

The New Confessions Study Guide

The New Confessions by William Boyd (writer)

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Plot Summary

John's mother dies during childbirth and he spends his entire life believing he is to blame, and that others blame him. John grows up with his father, Innes, who is a physician, and an older brother, Thompson. He is raised by a housekeeper, Oonagh. When John is a teenager his father sends him away to a boarding school in the hope that John will step up his academic efforts. By the time World War I breaks out, John has developed an infatuation for his widowed maternal aunt, Faye Hophouse. He runs away from school and goes to her home where he impetuously announces that he's joining the military. With no real option open to him, he does so. He eventually encounters a friend of the family, Donald, who takes John in to work on a project filming for documentaries about the war. John soon discovers a great desire to be creative rather than filming the dry informational scenes of others working on the project.

John is captured and held as a prisoner where one of the soldiers, Karl-Heinz, gives John a book. John and Karl-Heinz become good friends and when John is released from the military he begins work in the film industry. He finds a backer and sets out to make a three-part movie from the book, "Confessions." Karl-Heinz is to star as is a beautiful young actress, Doon Bogan. The first part is finished just as sound comes on the scene.

Over the coming years, John marries and divorces, has four children and laments the loss of his youngest son, Hereford, though it seems more like wistful thinking than fact. John learns that Doon has established a new life for herself in America and he visits but discovers they have little in common now and that Doon isn't open to renewing their relationship.

At one point in his career, John returns to Europe as a war correspondent during World War II. While there, a Native American who is driving John around discovers a prisoner who has a pocket filled with severed fingers and jewelry. The Native American kills the prisoner and he and John agree to say the man had tried to escape.

Eventually John returns to America where he's denounced as a member of the Communist Party. He discovers a man named Smee is behind his persecution. He later discovers someone is asking questions about the prisoner shot by Two Dogs Running and knows Smee is behind it. A miscommunication with a private investigator ends in Smee's apparent death. John is never certain Smee is dead but moves to a secluded villa where he hopes to avoid being blamed in Smee's murder. As the story draws to a close, John is certain Smee is nearby and settles in to wait.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

As the story opens, John James Todd says that his mother died giving birth to him in 1899. He says his "first act upon entering this world was to kill my mother" and that this - his first day of life, - was the beginning of "all my misfortunes." His father was lecturing students the day he was born. John says that his father is incapable of loving him because John's mere existence is a reminder of his wife's death. John says his efforts to please his father last his entire life. The last time they are together, John's father - Innes McNeil Todd - is in his eighties and John is in his forties. When his father tells John he should get a haircut, John says his father is right.

Innes is a surgeon at the Royal Infirmary and an anatomy professor at the university. John lived at Number 3 Kelpie's Court. His father is seldom home and almost never involved in John's life. He is in the care of the housekeeper, Oonagh McPhie. John's father is very interested in medical experimentation. Sometimes he pays John to eat only certain things for an entire weekend, then questions how he feels. Innes realizes that too many people die following surgery and believes the key lies in "the purification of their diet." John sometimes tells his father he does feel better which pleases his father. John says that he often leaves the house to eat something he wants and that he feels no guilt over the duplicity.

John has no close, lasting friendships and his brother, Thompson, is not particularly interested in John. John believes it might be because Thompson also blames John for the loss of his mother. As John ages, he becomes interested in Oonagh and says that she apparently senses his carnal interest, a fact that changes their relationship. John becomes convinced that Donald Verulam is his biological father and pumps Oonagh for information but gets nothing of use. He decides to question his mother's sister, Faye Hobhouse who lives in Charlbury. Faye has three children, Peter, Alceste, and Gilda. John says that Faye had apparently offered to adopt him but Innes had refused. Faye spoils him and is the only person, according to John, who never makes him feel as if he might have been to blame for his mother's death. One weekend John takes some of his photos to Aunt Faye and tells her Donald taught him. Faye "flinches," which makes John more convinced that he's on the right track though she initially denies knowing him. He later discovers that Donald isn't his father.

One evening John is told by his father that he's to be boarding at a new school, Minto Academy. Innes says it's because John has been "indulged" and isn't doing well in the local school.

The time switches back to May 12, 1972 at the Villa Luxe where John is staying. He is renting the villa from a friend, Eddie Simmonette. He says the villa is "comfortable, if somewhat dilapidated." John says his financial situation is an increasing problem.



Chapter 1 Analysis

There is an "epigraph" at the beginning of the book that makes little sense to the reader until much later in the book. The section is presented as an excerpt from "The Private Pagers of James Boswell" and relates a conversation between someone named Rousseau and Boswell. The conversation is a parting with promises to reunite in seven years time, if both are still living.

John's relationship with Oonagh could be at least partly the result of John's losing his mother. John never has a mother and so relies on Oonagh to a great degree to "mother" him. However, he is fully aware she isn't his mother and there's a level of detachment there that puts John in the position of being sexually interested in her when he comes of age.

The relationship between John and his father is complicated. John believes Innes doesn't like him because John is a constant reminder that Emmaline died giving birth to him. John may be right. Though his father is seldom interested in John's life, it seems likely that would have been the case even if John's mother had lived. Innes is very wrapped up in his career and probably would have been even if his wife were around. The fact that Innes sometimes pays John to be his experiment subject indicates that he is at least not completely indifferent. The opposite side of this is that John accepts his father's instructions and agrees to participate. Sometimes John doesn't stick to the requirements but doesn't tell his father this. However, John sometimes tells his father that the particular diet has made him feel better. This seems to indicate that John is looking for approval from his father.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter Two, John arrives at Minto Academy and is met by the headmaster, Archibald Minto who announces that he's fair but willing to flog when it's necessary. John says the majority of the students have some "freakishly" incredible talent, such as the ability to run or draw. There are some who have strange talents, such as juggling. John says most of the boys were passable with math or music.

One of John's classmates is Hamish Malahide. He is a year older than John and is a math prodigy. One day John discovers a group of boys urinating on Hamish. Hamish expects John to take a turn but John helps him up instead. That small act of kindness earns Hamish's never-ending loyalty. One day Hamish and John get even with a boy who had urinated on Hamish. The boy's name is Radipole. Hamish knocks the boy out with "homemade chloroform," ties the boy to a tree and cuts his hair raggedly. Then Hamish starts a rumor that boys from the Innerleithen orphanage had been seen on the school grounds. When Radipole regains consciousness and summons help, Minto is so angry at his inability to remember anything that he flogs Radipole.

The summer arrives and John's father spends a great deal of time perfecting a substance to spray over operating theaters in an effort to lessen infections. Hamish visits twice and a dermatologist photographs him for a medical book though none are able to help clear his acne. Donald spends time with John and he wishes for the right moment to ask if Donald is his father, but doesn't find it. John begins shaving and war breaks out in 1914 while the family is in Drumlarish on vacation. With fewer boys at school because of the war, Hamish and John are forced to play rugby. John's uncle, Vincent Hobhouse, is killed by a motor bus in Charlbury High Street. John writes a "clumsy" sympathy letter to his Aunt Faye and the two strike up a regular correspondence. John discovers Donald is spending a great deal of time with Faye, helping sort out Vincent's business affairs.

John is "irrationally jealous" that Faye and Donald are spending so much time together and he concocts a plan to visit Faye. Hamish agrees to help him leave school though it will likely mean Hamish is flogged. John arrives in London and when Faye asks why he's there, John says he's "run away from school." When she asks why, he wants to say because he's in love with her but he blurts out that he wants to join the army. John says that isn't at all the truth and he has no idea why he says it. Faye sends telegrams to Innes and the school and then urges John to write a letter, further explaining his actions. John says her action makes them "co-conspirators" and he feels even closer to Faye.

John tries to take things to a deeper level but Faye continues to play the role of the older sister. She gives John the letters she's saved from John's mother, many of them mentioning her friendship with Donald. John stops at the final letter which begins with



the words that his mother "feels a little fitter today. Perhaps everything will be fine after all."

One day John and Faye are swimming and he lets his swimsuit drop, claiming it to be an accident. Faye slaps him. When John apologizes, she says they will never mention it again. Faye's son, Peter, arrives as does Donald. Donald confides in John that he's going to ask Faye to marry him and asks John what he thinks of the situation. John uses the moment to say he knows Donald is his father but Donald says they were never more than friends.

The time switches to May 16, 1972 at the Villa Luxe. John says he "considered suicide" after the drama of those few days. He says he is the kind of person who suffers self-esteem issues any time his self-esteem is threatened. At the Villa Luxe, John has a view of his neighbor's villa. There are several young people there and John can see them playing at the pool.

Chapter 2 Analysis

There is an instance of foreshadowing in Chapter Two. John says that Hamish is a math prodigy and that he understands math in pictures. He says that Hamish continues in this vein until "the end of his desperately unhappy life." The reader doesn't learn at this point how Hamish's life ends but throughout this chapter the reader does learn about Hamish's unhappiness. Hamish is not an attractive young man. He has horrible acne. Hamish seems to understand that John is horrified to see Hamish's skin. At one point John contacts his father, asking Innes to help Hamish. Innes says he will but that he probably won't be able to help because Hamish needs a dermatologist.

John says he worries about Hamish's role in life until the Radipole incident. The fact that Hamish waits months to get even then executes his plan neatly without being caught makes John believe that Hamish will survive despite his difficulties. Hamish never has that confidence in himself but does believe in John.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter Three, John arrives on the western front of the war. John has joined a public school service battalion though there is some question as to whether Minto Academy is actually a public school. His company is assigned to hold a particular line for two weeks at a time. The company is then relieved and another is assigned the duty for two weeks. John enjoys walking on the beach during his free time and one day he encounters a particularly annoying dog that initially frightens him. The dog follows John back to his base and is adopted as a "mascot" of sorts. John hates the dog, who comes to be called Ralph.

John spends some time in a little village called Wormstroedt where he meets a plump young girl named Huguette who works in a tavern there. John believes himself to be in love with her but is too shy to approach her directly.

One day John is walking along the beach and discovers the bodies of several men who have apparently drowned. He finds his way to the hospital at St. Idesbalde and reports the bodies. A nurse, Dagmar Fjermeros, returns to the scene with him and offers no explanation for the deaths other than they didn't seem to have wounds. John holds her watch while she wades into the water to help retrieve the bodies. John is suddenly face-to-face with his own mortality and pledges that he'll do everything he can to stay safe. One day John makes his way back to the hospital to return Dagmar's watch.

The military holds drills for gas attacks and John is taught the effects of mustard gas. As John is on watch one day, a cloud of fog rolls in and he mistakes it for mustard gas. He screams out a warning and everyone rushes to don their protective gear. John manages to pass it off that someone else was the first to issue the warning and isn't punished for it. John learns that Dagmar is leaving which makes him more attracted to Huguette. One day he kisses her and professes his love. For money, she allows him to touch her. Later, John learns that many of the young soldiers have paid her for sex.

In Chapter Four, John is in a horrific battle. At one point he is helping a friend who has been severely injured by a bomb that detonated early. John leaves him alone while he searches for stretcher-bearers and the man's legs are run over by a British tank. A short time later, John encounters a man who is literally sinking to his death in some sort of mud pit. The man says he was blown there by a bomb and that he is missing a leg. John tries to help him but is unable to reach him. The man pleads with John to shoot him so he doesn't have to endure the death of drowning. John says it suddenly seems a reasonable request but his gun jams. He rushes away, hoping to find a gun on a dead body nearby but when he returns to the pit, the man is gone. John finally makes his way back to the British lines and discovers Donald Verulam who is now a captain.



The time switches back to 1972. John watches as one of the neighbor girls, Ulrike Gunther, prepares to go snorkeling in the nearby bay. He says he recognizes the emotion he feels as lust.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

When John finds the drowned men on the beach, this is the first time he's come into direct contact with death during the war. John has been largely protected from the war and he has believed that he will escape the serious fighting, though it's never clear exactly why he believes this. He does say that the best of the men are taken to the fighting battalions but somehow doesn't believe he'll face fighting. However, once John sees the bodies on the beach, he seems to realize that the war is real and that he is in real danger. It's interesting because he pledges to do everything he can to protect himself. He notes that he'd often walked at dusk or later while in the trenches, but stops, apparently realizing he's a perfect target for a sniper. This realization of his own mortality is an important part of John's emerging maturity and the coming of age theme.

Back at the Villa Luxe in Chapter Three, John is in the village one day when the twin daughter of the man who owns a nearby villa say hello to John. When they ask if he's ever been to Germany, he pretends not to hear them. John's action on this front is a kind of foreshadowing. John will gradually reveal a great deal about his time in Germany including time he spends as a prisoner of war during World War I.

John describes the battle in Chapter Four and the chaos and confusion that occur. The British tank that runs over John's friend stops nearby. John confronts them, saying he'll report them for running over a man but they argue with him, saying they didn't run over anyone who was still alive. The man's legs are badly mangled and John sees a great deal of death and carnage that day. As the time changes back to 1972, John says that he had initially believed he'd made it through that day unscathed but later realized the mental toll of seeing so much death and destruction. John says a person who sees something like that never again sees the world the same. John is being forced to grow up quickly though he doesn't recognize it as such.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

In Chapter Five, John learns that Donald is filming the war. John is quickly taken in to help with the project and he is soon disillusioned with the final product. He notes that the footage he takes of dramatic scenes is seldom included while the films are all similar in that there's the build-up of troops, preparation for a battle, a long sequence with enemy trenches being bombed, and a conclusion with smiling "walking wounded" and glum German prisoners. John sets out to film the truth about war but doesn't tell Donald his intention. John finishes the film and submits it to headquarters. It's returned and Donald says the film was "a ghastly mistake" to keep John from being pulled from the project. Donald says there are some "strong" moments in the film though it's "a bit grim and morbid."

John catches up later with another filmmaker, Harold Faithfull, who stages battle scenes. John says there's a "gap between the film and reality" of battle, and he hates that. He's even more upset at how easily Faithfull manipulates people to stage battles. John films a real battle though he's in serious danger himself while doing so. John calls it "Aftermath of Battle." When the film is returned, Donald says he's been ordered to destroy it and tells John he has two options - he can film the veterinary aspect of war or balloons. John chooses balloons. He then discovers Donald has not destroyed the film after all.

John begins his work with the balloons and decides a shot from the air will be perfect for the first scene in "Aftermath of Battle." He's in a balloon that's tethered to the ground with a cable when the balloon is attacked by an airplane, the cable severed, and John floats free. In Chapter Six, John describes his time in prison. He says the sheer monotony is horrific and he wishes for a book to help break the sameness of every day. A prison guard, Karl-Heinz Kornfeld, befriends John and arranges for John to have a book in return for a kiss. The book is Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*. John devours the book.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The man John helps escape in Chapter Five is named Teague. John reconnects with him in Chapter Six and Teague is recovering but badly injured. Both legs are amputated just below the knee because he was run over by a tank. His right hand and face are badly burned. When John meets up with him in the hospital, John asks what Teague thinks of the war now. There's some history between the two. John says he hadn't really liked Teague but is pleased to see him. According to John, there's an affinity between them because they had "shared most of that ghastly day." John's need to question Teague is an important piece of insight into John's character. John is interested in the ideas and opinions of others and he obviously is expecting some level of anger or



resentment from Teague. When Teague says that he "wouldn't have missed it for the world," John is obviously skeptical. However, Teague says he's thankful to be alive, an attitude John should understand but apparently doesn't.

A minor character in one of the battle scenes is Leo Druce. Leo is later dependent on John for jobs. Years after the war, Leo writes about the horror of that day though at the time of the battle, he tells John he'd seen very little of it. Leo is wounded during a battle and John later discovers the wound was self-inflicted.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In Chapter Seven, John returns home but finds no one waiting to meet him at the station. He has imagined a hero's welcome but says he looks more like he was released from a Salvation Army. He walks from Waverly Station to his father's apartment where only Oonagh is at home. She says he's missed lunch and John screams out that he doesn't want lunch. When his father comes home, he points out that John has aged, a comment that makes John angry, then says that John's timing leaving school was unfortunate in that Innes had to pay for the entire semester. John says he later hopes his father's reaction is merely an effort to cover up his emotions at John's return, but he isn't convinced. John talks to Oonagh a great deal but her only real interest in his stories comes when he describes his time in prison. Even then she says that it's a "terrible shame for a family to have had a son in prison."

John meets up with Hamish at a Grassmarket pub. Hamish is working on math theories and says it's a time of amazing breakthroughs. The two continue to meet a time or two each week and John says these are the only bright spots of his existence. Donald and Faye arrive with Peter who has been gassed and is obviously suffering the effects. Donald promises to help John get a job in the film industry. John and his father argue just before a job offer comes for John and he leaves happily. He begins as a cameraman at the Superb-Imperial film company. There he encounters Harold Faithfull and meets Sonia who would later become John's wife.

John tries his hand at screen writing but the owners of the company say they are interested only in happy endings. John and Sonia marry in Fulham on January 18, 1922, and she is soon pregnant. John hopes for a daughter saying he isn't ready for a son. The owners of the film company finally accept one of John's screenplays and he begins work on his own, away from Harold Faithfull's crew, a fact that makes Faithfull angry. John is on the set when his son, Vincent, is born on January 15. Hamish and John meet up briefly. Hamish is on his way to begin a research fellowship at Oxford. John's first film is a reasonable success but the film company soon goes bankrupt.

The time switches back to 1972. John discovers the hole he'd drilled in the bathroom wall has been stuffed full of toilet tissue.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter Seven is an important example of the structure of the book. John is writing the entire story as a memory from 1972. However, Chapter Seven begins with the statement that John leaves his pregnant wife at their apartment in 1922, then drops back in time even farther to explain how John came to be married.



Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In Chapter Eight, John receives a letter from his former prison guard, Karl-Heinz, who says he's working in the film industry and invites John to visit. John decides to accept the offer and sets out, leaving Sonia alone with their young son and expecting their second child. John promises to send for Sonia as soon as he's settled. John is unable to secure work in the film industry and is soon working as a doorman at the Hotel Windsor in Berlin. Karl-Heinz's roles are usually as non-speaking extras but he is working. John feels as if he's on holiday from his responsibilities and enjoys the time away. He notes that the "strong affection" they'd developed while John was in prison is quickly reestablished.

After about four months, John gets a job with Duric Lodakian, an Armenian who made his fortune in pistachios but has a passion for film. Duric buys a script from John. John and Duric's son, Aram, agree to cast Karl-Heinz for the lead and talk about some possibilities for the female lead. Karl says John should see Doon Bogan before making a decision. The time reverts back to 1972. John is in the village and encounters Ulrike who says she's come to realize his identity as a former filmmaker. She says her boyfriend is working on a retrospective of silent films of German cinema and that he has some questions he'd like to ask John. John agrees and the first is whether he knows the whereabouts of Doon Bogan.

In Chapter Nine, John says he knows the American actress, Doon Bogan. Aram also knows her and is interested in the possibility of retaining her for the movie John is about to begin, "Julie." They arrange to meet Doon for the first time and she's cut and dyed her hair to be what's expected for the movie. John is immediately lusting after her and says he is "heedlessly, helplessly in love with her" by the end of the meeting. Aram insists her fee is too high and John pays part of it. Meanwhile, Sonia and their two sons, Vincent and Hereford, arrive with Sonia's mother. John needs a co-producer and convinces Aram to hire an old army buddy, Leo Druce. John spends some time with Doon in preparation of the film and learns she's a Communist. The filming of "Julie" goes well and when it comes to an end, John makes a stop by Doon's dressing room to say good-bye. Doon breaks a glass and kneels to pick up the shards and John kneels too. He suddenly reaches out and kisses her roughly. She responds by kicking him in the groin so that he collapses in agony.

John continues the finish work on "Julie" but it's obvious it will be a commercial success. He moves his family to a better house and confides his love for Doon to Karl-Heinz. Karl-Heinz tells John the only way to get over his obsession with Doon is to find some other obsession. John returns home and spends some time with Sonia and the children. John says he is certain Sonia conceived that night. He then pours himself into finding his next project and settles on Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions, the book he'd read in prison that had sustained him through the difficult times.



The time reverts to 1972. John is in the yard, trying to see what's happening on the beach through a pair of binoculars. Ulrike arrives, headed for the beach near John's villa. She says her boyfriend said "Julie" is very good.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The foreshadowing regarding Doon Bogan continues for several chapters. In Chapter Eight, John is asked if he knows where Doon is. In Chapter Nine, the reader learns that John and Doon worked on a film together and that John believed himself hopelessly in love with Doon after their first meeting. An important aspect of the story is that Doon is a Communist, though this is not given much attention at this point in the story.



Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

In Chapter Ten, John takes the idea of a three-part movie based on Rousseau's Confessions, each section at somewhere around three hours in length, to Aram. John meets up with Faithfull at a gathering and he is talking to an actress, Monika Alt. John has rented a house in the country in order to work on the script for "Confessions" and Monika meets him there regularly for sex. Aram's father, Duric, is dying and insists that John and Aram both promise to make Confessions into a movie. They do and after Duric's death, the two men begin planning for the film. Sonia gives birth to twins, Emmeline and Annabelle.

On Christmas of 1926, John is with his wife, children and in-laws at home when the phone rings. It's Doon and she tells Sonia that John has to come because Karl-Heinz is ill. He reaches her apartment and discovers she's just left. He rushes back to the street and follows her to a meeting and is told he has to be a member in order to enter. He pays the dues and then questions the purpose of the meeting. He learns it is the "Revolutionary Artists' Association of the KPD," a part of the Communist Party. John enters and spends some time trying to get into position to see Doon. When they finally talk, John suggests Doon take a role in his next movie, "Confessions."

In Chapter Eleven, filming of "The Confessions" begins. Aram changes his name to Eadward A.L. Simmonette, or Eddie and John takes his family to London to attend Thompson's wedding. Thompson, who is in banking, tells John that it's not safe to be in Germany even though John's job in the film industry seems to be stable. He urges John to transfer his money to Switzerland. John says he's skeptical of Thomas's urging to get his money out of Germany but that it's the "best and only favor he ever did me."

The filming continues with John's "near-fanatical" desire for perfection of every scene that leads to repeated filming of some segments. One night John gets drunk and winds up in Doon's room. He says they made love that night though he was too drunk to remember. They have sex again that morning and John says he wonders what the maids think when they discover honey on the bed. John says he feels carefree during this time but is weighted down when they return to Berlin that November. John begins putting together the film and discovers there is already more than four hours worth and the filming isn't complete. He and Doon slip away often and he says Sonia is either naïve or indifferent to his comings and goings. John becomes convinced she's having an affair of her own and is pleased to have him away so often. He hires an investigator named E.P. Eugen to follow her. Eugen soon reports to John that he's convinced Sonia is not having an affair but that she's spotted him following her and confronted him as a stalker. Eugen tells her he's infatuated with her as an excuse for following her. Even with Eugen's assurance, John harbors doubts about Sonia's infidelity. John asks Doon to marry him but she refuses. He discovers Alexander Mavrocordato, Doon's ex-husband



and former manager, has been to her apartment. He's jealous and knows Doon has probably been sleeping with him.

One evening John arrives home and his older son, Vincent, says he can't wake Hereford. John goes to the boys' room and discovers Hereford is dead at the age of three. The setting reverts to 1972 and John says he believes his life might have been different had Hereford lived. John is in the village when he sees an American he believes he knows but he reassures himself that no one knows he's there and the man quickly disappears.

Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

John notes that he's surprised when Sonia gives birth to twins though he has already been told that was to be the case. This is a statement of the level of his interest in the family. He cares little for Sonia or the children until he's forced to pay attention. John seems more shocked that he's suddenly the father of four than happy about being a father. This is also an important aspect of perspective. John seems open about his indifference but he talks laughingly of Hereford. When Sonia arrives in town, the older son is afraid of John who is a stranger to him but Hereford is not. This may color John's attitude toward Hereford though John says it's because Hereford is such an engaging child. Hereford dies and John talks about the impact of that son, indicating that he had a closer relationship with Hereford than any of the other three children. It seems this could be wishful thinking on John's part or a skewed perspective looking back from years later.

In Chapter Eleven, John describes the beginning of the filming of "Confessions." One of the early scenes they film is of a particular character, played by Karl-Heinz, as he watches his mother on her deathbed. John challenges each of the actors to pretend the woman is their own mother in an attempt to get their total dedication to the film. As the mother of the story dies, John signals for a door to be opened and a "bewildered" old woman shuffles onto the set. Karl-Heinz recognizes the woman as his real mother, a woman he has ignored and who has lived in poverty while Karl-Heinz has been pursuing his career. John says that he knows Karl-Heinz will react in this way and has it arranged for the camera crews to continue to roll during the scene. Karl Heinz collapses onto the floor upon seeing his mother and John says it's an incredible scene. John admits that Karl-Heinz, when he realizes the scene was arranged and that John went to such great lengths to trick him into showing such deep, genuine emotion, almost doesn't forgive John for the action. There's another scene in which a woman who has just given birth is brought from the hospital in an ambulance so the baby can be used in a particular scene. John says they continue to shoot until the mother becomes distraught and calls a halt to the filming. John says the baby develops an "unfortunate" chill during the filming and almost dies. These are examples of John's determination to make this film an incredible work.

John describes a connection with Hereford that he doesn't have with his other children but the reader should keep in mind that Hereford was only three when he died. John

says that he believes his life might have been different had Hereford lived but this statement is made decades later and it seems more likely that John is grasping at a reason for being disconnected from his children.



Chapters 12 through 15

Chapters 12 through 15 Summary

In Chapter Twelve, filming continues with a scene in a cherry orchard. John says the film is over budget and behind schedule but that what's being produced is "extraordinary." One evening John is with Doon when they encounter a man broken down on the side of the road. John gets out and the man runs off into the woods. John recognizes Eugen and follows, catching him and discovering that Sonia has hired him now to follow John. John and Sonia don't communicate at all until he returns to Berlin. She immediately announces she and the children are returning to London and that John is going to provide for them. She refuses to grant him a divorce. John believes Sonia will eventually divorce him and that Doon will marry him though others realize Doon is serious when she says she will never marry. John says he is busy and successful and should have been happy but is somewhat unsettled. John rekindles his affair with Monika.

One day the weather calls a halt to filming. Doon is bored on the set and returns to the hotel. John follows later and finds Mavrocordato there and that Doon is apparently planning to appear in one of Mavrocordato's upcoming films. John is angry and the fight becomes physical with John taking the brunt of it and finishing his filming with a broken arm, ribs, and knuckles. Aram, now known as Eddie, announces that sound is a given for films now and that it's too late to include sound in "Confessions."

The time reverts to 1972 and Ulrike says her boyfriend wants to interview John. John agrees but insists there be no photos and that his address not be published.

In Chapter Thirteen, Doon says she's moving to Paris amid the political upheaval of Hitler taking office. John encourages her to go. John is depressed as he watches "talkies" become the norm. The world's economy is rocked by the Wall Street crash. The company struggles financially as John works on the editing of "Confessions." Doon goes to Italy to work on another film and, in an effort to appease Eddie, John creates a shorter film called "Jean Jacques" which includes sound. John says he hardly notices the rise of the Nazi Party as he and Eddie discuss ways to incorporate flashbacks of Part One of "Confessions" in the next two segments.

The filming of Part Two is announced but Eddie arrives before the film can get seriously underway. The arrest of a studio employee prompts an investigation and Eddie is declared "non-Aryan," a designation that prompts the banks to foreclose and the creditors to "rush in." The employees of the studio are paid off and the business officially closed. Eddie says he has the negative of "Confessions" in his car and offers to sell it to John for fifty thousand dollars. John, with the money safely in Switzerland, accepts. Once the deal is complete, Eddie says he's going to America. John plans to return to Paris to find Doon. He arrives at her apartment but a man tells him Doon has left.



In Chapter Fourteen, John arrives in London and stops in to visit Sonia and the children. He's surprised to find she's lost weight and is "genteel." The children are quickly gone to their pursuits. Sonia says she needs more money and points out the cost of keeping the children in their expensive schools. John leaves the house and says it's the last time he sees his family.

The year is 1934 and John is thirty-five. He says he doesn't look very hard for a job. He then learns Sonia is divorcing him and John is required to spend a weekend with a prostitute, allowing himself to be caught in the act, in order to provide grounds for divorce.

John meets up again with Leo Druce in 1936, shortly after making plans with a new studio to produce the next segment of "Confessions." Leo is again down on his luck and John offers him a job. John is then asked by the studio to film another project before beginning "Confessions." John asks Leo what he thinks and Leo advises John to insist "Confessions" begins immediately. John says he knows Leo is right and makes that insistence. John soon receives a telegram from the studio saying they are no longer interested in filming "Confessions" and that John is no longer needed. Leo gets a job on the film John had turned down. John is furious at the betrayal and returns to Scotland. A friend suggests John go to Thompson for a loan and set up a film studio of his own for "Confessions." John takes the advice and forms Aleph-null Films. John then goes to Thompson and explains the situation, saying he needs twenty-five thousand pounds. He says with that amount he can go to other investors for the remainder of the money to produce the film. Thompson says he can't assure John of the loan but helps smooth the process of application. When John goes to the board for their decision, he discovers the board has approved a fraction of the amount he needs and Thompson is thrilled, believing he's helped John immensely.

About this same time, John reads a piece in the newspaper about Leo Druce. Leo has granted an interview about his experiences in the war and describes a battle in which he portrays himself as a hero. John knows for a fact that Leo was barely involved in the battle at all and writes a letter to the editor to that effect. In that letter, John alleges that Leo is not entitled to the medals he wears and touts Leo's "nonexistent reputation as a gallant soldier." A short time after he learns that he's been given a very small loan, John learns Leo is suing him for defamation of character. John retains an attorney who advises that John settle the issue by writing an apology Leo demands and paying a settlement. The loan John had from the bank goes to that settlement and John believes his only option is to leave the country.

The time reverts to 1972 and John learns from his housekeeper, Emilia, that an American was asking about him in a nearby town.

In Chapter Fifteen, John arrives in Los Angeles in 1937. He is one of many foreigners hired by 20th Century Fox. Others with offices nearby are German and John's name on the door reads "J.J. Todt." John has no real assignment and he says he does no work during his months at Fox. He is supposedly working on a script that will one day be presented to a company executive, but never actually does so. Thompson writes to



John, enraged that he'd walk away without repaying the loan and pledging to never forgive John. John can't locate Doon and is worried about her. One day John has an argument with an executive who discovers John isn't German. The man says the studio is hiring only German writers and John is summarily fired.

John begins an affair with Lorelei who is the manager of a coffee shop. John winds up in Mexico and then finds he can't get his Visa renewed for America. John eventually befriends a man named Ramon Dusenberry who is Mexican/American and owns two newspapers. Ramon hires John as a photographer. One evening Monika asks John to meet her and informs him that Eddie is back in business and looking for John. John still can't obtain a visa but Monika marries him in order to get him back into the United States.

The time reverts to 1972 and John says he'd found his name in a book about the film industry. The entry indicated John may have died around 1960 and that he'd been an important director during the "silent era" and made several "indifferent B-feature Westerns" in Hollywood around World War II.

Chapters 12 through 15 Analysis

John and Doon spend a little time apart in Chapter Thirteen and John makes an interesting statement. He says he is now basically free to see Doon and spend as much time with her as he wants following the separation from Sonia. However, his life with Doon is "not the unalloyed bliss" he says he'd expected. John is so immature on the issues of relationships at this point in his life and it's a weakness of his character that's never actually overcome. He believes the initial excitement with Doon will last forever and can't understand why it doesn't.

Thompson is married to a pretty young woman named Heather who is obviously an admirer of John and his work. John, as is typical of his personality at this time, can't stand having a strictly platonic relationship with a woman. There's a moment in which he believes she wants him to kiss her and he does. She pulls away and is not angry, but sad, that he's brought an end to their friendship with the action. She tells him he's "ruined everything" and puts distance between them, eliminating any opportunity they'd previously had to be alone in order to eliminate the opportunity for another situation of this kind. John has no idea how to have a friendship with a woman and has killed an alliance that could have greatly benefited him.

While John is working initially he finds a freelance job reading scripts for a man named Monroe Smee. Smee is an odd man and after John reads several really horrible scripts, Smee admits that he'd written the scripts. John is mortified because he's told Smee exactly what he thinks of the scripts but Smee assures John that is exactly what he'd wanted from him. The encounter is rather vague and seems of little importance at the time but John later discovers that Smee is responsible for some serious trouble with the United States government.



Chapters 16 through 18

Chapters 16 through 18 Summary

In Chapter Sixteen, John says he makes eleven westerns between 1940 and 1943, and that all but one is less than an hour in length. Eddie has money to fund the projects though John says he doesn't know how Eddie became wealthy again. Monika and John divorce peacefully and John discovers that Faithfull had been the cause of his visa problems. John encounters Alex Mavrocordato who is down on his luck and broke. John and Mavrocordato talk and John discovers Doon hadn't gone with Mavrocordato as he'd always believed. John makes a film about Billy the Kid from the memories of a man who knew the legendary man. John realizes Billy the Kid wasn't the hero he'd been made out to be and the film reflects that.

John learns that Doon is living in Montezuma, Arizona, and heads there as soon as he wraps up his current film project. She is living in a rural area and focusing on painting. She tells John she'd tried to find him but hadn't been able to. Doon asks why John came to find her and he leaves in the afternoon, convinced he won't see her again.

John returns home after his visit with Doon to discover a letter from Hamish saying Hamish has a new position in the United States near Princeton. A second letter from John's father pledges his family - including Thompson - is ready to stand behind John "during this difficult and unpleasant time." John soon discovers he is being attacked in Britain for "living the high life in Hollywood while war was being waged at home." John believes Leo is behind the attack. John believes his only honorable course of action is to return to Britain. He is hired by Ramon as a war correspondent.

The time reverts to 1972 and John remembers the meeting with Hamish who'd secured a job with the military. He is still working on prime numbers and John remembers it as a "disquieting visit."

In Chapter Seventeen, John describes the assignment as a war correspondent. Many of his early stories are scrapped as "boring." He is soon paired with a soldier, an American Indian named Two Dogs Running Brown, who serves as his driver. At one point, John and Two Dogs wind up holding a prisoner who has a hip pocket filled with fingers and other pockets filled with jewelry. When Two Dogs discovers the fingers, he shoots the man and he and John agree they'll say the man tried to escape. John and Two Dogs are later fired at by British soldiers who mistake them for "Jerries." John is injured.

The time reverts to 1972. John remembers his recovery from a bullet wound. He convalesces in Washington, D.C., and Eddie sees to it that John has good care and food. John says he has since learned that he can "function surprisingly well on one lung." John spends as much time as he can pleading ill health but then gets a letter from Karl-Heinz asking for a loan. John is surprised that Karl-Heinz is alive.



In Chapter Eighteen, John heads to Berlin and is surprised at how much the city has changed. He begins searching for Karl-Heinz but has little luck. At one point he finds a bar that had once been open for the gays of the region and spends a great deal of time there because he doesn't know where else to search. He begins an affair with a young woman named Henni who is desperate to feed herself and her mother, and who exchanges sex for the cigarettes John provides. John comes up with the idea of hiring Mr. Eugen to find Karl-Heinz and he eventually finds Eugen who is obviously not doing well. John hires him and Eugen soon finds Karl-Heinz living in the basement of a church with a large group of children. John goes to great lengths to get Karl-Heinz out of the country and they make plans to meet in America.

The time reverts to 1972 and John remembers leaving Berlin and stopping by to visit his father in what would be their final visit before his father's death.

Chapters 16 through 18 Analysis

John is destined to become morose and philosophical about his life soon after his father's death. It seems clear that John is sad that he doesn't have a relationship with his children but still doesn't accept responsibility. During this period, he again laments the fact that Hereford is the one child with whom he could have bonded and that Hereford's death left a huge gap in his life. It seems likely this is mainly because John is facing some sort of mid-life crisis and is soon dealing with the loss of his father. He says later that he hadn't expected his dad's death to affect him.



Chapters 19 through 21

Chapters 19 through 21 Summary

In Chapter Nineteen, John begins work on what he refers to as "Confessions, Part III," but it is actually titled "Father of Liberty." Eddie doesn't want to hire Karl-Heinz but John insists. Karl-Heinz spends a great deal of time in the sun and looks better than he had in Berlin. One day Eddie tells John to meet him at a specific restaurant and to be careful that he isn't followed. John expects Eddie to reveal he and his wife are divorcing but when he gets there Eddie reveals that John's name has been included on a list of suspected Communists in a publication called "Red Connections." When John gets home he is subpoenaed. Eddie promises a lawyer but the man says he can only give some advice but can't actually represent John at the hearing. John is furious and wants to know who provided his name in the first place. He manages to get through the hearing without being arrested but his connection to the Communist Party seems possible and he's "gray listed" in the film industry, meaning no one will hire him. Eddie continues to pay him to work on scripts at home for awhile but puts distance between himself and John.

Over the coming months, John is followed and his phone is tapped. Monika is called as a witness against him and dozens of others are accused of being Communists. When John confronts her, she reveals that Eddie had paid her to marry John when he'd been unable to get a visa to enter the United States. Twenty-seven of them give John's name as a suspected Communist in an effort to clear their own names. One day Doon shows up and testifies that she's known John for years and that he's never been associated with the Communist Party.

John hires a private investigator named Sean O'Hara to find out who started the rumor that John is associated with the Communist Party. O'Hara returns after a few days and reveals that it's Monroe Smee. John goes to Smee's house and confronts him, demanding to know why Smee started all the trouble for him. Smee pulls a gun and threatens John. When John reveals this to O'Hara, he offers to "knock him around some." John declines.

The time reverts to 1972. John's housekeeper, Emilia, seems to be seeking out his company and John believes he can find some measure of happiness with her. At one point he reaches out and touches her shoulders and she suddenly remembers that an American has again been asking about John in town. She then seems to have second thoughts about starting a relationship with him and rushes away. John walks to the village and there meets Ulrike who introduces him to her boyfriend, Tobias. Tobias asks if John knows where there is a copy of "Confessions." John says he doesn't.

In Chapter Twenty, John recalls his final film, "The Last Walk of Jean Jacques Rousseau." Eddie hires him to direct the film but requires he use a pseudonym. John says the film was shot in 1958 and John uses the name John Wizenreid. Karl-Heinz is



battling ulcers and begins contemplating his death. He goes into the hospital while John is editing the film. One day Two Dogs Running arrives at the Lone Star studio where John is working. Two Dogs Running says there is an investigation into the "murder" of a "German POW" and that the initial findings are that John killed the man who'd had the fingers in his pockets. The investigation seems to have been instigated by Smee.

Karl-Heinz dies peacefully in his hotel room. The film is set to open but there are picketers objecting to the movie on the basis of John's Communist affiliation. The owner of the theater believes the threat that his establishment will be burned and refuses to show the film. One evening John sees a man following him on his daily walk on the beach and is certain it's Smee. He calls O'Hara demanding that he get Smee "off my back." O'Hara misunderstands what John wants and when John returns home he discovers O'Hara has killed Smee. O'Hara helps dispose of the body.

Smee's body is never found and the missing person case is never solved. Eddie arranges for John to leave the country and he remains at the Villa Luxe, owned by Eddie, keeping in touch with Eddie occasionally. John says the years pass and police never focus on John as a suspect. However, John always fears that Smee might not have died and so he remains, hidden away. One night in the villa, John hears someone walking around outside. The next day he goes into town and finds one of the men who'd investigated him those many years earlier. He asks about Smee and is assured Smee is dead, but doesn't believe it. Later, John gives Ulrike his copy of "Confessions."

In Chapter Twenty-one, John says that Hamish died the previous week of throat cancer. John then hears someone coming and wonders if it's Smee. He's convinced it is and that something is about to happen. He stands still on the beach and waits to see who it is.

Chapters 19 through 21 Analysis

John learns of his father's death and it's suddenly imperative that he know what his father really thought of his career. John is obviously holding out hope that Innes had seen his films and was secretly proud of him though Innes always derided John's choice of a career. John sends Thompson a telegram asking if his father had seen any of the films. Thompson's reply is terse, saying John's question is "in worst possible taste" and suggesting John get "professional medical advice." John then writes to Oonagh, hoping she will provide the information he wants but Oonagh says she isn't certain whether Innes ever saw the movies. Oonagh says she has seen them and is proud of John but John, at this moment, seems to desperately need the approval of his father.

The situation between John and Monroe Smee becomes very complicated. John and Smee first met when John was living in America and read some scripts written by Smee. However, at the time Smee tells John they are scripts he's considering for movies. John is brutal in his criticism and Smee thanks him. The appreciation seems genuine at the time and it appears that Smee does want John's honest opinion. He seems to accept that he's not cut out to be a script writer and that he'll have to focus himself on some

other creative outlet. Years later, when John discovers Smee is the reason John is being persecuted for his alleged involvement with the Communist Party, John comes to believe that Smee may be holding a grudge for John's harsh words. The reader has to remember that it's John's opinion that Smee's writing was horrible and that John may actually have been more abrupt than necessary. If this wasn't the reason for Smee's persecution of John, the real reason was never discovered.



Characters

John James Todd

John is a student as the story opens and the son of Innes Todd who is a doctor. He is greatly shaped by the death of his mother which occurred when John was born. John refers to himself as a murderer and believes his father and brother are antagonistic toward him because he is to blame for his mother's death. John struggles constantly to find acceptance and love, and he seeks that out with several unacceptable partners, including his maternal aunt. This infatuation is partly to blame for the fact that John joins the military during World War I and spends time as a prisoner of war. He returns home to find most people unwilling to even listen to his stories of captivity, let alone commiserate with him. John falls into the role of cameraman and film director in the burgeoning film industry though his first attempts at filmmaking don't fulfill his creative yearnings. John says he is lacking in self-confidence, probably the result of his feelings of alienation from his father and brother. As a student in school, John is adequate but not particularly driven. As he ages, he looks back on his life and believes he's had only a few good friends. John is the epitome of the coming-of-age character in many ways though he continues to struggle with his self-esteem and his need for love into his seventies. The story is presented from John's perspective.

Hamish Malahide

A student at Minto Academy when John arrives there, Hamish is a year older than John and something of a math genius. Hamish is plagued by acne that drives most of the other students to harass him mercilessly. John and Hamish strike up a friendship when Hamish has been urinated on by several of the other students. Hamish expects John to urinate on him as well and when John doesn't, Hamish becomes devoted to John. John worries about Hamish and arranges for his father to send Hamish to a dermatologist in an effort to clear up the acne. Hamish is never given any relief but seems oddly proud when he's photographed for a medical journal. Hamish is ultimately patient in his attempt for revenge against the boys who urinated on him, a fact that makes John certain Hamish will get along well in life despite John's concerns. Hamish believes in John's ability to survive as well, a fact that pleases John. Hamish questions everything related to math, unwilling to accept explanations by his teachers. John says that Hamish sees math as a series of pictures, which is why he is a genius on subjects related to math. As an adult, Hamish is working for the government, attempting to create a secure code using prime numbers. Hamish becomes a serious smoker and dies of cancer.

Thompson Todd

John's older brother, Thompson and John are never particularly close. John says Thompson may blame him for taking their mother away. Thompson is flabby with a



focus on business while John is very creative-minded. As an adult, Thompson goes into banking and urges John to move his money out of Germany, a move John said is the only good advice Thompson ever gave him.

Innes Todd

A brilliant medical researcher, Innes Todd is teaching at the university the day his wife dies giving birth to John. Innes believes the mortality rate following surgery is too high and spends a great deal of time working on how to lower that rate. He comes up with several ideas related to diet and often has John eat a specific food for several days in order to test his theories.

Faye Hobhouse

John's maternal aunt, Faye Hobhouse is very pretty and one of the few links John has with his mother. Faye stands by John and apparently takes an interest in him throughout his childhood. John imagines himself in love with Faye and makes an inappropriate move that changes their relationship.

Donald Verulam

A close friend of John's mother and the second husband of Faye Hobhouse, Donald Verulam is of particular interest to John because he believes Donald to be his biological father. Donald helps John land his first job in the film industry.

Oonagh

Oonagh is the housekeeper who cares for John as a child. She is John's main caregiver for most of his life and John experiences jealousy when she gives birth to a child of her own.

Peter Hobhouse

John's cousin, Peter Hobhouse is the son of Faye Hobhouse. Peter is in the military when John goes to visit Faye the first time. John considers him something of a snob. Peter is gassed during the war and is obviously ill and struggling after that.

Doon Bogan

Doon Bogan is a beautiful actress John meets before he begins filming the first part of "Confessions." John is immediately infatuated with her and comes to believe he's in love with her. John and Doon have an affair that ends when she leaves him to begin another



movie. Doon is self-assured and confident, and is much less invested in the relationship than John. John loses touch with her and eventually discovers she's moved to a rural area in America and made a new life for herself.

Eddie Simmonette

A wealthy owner of a movie company, Eddie Simmonette's name is really Aram but he changes it to escape his European roots. Eddie is devoted to John until John is accused of being a Communist and, at that point, he denies their friendship though he continues to secretly help John. Eddie owns the villa where John stays in 1972.

Leo Druce

Leo Druce is a soldier who shoots himself in the leg to avoid the heat of a battle during World War I. John helps Leo when Leo is desperate for work and Leo later stabs John in the back, advising him to turn down a film that Leo then directs.

Karl-Heinz Kornfield

A young soldier who is guarding John when he is taken prisoner of war during World War I, Karl-Heinz Kornfield is gay and trades food and later a book to John in return for a kiss. Karl-Heinz meets up with John on several occasions after the war and they work together on the first segment of "Confessions."



Objects/Places

Number 3 Kelpie's Court

John grows up at Number 3 Kelpie's Court.

Charlbury

John's Aunt Faye lives with her family in Charlbury.

Minto Academy

John attends school at Minto Academy.

Waverly Station

John's arrival point after World War I, he walks from this place to his father's apartment.

Villa Luxe

Where John is living in 1972.

Drumlarish

Where John and his family are on vacation when war breaks out in 1914.

Homemade chloroform

The substance Hamish uses to knock out Radipole.

Suberb-Imperial Film Company

Where John goes to work as a junior cameraman after the war.

Grassmarket

Where John and Hamish meet up after John's return from World War I.



Alpha-null Films

The company John sets up in order to borrow money from Thompson's bank to film "Confessions."

Confessions

The name of the movie John produces as part one of a trilogy though he never gets the second and third parts filmed.



Themes

The Effects of the Death of John's Mother

John's mother dies when he is born, a fact that seems to impact the rest of his life in several notable ways. While the most important is that he grows up without the love and nurturing that would likely have come from his mother, John's self-worth is also greatly impacted and he believes others blame him for his mother's death. John's father, Innes, is never affectionate with John. It seems likely that Innes would not have been an affectionate, doting father even if his wife had not died but John doesn't seem to consider that. Instead, John believes Innes hates John because he caused his mother's death by the sheer fact of his birth. In John's mind, Innes can barely stand to look at John because to do so is to remind himself of the death of John's mother. Another aspect of this theme is John's quest for a solid identity. John imagines that Donald is really his father and goes so far as to express this hope to Donald. Yet another aspect of this theme is that John seeks out relationships throughout his life and some of those are probably prompted by the fact that he was deprived of a mother-son relationship. John leaves school and goes to Faye Hobhouse, his maternal aunt, believing that he loves her in a romantic way and that Faye will return that love. John doesn't see this as inappropriate at all but believes it's completely within the realm of acceptable behavior.

The Need for Companionship

The need for companionship controls a great deal of John's life from the time he's very young. For the most part, John confuses the need for friendship with the need for a sexual relationship. Whenever he's lonely or dissatisfied with his life, he begins a new affair. John says that he marries Sonia largely because he wants to have sex. He is soon bored with the marriage and weighted down with the responsibility. When the marriage is no longer engaging for him, he begins a series of affairs with actresses. One of those is Monika and the other is Doon Bogan. John believes himself in love with Doon and believes his life would be wonderful if he could escape his marriage and marry Doon. However, when Sonia leaves him and John finds himself free to spend a lot of time with Doon, he soon grows bored with that stability and is relieved for some time apart. Soon after her departure, John believes himself lonely again and the cycle continues. This theme is also seen in John's early infatuation with Oonagh and his aunt, Faye Hobhouse. John has the undying love and affection of each of these women but is unable to allow the relationship to stand at that. He goes so far as to leave school to go to Faye's house, believing he can claim his love for her and that she'll return it. Even when he is living in his self-imposed exile, John clutches at the possibility of beginning a relationship with his housekeeper.



The Need for a Creative Outlet

The need for creative release is an important theme in this story because it drives the majority of John's career. At an early age, John receives a camera from a good friend of his mother, Donald. John takes pictures under Donald's tutelage and much later is taken in as a cameraman for a project to film the war because of this relationship and his experience with the camera. From the beginning of that project, John sees the potential to make an incredible and creative documentary rather than simply filming what happens or setting up scenes to appear as if a battle is under way. After the war, John flounders and doesn't know what to do with himself. Donald helps him get a job with a studio which sets the rest of John's career in motion. John struggles over many hurdles in order to make his creative dreams a reality. When he is filming "Confessions," he is fanatical about the scenes and having everything be perfect for the filming. He says at one point that the filming is over budget and has taken too much time, but that what's being produced is extraordinary. In John's mind that quality makes up for everything else. When John is forced out of the film industry for a while because of the stories of his association with the Communist Party, he pays the bills by doing other jobs, including tutoring. However, he always clings to the hope that he'll go back to work in films.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the exclusive perspective of John James Todd. This limited perspective means the reader is in the dark as to the thoughts and motives of anyone other than John. An important example of this limitation is seen in John's relationship with his father, Innes Todd. John believes his father hates him because John is a constant reminder of the death of his mother. John's mother died in childbirth. John has some guilt over that and he believes his father hates him because of it. It seems this may not be the case at all. John's father is a rather distant man with everyone. He is clinical in his thoughts and actions and this distance doesn't seem to be limited to John. Innes might have been a different man if he hadn't lost his wife, but there is no real proof of this. The reader sometimes has an intimate look at John's thoughts and personal actions. In some cases, the reader may feel John discloses too much information. For example, John talks about his physical reaction to his housekeeper at the villa in 1972 and he drills a hole in a wall in an effort to get a glimpse of her while she's using the bathroom. These scenes are important to fully understanding John as a main character. The limited personal perspective is the only way for the author to fully convey the deeper aspects of this character.

Setting

The story is set over a period of the lifetime of John Todd. The overall physical settings are real places though the specific settings are not. There are several references to cities and countries that do exist, including Scotland, London, and Europe. The specific settings, including Minto Academy, John's home, and the villa where John is living as he's recounting the story of his life, are fictional. The majority of these settings are described only to a minor degree. The details are left to the imagination of the reader. The story is set in the 1900s. The overall time setting is real and there are some important historic events described in the story, including the first and second World Wars. Like the physical setting, the specific settings within these overall settings are from the imagination of the writer. John describes several specific battles. Some of these are reasonably accurate with regard to historic battles while others appear to be completely of the writer's creation. The use of the overall real setting is acceptable as are the fictional events used to further the action of the story. The time and physical settings are acceptable to the story and reasonable for the events that occur. Technology and conveniences, such as indoor plumbing, seem to be in keeping with the specific time settings.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in a ponderous manner with action that moves much too slowly in many cases. There are long passages devoted to the descriptions of people and places that pass through his life only briefly, never to be seen again. There are also lengthy passages about the various battles John experiences in the war as a soldier and later as a correspondent. Readers may be tempted to skip over some of these passages. There are also some disturbing scenes and the language is often coarse with curse words. An example of this is seen in John's description of Oonagh's efforts to tend to her infant son. When the baby won't be pacified, Oonagh sucks on the child's penis, an act that immediately quiets him. John also has memories of Oonagh cuddling him to her bare breast in an effort to comfort him. John says he isn't certain whether that happened or if it was a figment of his imagination. Some readers may find these passages or the foul language offensive. The book is presented in a straightforward manner other than the author's tendency to plod through scenes. The story is not presented in chronological order, though the flashbacks are clearly identified so the reader should not have trouble discerning what is current and what is in the past. For the most part, the author begins sections with a date to identify the time setting.

Structure

The story is divided into twenty-one chapters. Each chapter is numbered but also includes a title. The story does not fall in chronological order and this may become confusing to some readers. For example, Chapter Six ends with John being released from prison as the war comes to an end. Chapter Seven begins with John kissing his pregnant wife farewell but explains nothing about this wife until later in the chapter. The chapter is again interrupted by a flash-forward that continues the thought at the beginning of the chapter before finally going back to describe how John meets and marries Sonia. The book consists of a series of memories that are roughly presented chronologically, beginning with John's childhood and going through adulthood. The chapters tend to end with a section indicating the story was written in 1972 from the villa where John is at that time. He is apparently seventy years old at the time of the writing from the villa. The chapter titles are "Beginning;" "A Sentimental Education;" "L'homme de l'extreme gauche;" "New Geometries, New Worlds;" "WOCC;" "The Confessions;" "Superb-Imperial;" "Julie;" "Passions;" "Comrades;" "The Confessions: Part I;" "End of an Era;" "The End of the Affair;" "Dog Days;" "Pacific Palisades;" "The Kid;" "The Invasion of St. Tropez;" "Berlin, Year Zero;" "The Hollywood One;" "The Last Walk of Jean Jacques Rousseau;" and "John James Todd on the Beach."



Quotes

"I know he never loved me, but that, as far as I am concerned, is of little importance. He did not love me because, quite simply, I was a constant reminder of his loss."

Chapter 1

"I have no idea why he did not like me. Normally, with an age gap of six years, an older brother will treat a younger with fond enthusiasm - a favorite sidekick, an instant fan, almost like a pet - but Thompson's attitudes then, as far as I remember, were either indifference or irritation."

Chapter 1

"There were things about him that I found potently intriguing, but if I looked too closely at those vivid encrusted spots my scalp literally began to crawl and my eyes water."

Chapter 2

"Dear Faye, I feel a little fitter today. Perhaps everything will be fine after all ..."

Chapter 2

"It took him less than an hour to inspect the entire battalion and we were to a man passed Free from Infection. Free to go and get killed and not contaminate the battlefield, Pawsey said bitterly, when we compared our outrage later."

Chapter 3

"I was only twenty-six years old, but the war had provided me with several lifetimes of experience. I was constantly on the verge of brilliant ideas, or at least I felt I was, and that feeling can sometimes be as important as the ideas themselves."

Chapter 8

"There were only two answers that I could come up with. One: that she was a trusting fool. Two: that my prolonged absences from the home suited her in some way."

Chapter 11

"We were now over budget. We were behind schedule. But what was being produced was extraordinary."

Chapter 12

"It was two weeks after my arrival in London before I got round to going to see Sonia and my family in the house I was renting for them."

Chapter 14

"I shot them quickly, efficiently, and wholly without passion. I might have been making deck chairs."

Chapter 16



"We said, we agree, that no communists or subversives would knowingly be employed in the film industry."

Chapter 19

"Yes, I've done that human being business pretty thoroughly, thank you very much. I've participated in human drama all right."

Chapter 21



Topics for Discussion

Describe John James Todd. What kind of character is he? Is he likeable? Believable? Why or why not? What are his strengths and weaknesses?

Who is Doon? What is her role in the story? How does she first meet John? What kind of character is she? How does John encounter her for their final meeting of the story?

Who is Karl-Heinz? How does John meet him the first time? What is his role in the story? What is his fate?

Who is Leo Druce? How does John meet him the first time? What happens to end John's friendship with Leo? What is the editorial Leo writes and what is John's rebuttal?

Compare any two settings in the story. What is the importance of each? Compare any two characters from the story. What is the role of each character and what are their strengths and weaknesses?

Who is Innes Todd? Thompson Todd? Oonagh? Faye Hobhouse? David? Monroe Smee? How is each related to John? What is the role of each in the story? Why is each of these important to John's life?

John Todd spends a great deal of time seeking love and his identity. Describe his quest for each of these. Why does he seek after these things so desperately? List at least two instances in which he makes poor decisions based on his need for either love or his identity.