hedonists who have left the United States in search of a freer state of being; they are bourgeois professional who have parleyed discontent into a professional situation that allows them to live a rootless existence. Their concerns remained centered about their flats, their job, and their families. The Names has none of the orgiastic excesses of Tropic of Cancer or The Sheltering Sky. When two characters go to bed together, the process is secretive and somewhat embarrassing, as when James seduces Janet Ruffing under the reproachful gaze of Lindsay Keller.

What the travelers of The Names have in common with the travelers of the past era is their image of themselves as outsiders. They are part of no culture, and they are part of all cultures. In this sense, travel is an individualist act:

Air travel reminds us who we are. It's the means by which we recognize ourselves as modern. The process removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other. (255)

On the other hand, these travelers do not revel in their nonconformity as their predecessors did. This is the eighties, and cohesion with the zeitgeist is a high virtue. Owen Brademas, in particular, laments the loss of permanence in his life. He grows obsessed with the death cult because he longs for a constant in his life. James fixates on his estranged family as he careens from country to country. In short, these travelers may be a modern version of Henry Miller, but they are not his children.

## A New Dangerous World

"Are they killing Americans?" is the mantra of The Names, asked over and over again throughout. It reflects a new world dawning in the last decade of the Cold War. That war, of course, contained a significant amount of terror but few actual casualties.

The Americans of the novel have a front-row seat for the new terror, on that will become only more pronounced as the twentieth century ends. The Ayatollah Khomeini has overthrown the Shah of Iran, and Islamic militants have engaged in a two-week bloody siege in the Grand Mosque. Throughout the developing world, a vicious response is brewing to perceived American imperialism.



The work of most of these characters is to determine just how serious these anti-American sentiments are. America, one character notes, is the world's great myth. It is the boogie man that unseats governments at will, depletes resources, and generally bullies weaker nations like Greece. James, unbeknownst to himself, represents this myth to man like Eliades, whom have no qualms about killing Americans in response.

A running joke in the novel is that the first response to this danger is typically American: buying up rugs. Charles Maitland rationalizes this:

Weaving districts are becoming inaccessible. Whole countries in fact. It's almost too late to go to the source. It is too late in many cases. They seem to go together, carpet-weaving and political instability. (176)

The Names is, in this respect, a chronicle of a world that is ceasing to view the West as a liberating force and more as a target for rogue governments and terror groups.

## Language and Divinity

At the heart of James Axton's narrative is his search for the linguistic death-cult that stalks the periphery of his international travels, and his constant companion in this search is his wife's former employer, Owen Brademas. It is Owen, in the end, who makes substantive contact with this cult because of his ability to speak many languages.

This cult is fixated on words and language. Their principal act is murder, but this murder is an act of linguistic ritual. They lure the victim to a town that bears his or her initials. Thus, by the time the actual killing occurs it is an enactment of this method. Why, then, does this cult place such intense importance on language? The answer to this comes from Vosdanik, the man Volterra and James meet in Jerusalem. He expounds at length on the development of Aramaic, arguing that language and religion are inextricably linked. Believers carry their language with them as a way of giving their beliefs voice.

Owen sees in the idea of this cult a way finally to develop a connection with the divine in a way that makes sense to him: language. He is haunted by his inability to speak in tongues with his family at their Pentecostal meetings. James's fascination with the cult mirrors Owen's, though he is more concerned with developing a constant in his life:

My life is going by and I can't get a grip on it. It eludes me, it defeats me. My family is on the other side of the world. Nothing adds up. The cult is the only thing I seem to connect with. (300)

In the end, Owen fails to connect with the cult as he did with his parents. The novel ends with a fictional portrayal of his paucity of revelry at a revival meeting. For him, God is contained in words, but the words simply will not come.

# Style

## Point of View

The Names is told in the first person past from the point-of-view of James Axton. James - like many DeLillo protagonists - is a highly educated, dispassionate, and cynical individual. Late in the novel, he states that he has never given himself over to any passion, particularly love.

The result of having this personality for a narrator is that the means of telling the story is analytical. We are at once part of emotional and often violent events and separated from them by a protagonist who has examined the past events now can explain their motivations. Some key passages that perfectly reflect this dichotomy of narrative are when Kathryn and James argue after he realizes that her dig is ending and when James sees David Keller shot.

One can also appreciate that fact that James Axton is a writer, and at one point a cultist discusses with him whether the events of the novel should be set down in a novel. In this sense, the narrator is reflecting upon the viability of the events he relates. This self-reference - an acknowledgment that we are, in fact, reading a book - is a hallmark of the American postmodern, of which DeLillo is a forerunner.

The only exception to this point-of-view exists in the final book of the novel, "The Prairie." This short chapter is supposedly written by James's son Tap. As such, it has a completely - though equally analytical - voice, complete with constant misspellings.

## Setting

The Names is a novel about travelers at the dawning of a new, dangerous era. As such, setting plays an important role in the telling of the story. The novel takes place in Greece, India, and the Middle East, primarily, and the locations of the novel can be divided into two groups: those leaning into the future and those regressed in the past.

Athens is the location in which most of the novel takes place, and it is most definitely a location leaning into the future. Other such places are Jerusalem, Bombay, Amman, Istanbul and Lahore. These large cities have amenities and rely upon Western patronage. Many restaurants and apartment buildings in Athens seem to cater exclusively to American businesspeople. These towns are still rife with danger, though. Athens in particular has frequent killings of government officials and anti-American graffiti on walls. This danger is personified by the Greek nationalist Andrea Eliades, who harangues our protagonist and may arrange his attempted murder.

On the other end of the spectrum are the ancient villages in the Mani and Kouros and such locations as Hawa Mandir and the Thar Desert. These locations are punctuated with stone huts, decrepit cuneiform, and the death cult. This cult's leader, Avtar Singh,





says that these old empty places are the solution to a word that has become obsessed with defining itself. The places are the thing itself, as Lear put it. They are self-evident and have no need for the modern world. They are places of raw fascination for people like James and Kathryn Axton, Owen Brademas, and Frank Volterra.

The effect created in the novel is of a world leaping into a dangerous future, but also regressing into an equally dangerous past.

## Language and Meaning

The language of *The Names* reflects the temperament and education of James Axton, its narrator. The prose is clear and concise. The sentences are all bound to grammatical strictures. This may be one man's experiences, but it has clearly been edited with care. All told, the novel is a measured and unsentimental portrait of a man determining the course of his life as he lives it. James seems to be explaining to us, "this is why I gave up drinking, and this is why I searched for a cult?"

Most compelling about this tone is the way in which the narrator describes some of the more violent episodes of the story, from the ritual murders to his near brush with death at the hand of a hired gun. These episodes are clearly and simply told in plain narrative prose. No panic is reflected in our narrator's relation, and very little sense of disorientation is ever reflected. Even his seduction of Janet Ruffing is told with the dispassionate examination of a third party. Only in retrospect, wondering whether David's bullet was meant for him or if it was wise to bring his son to the Mani, does the storyteller ever betray a hint of panic. Even this, though, is retrospective, a dissection of his own foolishness.

Even the final chapter of the novel, told in the sloppy vernacular of James's nine-year-old son seems oddly concise. Telling the fictionalized story of Owen Brademas's childhood, it dissects his lack of religious faith in wording so precise and exacting - and eloquently misspelled - that we are left with little doubt that the author is an Axton.

## Structure

*The Names* is a novel divided into four books: *The Island*, *The Mountain*, *The Desert*, and *The Prairie*. Each of the first three books is named for the location that James and his cohorts scour for evidence of the death cult. Each of these books is between four and five chapters in length. The fourth book consists of one short chapter, and unlike the first three it is written by Tap Axton and not his father. This book is named for the prairie where its protagonist - a fictionalized version of Owen Brademas - attends revival meetings.

Each chapter is comprised as multiple passages varying in length from one paragraph to several pages. These take on the quality of a travelogue, each dealing with one trip, conversation, party, or memory. Perhaps most disorienting about them is that they don't necessarily deal with every trip or location James Axton takes. For example, early in the

novel James mentions taking an important trip to Istanbul. The next passage begins with his returning. Occasionally, James will describe his journey to a given location without describing the location itself.

This is not to say that James never describes his surroundings. Indeed, he describes certain settings in detail: the Mani, Jerusalem, Amman, etc. This reflects his assertion of himself as an outsider who does not sublimate himself to his surroundings. Clearly, James is picking and choosing which aspects of his travels he feels warrant description.



## Quotes

"We were a subculture, business people in transit, growing old in planes and airports. We were versed in percentages, safety records, in the humor of flaming death."

The Island: Chapter 1, p. 6

"[Owen's] pain was radiant, almost otherworldly. He seemed to be in touch with grief, as if it were a layer of his being he'd learned how to tap."

The Island: Chapter 2, p. 19

"What's next?"

"Istanbul, Ankara, Beirut, Karachi."

"What do you do on these trips?"

"Policy updates, we call them. In effect I review the political and economic situation of the country in question."

The Island: Chapter 2, p. 33

"We scuffled. No clean blows. She took a run at me once with a kitchen thing."

"What for?"

"She found out I went to bed with a friend of hers. It led to words."

The Island: Chapter 3, p. 67

"The body was found at the edge of a village called Mikro Kamini, an old man, bludgeoned."

The Island: Chapter 4, p. 72

"The lie was deeper in Greek than it would have been in English. I knew this without knowing why. Could reality be phonetic, a matter of gutturals and dentals?"

The Island, Chapter 4, p. 103

"I have a point to make, only one. I thought of it after James and I talked about the finds in central Crete, human sacrifice, the Minoan site. Is it possible these people are carrying out some latter-day version?"

The Island: Chapter 5, p. 116

"I never minded what you did. I know you've always arranged your life around things you couldn't possibly fear losing. The snag in your plan is your family. What do you do about us? But I never minded what you wrote. It's your present occupation I despise. I would hate your life. I would hate doing what you do."

The Island: Chapter 5, p. 127

"[Kathryn] called that night to say she'd taken a job with the British Columbia Provincial Museum. She spoke haltingly, her voice full of concern. I could almost believe someone close to me had died."

The Island: Chapter 5, p. 133



"The alphabet is male and female. If you will know the correct order of the letters, you make a world, you make creation. This is why they will hide the order. If you know the combinations, you make all life and death."

The Mountain, Chapter 6, p. 152

"They found a man whose initials matched the first letter of each word in a particular place-name. They either led him to this place or waited for him to wander there on his own. Then they killed him."

The Mountain: Chapter 7, pp. 168-169

"It was their place, I was sure. A place of hesitations and textures. An uncertain progress that was like the inner labor of some argument ... A place that was a muffled question, as some places are shouts or formal lectures. All the buildings joined. One mind, one madness. Was I beginning to know who they were?"

The Mountain: Chapter 8, p. 196

"I one sense we barely exist," [Andahl] said. "It is a difficult life. There are many setbacks. The cells lose touch with each other ... We lose purpose, get sick. Some have died, some have wandered off. Who are we, what are we doing here? There is not even a threat of the police to give us a criminal identity. No one knows we exist. No one is looking for us."

The Mountain: Chapter 9, p. 208

"It doesn't add up"

"Well, then, I'm imagining."

"Unless [Eliades] has friends on one of the left-wing papers. Maybe he's playing amateur spy. The Communist papers like to print the names of foreign correspondents they think are tied to U.S. intelligence."

"It doesn't seem like him."

The Mountain: Chapter 10, p. 243

"Owen was gravitationally bound to the cult, as an object to a neutron star, pulled toward its collapsed mass ... What could he say about the attraction?"

The Desert: Chapter 12, p. 286

"You're waiting, then, until he enters town?"

"You know this. You're a member now."

"No, I'm not"

"Of course you're a member."

"No, I'm not."

"Damned fool. Of course you are."

The Desert: Chapter 12, p. 298

"What did it say exactly?"

He smiled. "Only that the Northeast Group, an American firm selling political risk insurance, has maintained a connection with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency since



its inception."

The Desert: Chapter 13, p. 315

"The gift was his, the whole language of the spirit which was greater than Latin or French was not to be seized in his pityfull mouth. His tongue was a rock, his ears were rocks. This was his queer description of the situation, mumbled in his mind. He wanted to strike himself silly, but his hand was stade by the rathful look of the preacher."

The Prairie: Chapter 14, pp. 338-339



## Topics for Discussion

Compare Owen Brademas and James Axton. Owen claims at one point that he and James are the same person. To what extent is this true? What obsessions do they share? How does James deal with them differently from Owen?

Discuss the era in which the novel takes place. What challenges was America facing in the years prior to this story, and what changes does it face now on the international scene? How is the period of this novel a tipping point?

How are language and religion intertwined in the novel? How does the cult regard language? How about Owen Brademas? In what ways does he fail to embrace this connection between words and God?

Discuss James Axton's marriage in the novel. What does he expect to happen between he and Kathryn? How does her energy for the fruitless dig reflect a different attitude toward the marriage?

What do James Axton and Ann Maitland say about the Acropolis at the beginning of the novel? How does the Acropolis become a symbol in the narrative, and what is it a symbol for?

Discuss the idea of travel. Why do people often choose to travel to different countries? Why do the characters of this novel travel? Are they immersing themselves in cultures? Do they view themselves as separate from their surroundings?

Discuss the desert as a metaphor in the novel. What occurs in the desert that cannot occur in the more populated areas of the narrative? How do the cult members characterize the desert?

Examine the character of Andreas Eliades. What viewpoint does he represent in the novel? What speculations are made both by James Axton and Ann Maitland about him? What is revealed by the end?

Discuss the novel as a thriller. In what types of intrigue does James become embroiled over the course of the narrative? How are these intrigues resolved?