

# **Paperboy Study Guide**

**Paperboy by Vince Vawter**

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# Plot Summary

Paperboy is an award winning novel by Vince Vawter. In this book, a young boy with a stutter takes over his friend Rat's paper route while Rat is visiting his grandparents. The young boy struggles with his stutter to such a degree that he is frightened for Friday, collection day, to come around. While working this route and collecting the money, the boy meets a beautiful, but troubled woman. She is a scholar who appears to be the only stranger to truly understand the boy's speech trouble. Paperboy is a novel that not only explores the unique struggles of someone with a speech impediment, but it is a coming of age novel that takes the main character from a boy afraid of his own malfunctioning speech to a boy who helps rescue his housekeeper from a violent man intent on killing her.

The narrator is an eleven year old boy called Little Man with a profound stutter. He is highly intelligent. In fact, he has been promoted a grade above his peers. However, his speech impediment has caused him to become quiet and withdrawn in class.

Little Man's friend, Rat, has a paper route. Little Man agrees to take over the paper route for the month of July, when Rat goes to visit his grandparents on their farm. Little Man is excited to throw the paper each day, but he is nervous about collecting the money each Friday evening. This will require him to speak to strangers who are not aware of his stutter. Little Man always becomes nervous in these situations, which only increases his stutter.

On the first day, Little Man is practicing difficult words that begin with R and B as he throws each paper. When he tries the word 'pitch', the woman at the house where he is throwing the paper thinks he has said a bad word. Little Man's stutter only grows more profound as he attempts to explain what he was really doing. Since he's unable to provide a verbal explanation, he writes a note to the woman and leaves it at her house later that night.

On Friday Miss Nellie Avent (Mam), the Vollmer family's maid, offers to go with Little Man on his collection rounds. Little Man refuses, however, aware that this is his responsibility and he must do it alone. Most of the houses leave the paper money clipped to the door or mailbox for Little Man. However, he is forced to ask for the money and say the difficult N sound in "ninety-five cents" when he stops at one particular house.

That first night, Little Man also meets Mr. Spiro. Mr. Spiro helps him when he accidentally causes himself to faint while trying to say the difficult "V" sound in his real name. Mr. Spiro speaks to Little Man like he is a normal person, waiting patiently for him to spit out his words instead of rushing him like most strangers do. Mr. Spiro also gives Little Man a quarter of a dollar bill as a tip with the word "Student" written carefully on it. Mr. Spiro promises Little Man another piece of the bill each week for the remainder of the month.



Early in his job as the paperboy, Little Man gave a local junk man his knife to be sharpened. The junk man, who is named Ara T, refuses to give the knife back. Little Man finally tells Mam about the missing knife. Mam disappears for several days afterward and returns with a bruised and battered face. Mam refuses to tell Little Man what happened, but he suspects Ara T is responsible. Little Man sets about trying to find his knife. He is almost caught searching through Ara T's hideaway.

Little Man continues to meet with Mr. Spiro each week. At each meeting, Mr. Spiro answers Little Man's questions honestly and intelligently while forcing the narrator to orally ask his questions. Once Mr. Spiro helps Little Man recite a poem he wrote by saying it with him. Mr. Spiro also gives Little Man two more pieces of the dollar bill. These say "Servant" and "Seller."

Near the end of the month, Little Man discovers that his bedroom has been broken into after he accidentally left a ladder outside his window. Mam becomes angry and instructs Little Man to go to Rat's house while she takes care of something. Little Man disobeys Mam and follows her to Ara T's hideaway. From there, they catch a bus and go to a section of town where there are bars on every corner. When Mam finds Ara T's cart, she instructs Little Man to hide inside. Little Man becomes overwhelmed by the smell, however, and follows Mam into the bar. When he enters, Little Man finds Mam pinned to the wall by an intoxicated and enraged Ara T. Little Man distracts Ara T by throwing a beer bottle at his head. Mam escapes Ara T's clutches and grabs Little Man's knife from Ara T's coat pocket, stabbing him in the arm. A moment later, Big Sack, the man who mows the Vollmer's lawn, comes into the bar and assures Mam and Little Man that he will take care of things.

Mr. Spiro leaves on a trip. However, before he goes, he gives Little Man the last piece of the dollar bill, which says "Seeker." Little Man decides he has until Mr. Spiro returns to figure out what it all means. When Little Man returns to school a few weeks later, he no longer worries about what people think of his stutter. He stands in class and speaks his name, Victor Vollmer, and recites his favorite things without noticing the titters of the students around him. His job as the paperboy has taught Victor that there are more important things than worrying over a little embarrassment.



# Chapters 1-4

## Summary

### Chapter 1

The narrator, Little Man, is an 11-year-old boy with a profound stutter. For this reason, he likes to type on an old typewriter someone once left at his house. Little Man's best friend is Mam, the maid who works for his family. Her name is really Miss Nellie Avent, but Little Man has trouble with N and V sounds. That is why he calls her Mam. Little Man's other best friend is Rat. Rat's real name is Art, but Little Man has trouble with those sounds. Rat also does not mind the change Little Man has made to his name.

Rat is spending July on his grandparents' farm. Little Man has agreed to take over Rat's paper route for the month, but he is nervous about having to collect the paper money on Fridays. Little Man speaks to Mam about his fear, but he refuses to allow her to accompany him on the route.

### Chapter 2

Little Man arrives alone at the place where the newspapers are dropped off. He tries not to speak to anyone, but one of the other paperboys asks about Rat. Little Man answers with short, curt sentences to limit his stuttering. When he begins his paper route, Little Man practices his most difficult words, words that begin with P and B. At one particular house, Little Man practices the word 'pitch'. However, the woman sitting on the porch of the house thinks he has called her a bad name. Little Man tries to explain to the angry woman what he was really doing, but his stutter is so pronounced he is afraid she does not understand. For this reason, Little Man returns late that night with a typewritten note for the woman, explaining what happened.

The rest of the week goes by smoothly. On Thursday, Little Man once again sees Mrs. Worthington, the pretty woman he accidentally insulted. She calls him sweetie and asks Little Man to come by on Friday to pick up the payment for the paper even though she normally pays monthly.

### Chapter 3

It is Friday afternoon. Little Man sits on the back patio reading a book. When he spots a local junk man named Ara T in the alley, he goes out to see him. Ara T is known to be the best at sharpening knives and Little Man's yellow handled knife is very dull. Little Man gives the knife to Ara T and asks him to sharpen it. Ara T says he does not have his whetstone, but if Little Man will give him a few cents for oil, he will have it back to him the next day. Little Man gives Ara T 50 cents.

Little Man changes into long pants and a clean shirt before going to collect for the paper route. Most of the houses have left the money in an envelope clipped to either the



mailbox or the front door. However, Little Man is forced to go to the door of one house. There is a boy sitting in the front room staring at a silent television, but he ignores Little Man's knock. Instead, a man comes to the door. Little Man is horrified when he is forced to tell the man the amount due because the N sound in 95 cents is one of his most difficult sounds. Little Man tosses his pencil in the air to help him get the words out.

Little Man continues his route. He has to knock on Mr. Spiro's door as well. According to Rat, Mr. Spiro is an odd man who is constantly putting his paper on hold while he went on long trips. Mr. Spiro comes to the door with a book in each hand and quickly leaves to retrieve the paper money. When he returns, he asks Little Man his name. Little Man's real name is very hard for him to say. As he tries to get it out, he forgets to breathe. This causes Little Man to pass out on Mr. Spiro's porch.

Mr. Spiro helps Little Man recover from fainting. He even seems to understand exactly what happened. Mr. Spiro gives Little Man the paper money and a quarter of a dollar bill with the word "Student" written on it. Mr. Spiro promises Little Man the rest of the dollar as he finishes out the month.

Little Man goes home and has dinner with Mam. Afterward, Little Man hears Mam tell his father that they should watch out for Ara T because she believes that he is trouble. This worries Little Man since Ara T still has his knife.

#### Chapter 4

Big Sack, the man who mows the Vollmer's grass each week in the summer, comes to the door on the following morning. Little Man takes him his pay, but Big Sack requests to speak with Mam. After Mam speaks to Big Sack, she warns Little Man again to stay away from Ara T. Little Man is reluctant to tell Mam that he has given Ara T his knife.

Little Man is waiting for his paper bundles when he sees Ara T in the alley. Little Man approaches Ara T and asks for his knife back, but Ara T tells him he cannot have it back until he can say "knife" properly. Little Man walks away, using an old tin can lid to open his bundles. On his route, Little Man notices the boy sitting in front of the silent television again. He finds it odd. Later, he leaves a note for Mr. Spiro, thanking him for his help the night before.

When Little Man reaches Mrs. Worthington's house, he knocks on the door because she was not there the night before for collection. A strange man comes to the door. Little Man knows this man is not Mr. Worthington. Instead of explaining himself, Little Man gives the man one of the papers.

After his route, Little Man stashes his things under Mrs. Worthington's hedges. Little Man then follows Ara T, hoping to find where Ara T hides his stuff so that he might be able to recover his knife. Little Man watches Ara T hide his cart behind an odd door that appears to be an abandoned coal shed. Little Man notes the location and leaves because it is getting dark. When Little Man sneaks up to Mrs. Worthington's porch to get his things, he hears her crying before she drops her glass and passes out. Little Man



picks up the broken pieces of her dropped whiskey glass so she will not cut her feet when she wakes.

## Analysis

These early chapters introduce the main character. He's known only as Little Man since the reader does not learn his name until the very end of the book. He has a profound stutter and his name is one of the many things he cannot speak. Despite this, Little Man is a highly intelligent young man who has been advanced a grade in school. Little Man is also a very talented pitcher with a strong arm.

Little Man is an only child who lives with his mother, his financial planner father, and his maid named Mam. Little Man is very close to Mam and she acts as a friend and a parental figure to him. When Little Man worries about being able to speak to strangers on the paper route he has agreed to take over for his friend, Rat, Mam offers to go with him. Little Man, however, does not like people to do things for him, something people have often done since he was small because of his stutter, so he refuses her offer. In this way, Little Man shows the reader his strong character and his stubborn desire to care for himself despite his stutter.

These early chapters also introduce several other important characters:

Rat is Little Man's good friend. Rat's name is really Art, but Rat is easier for Little Man to say. Rat has a paper route, but he is going out of town for a month, so he has asked Little Man to take it over for him. This is Little Man's first job, a real responsibility like nothing he has ever had before. It is a good opportunity for Little Man.

Mam is a maternal figure to Little Man as well as a good friend. Mam cares for Little Man when his parents are not around. Mam is one of a few people who understand Little Man's stutter. She does not speak down to him or speak for him as some other adults tend to do.

Mrs. Worthington is one of the customers on Rat's paper route. The first time Little Man meets Mrs. Worthington, she thinks he has called her a bad name. Little Man writes her a note to apologize. She appears to accept this apology. She is flirtatious and Little Man really likes her. However, Mrs. Worthington also has a drinking problem and appears to have some serious marital problems.

Mr. Spiro is another customer on Rat's route. Mr. Spiro is a highly intelligent man who takes the time to speak with Little Man. Also, he has the patience to really listen to Little Man. Mr. Spiro appears to have extensive knowledge of the techniques for treating stuttering. Little Man is fascinated by Mr. Spiro and finds himself looking forward to future meetings with him.

Ara T is a junk man who takes Little Man's knife to sharpen it and then refuses to return it. Little Man hears Mam warn his father about Ara T and then feels almost prosecuted when Mam warns him to stay away from Ara T as well. It is clear that Mam knows



something about Ara T that no one else does. There is a sense of danger around Ara T that makes the reader worry when Little Man makes the decision to follow Ara T and find where he hides his junk cart.

Big Sack is a very large man who makes his living doing gardening and mowing chores. Big Sack appears to be a friend of Mam's, suggesting that he might be aware of Ara T's history and why Mam is so afraid of him. It also suggests that Big Sack might be a part of whatever might happen between Mam and Ara T later in the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

What is a stutter? What causes it? Why does Little Man have so much trouble with certain sounds? Why can Little Man not say his own name? What happens when he tries to do so?

## Discussion Question 2

Who is Ara T? Why does Little Man give Ara T his knife? What happens when Little Man attempts to get his knife back? Why does Mam warn everyone to stay away from Ara T?

## Discussion Question 3

Who is Mr. Spiro? What is different about the way Mr. Spiro thinks? What does Little Man think of Mr. Spiro? What does Mr. Spiro give to Little Man the first time they meet?

## Vocabulary

newspaper, paperboy, route, collection, stutter, speech, impediment, therapist, hunting, tangled, whetstone, count, flicked, noise, jangling, history, substituting, wicker, compared, apology, written, earlier, younger, attention, special, fastened, typewriter, gentleman





# Chapters 5-8

## Summary

### Chapter 5

The following Friday, the narrator rides his bike so that he can get to Mr. Spiro's quickly. The narrator and Mr. Spiro talk about baseball. The narrator then asks Mr. Spiro to sit on the porch swing so he can ask him questions. The narrator finds it easier to speak when he is on a swing because he can time the syllables with the swings. Mr. Spiro is patient and answers all of the narrator's questions honestly, introducing the narrator to the names of several philosophers and famous writers as he does. They also talk about the Rosetta Stone and the origin of the written word. Before he leaves, Mr. Spiro gives the narrator another piece of the dollar. This one says 'Servant'.

### Chapter 6

After leaving Mr. Spiro, the narrator goes to Mrs. Worthington's house. The narrator is disappointed when Mr. Worthington is the one to answer the door and quickly shoos him away. After the door closes, the narrator can hear arguing and the sounds of breaking glass inside. Victor knows Mrs. Worthington is in trouble, but he does not know how to help her.

When the narrator gets home, he can hear Mam in her room above the garage. He goes to see her. The narrator tells Mam about his knife, how Ara T took it from him and will not return it. Mam tells the narrator she will take care of it.

### Chapter 7

On Monday, the narrator sees Mrs. Worthington. She does not appear to be drunk, but she also does not appear to be in the mood to talk. She offers to pay what she owes for the paper, but the narrator tells her she can wait.

At home, the narrator discovers that Mam had taken some time off. For this reason, the narrator's parents want him to accompany them to a restaurant. The narrator is nervous because it is a sit down restaurant and he will have to speak his order. The narrator's anxiety increases when his parents invite a group of friends to join them. The narrator is able to order his spaghetti despite the tough P sound following the S, but one of the women at the table laughs at his stutter. When the food comes, the narrator is so humiliated by this woman's laughter that he is too nauseous to eat. He eats anyway. Halfway through the meal, the narrator becomes ill. His parents take him home. After the narrator has cleaned up, he sneaks downstairs and overhears his parents talking. The narrator is surprised when his mother suggests that his stutter comes from an unknown genetic source.



The following morning, the narrator's mother leaves to go to her country club. While she is gone, the narrator goes into her bedroom and searches through a box where he knows his mother keeps her private papers. In this box, the narrator finds his birth certificate. Although the birth certificate lists his mother's name under mother, under father it says unknown.

## Chapter 8

On Friday, Victor makes plans to go to lunch and a movie with his father. Victor's father has to work late, so they miss dinner. However, they have a good time watching the movie *Shane*. Afterward, Victor prepares for his paper route. He notices that Big Sack is watching from across the street and Ara T is nearby.

Victor visits Mr. Spiro early because he has prepared a list of questions for him. They sit on the porch swing again. Mr. Spiro answers Victor's questions honestly once again. Victor really wants to talk to Mr. Spiro about his discovery that his father is not his biological father. Before he can, Mr. Spiro becomes excited to learn that Victor has written a poem. He asks Victor to come inside and type it out for him. When Victor has finished typing the poem, Mr. Spiro recites it with him, allowing him to read it without stuttering. Afterward, Mr. Spiro gives him another part of the dollar bill. This one says, 'Seller'.

## Analysis

Victor begins having long conversations with Mr. Spiro on Fridays when he goes to collect the paper money. Victor enjoys his time with Mr. Spiro because Mr. Spiro treats him as though he is a normal person, not a child with a stutter. Therefore, when Victor learns that his father might not be his biological father, he wants to discuss the situation with Mr. Spiro. Unfortunately, the subject does not come up the next time they see one another.

Victor tells Mam about the knife Ara T stole from him. The following day, Mam takes time off. Victor notices Big Sack hanging around when Ara T is nearby. Although Victor does not put these two things together, the reader must wonder if they are connected. Mam has expressed concern about Ara T for several weeks now. The reader must wonder if Mam confronted Ara T and something went wrong or if she is simply trying to find a way to prove Ara T stole the knife.

Victor's parents are busy people who do not spend a great deal of time with him. They are clearly concerned about his stutter, however, as evidenced by the speech therapist they have arranged for him. Victor's mother is also worried about the source of the stutter. Victor overhears her speaking with her husband about it, wondering where it might have come from. This leads Victor to discover that his father might not be his biological father. This is a difficult realization for Victor because he is very close to his father, closer than he is with his mother. For this reason, Victor is thrown for a loop and



feels like he has no one to talk to about it. The reader must wonder if this news will come out and, if so, what will be the result.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Little Man have trouble eating in sit down restaurants? What type of restaurant does he prefer? Why does Little Man decide to have spaghetti despite the difficulty he knows he will have saying it? What is the result?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Little Man tell Mam that Ara T took his knife? How does Mam respond? Why does Mam take time off work the following day?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Little Man like talking with Mr. Spiro? What do they talk about? How does Mr. Spiro help Little Man with his speech?

## Vocabulary

concrete, housecoat, lamppost, pesky, stretched, crawled, gathered, account, playground, sobbing, toaster, pharmacy, handle, eased, antenna, scrunching, crate, junk man, belonged, special, privet, somewhere, difference, cousin, meaning, learning



# Chapters 9-12

## Summary

### Chapter 9

Mam has returned after taking nearly a week off of work. Victor is shocked to see her face. She has been beaten and her nose is clearly broken. Victor wants to ask who hurt her, but he knows Mam will not tell him. Victor knows that Mam is in the same sort of trouble Mrs. Worthington is, but he also knows there is nothing he can do to help either woman. Victor is extra good the rest of the day and tries to help Mam with her chores, but she finally sends him upstairs.

Victor goes to collect the money for the paper. Mrs. Worthington answers the door and invites Victor inside. He goes, but she begins to act funny and then passes out. Victor checks her before leaving.

### Chapter 10

The following day, Victor spots Ara T after he finishes his route. Since he can see that Ara T is going in the opposite direction of his hideaway, Victor decides to go search the hideaway for his knife. Victor is able to get inside the coal shed. He searches quickly, discover the headlamp from a bike that was stolen from him the year before. However, he does not find his knife. Ara T arrives. Victor has to run to escape Ara T. Later, when Mam asks if Victor has seen Ara T, he lies.

### Chapter 11

Victor's parents have gone to New Orleans for a week. This means Mam will be sleeping in the other twin bed in Victor's room until they return. When they wake Sunday morning, Victor helps Mam make a large breakfast. They eat together. After breakfast Victor runs back to Ara T's hideout in search of his newspaper bags. They are gone. Victor spends the rest of the day reading, trying not to think about Ara T. that night, Mam takes him to church for her choir practice. Victor is surprised that no one asks her what happened to her face and that Mam can sing with such joy. Afterward he asks her why she has to sit in the back of the bus. Instead of answering, she offers to move to the front with him.

### Chapter 12

On Wednesday, Mam asks Victor if he wants to go to the zoo with her. Victor finds the zoo childish, but he goes because he knows that Mam enjoys it. While they are there, Victor watches as Mam confronts a young boy who was attempting to feed trash to a giraffe. Victor is impressed with the courage Mam shows. Later, Victor talks the photographer into allowing him to have his picture taken with Mam in the gift shop.



While they wait, they eat ice cream. Afterward, Mam and Victor laugh about how they look in the picture.

## Analysis

Mam returns to the Vollmers. Her face shows evidence of a bad beating. Victor is shocked and wants to do something to help, but Mam refuses to talk about it. None of the adults around Victor will talk about it, either. In fact, when Victor goes to church with Mam, he is surprised that everyone ignores the bruises. This is part of the culture of the time, a culture in which white people did not get involved in black people's problems. The black people kept their troubles to themselves. It was a difficult time rife with racial disquiet.

Victor begins to see the courage that Mam uses to conduct her life. Victor has never really noticed how strong and how brave Mam truly is until she is beaten and later faces down a difficult child at the zoo. This new understanding of human nature is not restricted to Mam, however. Victor also begins to see things in Mrs. Worthington's relationships with her husband and her lover, in Mr. Spiro's unique life, and in his own parents' lives that have awakened him to the nuances of humanity that are not always very clear to children. This suggests to the reader that Victor is beginning to grow up. He is maturing.

Victor continues to worry about his knife, not really putting together the missing knife with Mam's beating just yet. Victor goes to Ara T's hideout in an attempt to find the missing knife and is nearly caught by Ara T. It is a dangerous moment that could mean trouble for Victor, but he escapes unharmed. Instead, he leaves behind the bags he uses to carry the newspaper in. This could be trouble for Victor. The bags are evidence of what he has done. Also, the bags belong to Rat. Victor might get in trouble for losing them.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Little Man go to Ara T's hideaway? What does he find there? What is the significance of this find? What does it say about Ara T?

## Discussion Question 2

What happened to Mam? Why is Little Man upset about it? How do the adults around Mam respond? What does Little Man think of this?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Little Man ask Mam why she sits in the back of the bus? What does this refer to? What does this tell the reader about the setting of the novel? What is Mam's response? How does Little Man respond to Mam's answer?

## Vocabulary

sustenance, translation, answer, understand, question, messenger, traveler, poet, drinking, refolding, steaming, lonesome, cowboy, theater, planning, whispered, choosing, screamed, screeched, motioned, knowing, specks, birth certificate, western



# Chapters 13-16

## Summary

### Chapter 13

Memphis is experiencing a heat wave. When baseball practice is called off, Victor bounces a ball on the garage door. While doing this, he thinks about Mam, Mr. Spiro, Ara T, and Mrs. Worthington. When Victor's ball gets caught on the roof, he gets a ladder to rescue it. While on the roof, he decides to climb into his bedroom and take a nap. When he wakes, it is time for his paper route. He forgets the ladder in his rush to go.

The truck is late dropping off the papers. As he waits, Victor spots Ara T in the alley. When the papers come, Victor realizes that one of the other paper boys has taken one of his bundles. Victor confronts the boy, but the boy just laughs at his stutter and rides off on his bike. Victor picks up a rock and pictures himself throwing it, but the boy falls off his bike before Victor can do anything. Victor goes to a vending machine and buys the papers he needs.

### Chapter 14

The following day, Victor confronts the boy who stole his bundle. The boy backs off, telling him everything is copacetic. Victor is proud of himself for dealing with it without an adult's help.

That afternoon, Victor goes to collect the paper money for the last time. At the house where the boy was always watching the silent television, he finds the boy on the porch. Victor speaks to the boy, but he does not respond. The boy's mother comes when Victor knocks. When she steps onto the porch, she speaks to the boy with her hands. It is then that Victor realizes the boy is deaf. Victor thinks that this boy would make an excellent friend because Victor's stutter would never cause them communication problems if Victor could learn to speak with his hands.

### Chapter 15

When Victor arrives at Mr. Spiro's house he discovers his new friend preparing to leave on an extended journey to Wisconsin. Victor is so jolted by this news that he asks if he can return to collect Mr. Spiro's money. At Mrs. Worthington's house Victor finds an envelope clipped to the door with a note and a five dollar bill. The note tells Victor that they have decided to cancel the paper. Victor is disappointed not to be able to see Mrs. Worthington one last time.

### Chapter 16



Victor goes home to get change to pay Mr. Spiro's paper because he does not wish to collect from him. When he goes to his bedroom he discovers that someone has climbed up the ladder and stolen all his money, his wallet, his watch, and the picture of him and Mam. Victor calls for Mam. She comes upstairs and takes in the situation. When she sees the ladder outside the window she asks Victor if he left it there, to which he admits he did. Mam tells Victor to go to Rat's house while she deals with the situation. Victor disobeys, however, and decides to follow Mam. Mam goes to Ara T's hideaway. Ara T is not there and neither are Victor's missing belongings. When Mam spots Victor, she allows him to go with her. They take a bus.

## Analysis

Victor discovers that one of the other paperboys has stolen some of his papers. Victor confronts the boy, but he stutters so much that the boy just laughs. Victor is humiliated, but he is also very angry. For this reason, Victor confronts the other boy the following day. The boy, whether out of respect for Victor or because he knows what he did was wrong, concedes to Victor and agrees that everything is over and done with.

On his last day collecting money for the paper, Victor is disappointed to discover that Mrs. Worthington is not around when he arrives. Victor has a crush on Mrs. Worthington and wants to help her, but realizes that her situation is more complicated than he can handle. Victor is more disappointed when he discovers that Mr. Spiro was leaving town for a significant amount of time. So disappointed is Victor over this thought that he does not want to speak to Mr. Spiro, let alone have another of their long conversations. In this way, the reader can see that Victor, despite the growth he has experienced over the past month, is still an eleven year old boy.

Victor discovers that someone has broken into his room and taken most of his valuable possessions. Victor had left a ladder outside his window which led to the robbery. Just the same, he feels vulnerable and angry. Mam is also very angry and determined to make this right for her ward. For this reason, Mam shows her courage once again by going after Ara T, the one person both she and Victor know must be responsible for this crime. Victor decides to go with Mam. Mam has been hurt once before, likely by Ara T. Victor does not want her to be hurt again. At the same time Victor is showing his immaturity in his reaction to Mr. Spiro leaving, he shows extreme courage and strength in his decision to help Mam track down Ara T.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Mr. Spiro leaving? How does Little Man respond to this news? For what reason?

## Discussion Question 2

Who broke into Little Man's house? What was stolen? How does Little Man respond? How does Mam respond?





## Discussion Question 3

Why does Mam go in search of Ara T? What does she hope to accomplish? What does the reader expect to happen when Mam finds Ara T?

## Vocabulary

breathed, straightened, blankets, dancing, switched, driveway, expecting, stolen, shining, handwriting, sentences, downhill, doorbell, deaf, gotten, excellent, envelope, certainly, waiting, excited, considered, conversation, unfinished



# Chapters 17-20

## Summary

### Chapter 17

Mam and Victor get off the bus downtown in an area where there are a lot of bars. Mam searches each bar they pass for Ara T. In the back of one building, they find Ara T's cart. Mam tells Victor to hide in the cart while she goes inside to speak to Ara T. Victor tries to do as he is told, but the stench coming from the cart is too much for Victor to withstand. He leaves the cart and goes inside the bar in search of Mam. When he does, he finds Ara T holding Mam up against the wall by the throat.

Victor is afraid that everyone is just going to stand around and watch Ara T kill Mam. For this reason, Victor picks up a bottle and throws it at Ara T's head. Ara T moves at the last second and the bottle does not hit him as it should have. However, it startles Ara T enough that he drops Mam and confronts Victor. As Ara T pins Victor to a table Mam stands, grabs Victor's knife from Ara T's coat pocket, and stabs him in the arm. Big Sack arrives shortly after Mam stabs Ara T and knocks him unconscious. Big Sack takes over the situation, treating Ara T's wound and instructing Mam and Victor to leave. Mam gathers up Victor's belongings from Ara T's table, pockets, and wrist. They take the bus again.

### Chapter 18

Victor is convinced that he and Mam will be arrested for their fight with Ara T. Therefore, when the bell rings early the following morning, he thinks that is who it is. However, no one comes for him. Instead, he finds Mam making a large breakfast. They discuss what happened as they eat, but Mam tells Victor he must never talk about it again.

### Chapter 19

After breakfast, Victor takes an envelope Mam gave him and finds a note from Mr. Spiro, the last quarter of the dollar bill with the word 'Seeker', and the payment for the paper. The note tells Victor that he will return after the autumnal equinox and that he hopes they will continue their discussions then. Victor feels a little guilty for avoiding Mr. Spiro that night before. Victor puts the dollar bill together and attempts to figure out what the words mean, but he realizes he has plenty of time to do so.

Rat comes by the house soon after his return from his grandparents. Victor tells him about the paper route, but leaves out his experiences with Mrs. Worthington and Mr. Spiro. Victor then goes on the route with Rat.

Victor's parents return. Victor's mother comes to his room with a gift of praline candies. Victor's mother always gives him pralines, but Victor dislikes them. This time Victor decides to tell his mother the truth. Victor's father comes to see him and gives him not



only the change in his pocket, but a twenty dollar bill as a tip for doing well on the paper route. His father then offers to play catch with him, even though Victor knows his father dislikes playing catch. They speak for a minute and Victor decides that even if his father is not his biological father, he is all the father that he needs.

## Chapter 20

When school starts, Victor is intimidated by a teacher who wants each person in the class to make a short speech in order to introduce themselves and talk about a few of their favorite things. As Victor waits for his turn, he thinks of all the people who matter in his life, including Mam, his parents, Mr. Spiro, Rat, and Mrs. Worthington. As he imagines them sitting in the classroom, Victor gains confidence. When it is his turn, Victor stands and speaks his name and his interests. He stutters, but he does not care.

## Analysis

Victor and Mam go to confront Ara T over the theft of Victor's money and belongings. Mam is again showing her bravery. This becomes even more profound when the reader learns that Mam knows Ara T killed her brother when they were both young and that Ara T was the one who beat her so badly. These things show the reader that Mam's continued willingness to confront Ara T shows the reader how important Victor is to her.

After all the activity of the summer, Victor settles down to his regular routine. However, he is deeply changed from the summer. When Victor has to stand in front of his class and give his name and his favorite hobbies, he does so without passing out, without using tricks, without becoming overwhelmed by his stutter. This shows the reader how mature Victor has come and the things his new friends and experiences have taught him.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mam go looking for Ara T? What does she hope will be the result of this meeting? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Little Man save Mam from Ara T? What happens next? Why is Little Man afraid he and Mam will go to jail?

## Discussion Question 3

What is written on the four pieces of the dollar bill Mr. Spiro gave to Little Man? What do these words mean? How does Little Man go about trying to find their meaning? Does he?



## Vocabulary

building, convenient, decided, peeking, instead, stuffed, secret, fence, cleaned, sausages, cafeteria, classrooms, hobbies, billfold, wondered, special, pitches, seeker, certificate, between, concerned, throw, remembered, believe, tote, finished, attic, air-conditioning, pralines



# Characters

## Victor Vollmer

Victor Vollmer is an 11-year-old kid who has a profound stutter. In this novel, Victor is forced to face his stutter head on when he takes over a newspaper route for a friend and has to speak to strangers in order to collect their money. It is the bravest thing Victor has ever done and it leads to him making friends with several new people.

Victor learns a lot over this one month of summer. When he meets Mr. Spiro, he finds an adult who is willing to speak to him as though he is an adult. Victor has never met anyone like Mr. Spiro. Victor also learns from Mam, his family housekeeper. Mam shows him that even when life pushes you down, there is never any excuse for a lack of courage. From Mrs. Worthington, Victor learns that sometimes life beats you down and you have to either fight back or surrender. Finally, Victor learns that it is not how you say something but what you have to say.

## Miss Nellie 'Mam' Avent

Miss Nellie Avent is the Vollmers' housekeeper. Little Man calls her Mam because it is easier to say than Miss Nellie. Mam not only cooks and cleans for the Vollmers, but she is often Little Man's only companion, especially when she is left to care for Little Man while his parents on vacation.

Mam is a very courageous woman. In this novel, she twice stands up to Ara T for stealing something from Little Man. During one of these confrontations, Ara T beats Mam, breaking her nose. The second time, Ara T promises to kill Mam as he did her brother years before. Mam continues to fight for what is right, however. Little Man also witnesses her bravery when she confronts a white child at the zoo when the boy tries to feed trash to a giraffe. Mam could have been hurt or arrested for such an action, but she stood up because she knew it was the right thing to do. Little Man learns a lot from Mam during this time period.

## Ara T

Ara T is a junk man who collects junk from the trash cans in the alley behind the houses in Memphis, quite often from Little Man's neighborhood. Ara T is handy with a whetstone. For this reason, Little Man gives Ara T his yellow handled knife in hopes of having it sharpened so he can use it to open the newspaper bundles for his newspaper route. Instead Ara T steals the knife and refuses to give it back. When Little Man tells Mam, she confronts Ara T. Ara T beats her. Later, Ara T breaks into Little Man's bedroom and steals his money as well as a few of his possessions. When Mam confronts him this time, Ara T attempts to kill her. Little Man and Big Sack save Mam



and Big Sack promises that Ara T will never bother them again. Little Man later learns that Ara T likely killed Mam's brother when they were all young.

## Big Sack

Big Sack is a man who mows the Vollmers' lawn each Saturday in the summer. Little Man learns later that Mam and Big Sack grew up near one another. Big Sack sometimes helps Mam watch out for Little Man, especially after Ara T beats Mam when she asks for Little Man's knife back. At the end of the novel, Big Sack comes to Mam and Little Man's rescue when Ara T attacks Mam after she confronts him about the things Ara T stole from Little Man's bedroom.

## Rat

Rat is Little Man's best friend. Rat's real name is Art, but because Little Man has trouble saying Art, he calls him Rat. Rat does not mind. Rat has a paper route he runs every afternoon. When Rat goes to stay with his grandparents for the month of July, Little Man volunteers to take over Rat's paper route. Little Man handles it well, even when he has to speak to customers in order to collect their payments each Friday.

## Mrs. Worthington

Mrs. Worthington is a woman who lives on the newspaper route Little Man works for the month of July. The first time they meet, Mrs. Worthington believes that Little Man called her a bad name because he was practicing saying 'pitch' when he threw her paper. Little Man goes out of his way to reassure Mrs. Worthington that he would never call her the name she thinks he did.

Little Man develops something of a crush on Mrs. Worthington. However, it soon becomes clear that Mrs. Worthington is an alcoholic who has marital problems. Little Man wants to find a way to help Mrs. Worthington, but he never finds a way to do so. In the end, Mrs. Worthington cancels her paper, taking away the one connection she and Little Man had. Little Man does see her once several weeks later and she appears happy, leaving him with the hope that she worked out her problems.

## Mr. Spiro

Mr. Spiro is a former merchant marine who likes to travel and continues to do so. Mr. Spiro is highly educated and well-read. When Little Man passes out on Mr. Spiro's porch trying to say his own name, Mr. Spiro recognizes immediately that Little Man is a stutterer who struggles with V sounds. Mr. Spiro speaks in an odd way, but Little Man finds in him an adult he can trust and who will always be honest with him. For this reason, Little Man chooses to share a great many questions with Mr. Spiro, getting answers for things he feels he cannot safely ask other adults.



When Mr. Spiro prepares to leave on another of his trips, Little Man is deeply disappointed. However, Mr. Spiro leaves Little Man a note that suggests he would love to spend more time talking with Little Man. This brings Little Man out of his disappointment and gives him a schedule by which he hopes to figure out the meaning of the words Mr. Spiro wrote on the four pieces of a dollar bill for him.

## **Mrs. Vollmer**

Little Man's mother is a caring woman who seems somewhat removed from her child's life. It is clear that she is concerned about Little Man's stutter, and where it came from, but she often misses the fact that Little Man is also embarrassed by his difficulties with his speech. At one point, Little Man's mother takes him to a sit down restaurant even though this will require him to speak to a stranger, something he loathes more than anything else. Little Man's mother is also unaware of what he likes and dislikes on his sandwiches. While this type of distance child rearing was common in the time period in which the novel takes place, it still seems to create a separation between mother and son, leaving the reader with the impression that Little Man was not close to his mother.

## **Mr. Vollmer**

Little Man learns that his father might not be his biological father because his father is listed as unknown on his birth certificate. For a large portion of time in the novel Little Man tries to find someone he can speak to about this situation. In the end, however, Little Man realizes that his father, a man who often does things with Little Man not because he wants to, but because he knows Little Man likes it, that it does not matter if this man is his biological father. All that matters to Little Man is that his father is a part of his life and that he loves him dearly.

## **Rat's Mother**

Little Man delivers the money for the paper route to Rat's mother while Rat is out of town. Rat's mother is uncomfortable with Little Man because of his stutter. For this reason, she often does not speak to Little Man.

## **TV Boy**

While collecting money for the paper route, Little Man takes notice of a boy at one of the houses on the delivery route. This boy sits in front of the television and studies it even when the sound is off. Little Man finds this odd. Toward the end of the novel, however, Little Man learns the boy is deaf. This idea makes Little Man think this boy would make a good friend because he would not be aware of Little Man's stutter if he could learn to speak with his hands. At the end of the novel, Little Man does become a friend of the boy.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Press-Scimitar

Press-Scimitar is the name of the Memphis newspaper Rat and Little Man deliver every afternoon.

## Newspaper Bags

Rat gives Little Man a set of newspaper bags in which he keeps the papers as he goes on his route to throw the paper. Little Man loses these bags at one point when he leaves them outside Ara T's hideaway.

## Dollar Bill

Mr. Spiro gives Little Man a dollar bill as a tip during his month as paperboy. However, he gives it to him in pieces and each piece has a word written on it.

## Whiskey Glass

Almost every time Little Man sees Mrs. Worthington she has a whiskey glass in her hand. Once she drops and breaks the glass, prompting Little Man to pick up the pieces so she will not hurt herself.

## Yellow Handled Knife

Little Man has a yellow handled knife he uses to cut the strings on the newspaper bundles. The knife is dull so Little Man gives it to Ara T with the understanding that Ara T will sharpen it. However, when Little Man asks for the knife back, Ara T refuses to give it to him.

## Ara T's Cart

Ara T pushes around a cart in which he collects trash he finds in alleys and trash cans.

## Abandoned Coal Shed

Ara T has a hideaway inside an abandoned coal shed. Little Man goes here once to look for his knife. After his room is broken into, Mam goes to the hideaway to search for Little Man's belongings.





## Ladder

Victor leaves a ladder sitting outside his bedroom window on a hot day after he climbs up to find a tennis ball he was using. It is this ladder that Ara T uses to break into Victor's room.

## Memphis

Little Man has a billfold, but he rarely uses it because most of his money is in change.

## Watch

Little Man has a watch, but he rarely wears it because when he has it on adults often ask for the time and Little Man has trouble saying many of the time related words.



# Settings

## 1959 Memphis

The novel takes place in the summer of 1959. At this time the Civil Rights Movement was still in its infancy. For this reason, Mam still has to sit in the back of the bus unless accompanied by Little Man and could only get into the zoo on Wednesday afternoons as long as Little Man was with her. It was also a time period when it was common for most middle class households to have black maids to care for their children while the parents sat in back rooms worrying about what would happen when the schools became integrated. It is with all this as the backdrop that Little Man learns to deal with his stutter and witnesses the bravery of the adults around him, most notably Mam, his family's maid.

## Vollmer Home

Little Man lives in a two-story house with an apartment over the garage where Mam lives. The house does not have air-conditioning, but is cooled by an attic fan. The house also does not have a washing machine, requiring Mam to wash clothes by hand. However, it is a comfortable home kept clean and ordered by Mam.

## Mr. Spiro's Home

Little Man is invited into Mr. Spiro's home once. He is surprised by the number of books in the home. Mr. Spiro is very well read and he often comes to the door with a book in each hand. Mr. Spiro tells Little Man that he has traveled most of his life and continues to enjoy traveling, but he has a home in order to have a safe place to keep his books.



# Themes and Motifs

## Physical Disability

Little Man has a stutter. His stutter is so bad that he can barely speak a sentence without stumbling over one or more words. This causes Little Man a great deal of embarrassment, especially around strangers. For this reason, Little Man has found ways to avoid speaking to strangers. Little Man also has a therapist who has taught him many tricks in dealing with his stutter, such as using gentle air, remembering to breathe, throwing something into the air while speaking, rocking in a swing, screaming, or whispering.

Little Man suffers from bullying from both school mates and adults. This makes things even more difficult for him. However, Little Man's experiences make him more sympathetic to other people's disabilities. For this reason, when Little Man meets a young boy who is deaf, not only is he not judgmental of the boy's disability, he thinks the boy would make the perfect friend because Little Man's stutter would not be an issue between them.

As the novel progresses, the author helps the reader to see how difficult Little Man's life often can be with his stutter. However, he does not suggest to the reader that they should feel sympathy or pity for Little Man. Instead, the author shows the reader that Little Man, despite his stutter, is just like any other boy his age. This makes the disability become less of an issue as the reader gets to know the boy behind the stutter.

## Friendship

Friendship is an important theme of this novel. The novel begins with Little Man announcing who his two best friends are. Little Man tells the reader that Mam is his best friend because she is gentle with him and does not try to hurry him when he is stuttering while talking to her. Little Man also tells the reader that Rat is his best friend, especially when it comes to school and baseball.

As the novel progresses, the reader watches as Little Man makes more friends. First he meets Mrs. Worthington, a sad housewife with a drinking problem. Little Man develops a crush on Mrs. Worthington even as he becomes aware of her problems and tries to find a way to help her. Later, Little Man realizes that there are some people he simply cannot help, but he still has hopeful thoughts for Mrs. Worthington.

Little Man also meets Mr. Spiro. Mr. Spiro is like no one Little Man has ever known. Mr. Spiro speaks with a vocabulary that is clearly highly educated. Mr. Spiro also knows a great deal about speech impediments and he helps Little Man speak clearly. Mr. Spiro is also honest with Little Man, answering his many questions about adults and the adult world.



In the end, Little Man comes back to his two original friends. However, in them he finds a woman full of courage and a boy who is trustworthy and loyal no matter what. Little Man learns to value those who are close to him.

## Courage

Mam is a strong, courageous woman. The reader can see this from the very first of the novel. Mam is a black woman living in a world before the Civil Rights Movement, before blacks began to share in the freedoms and liberties allowed their white counterparts. Living in this world and quietly staying out of trouble shows a strength of character in Mam that few could understand let alone appreciate. However, as the novel continues, the reader begins to glimpse Mam's courage.

Mam learns that Ara T has stolen Little Man's knife. A short time later, Mam takes time off work for the first time in her career with the Vollmers. When she returns, it is clear to both the reader and Little Man that Ara T beat her for trying to take back his knife. This shows great courage as Mam confronted this man even though she knew he was a danger.

Later, Mam is at the zoo when she sees a boy trying to feed trash to a giraffe. Mam stands up to the boy, refusing to allow him to do this. The boy could have called for help, could have gotten Mam thrown out of the zoo, or worse. He did not. This shows Mam's courage again.

After Ara T breaks into Little Man's room and steals many of his possessions, Mam decides to confront him again. Given the fact that Ara T beat her before and is thought to be responsible for the murder of her brother, this is a very brave thing for her to do. Little Man shows courage as well when he rushes in and throws a beer bottle at Ara T to help Mam.

After witnessing Mam's courage and meeting strangers, Little Man discovers courage in his own personality. When school begins again, Little Man meets a challenge that would normally leave him breathless and possibly unconscious on the floor. Little Man speaks in front of his class, says his name (Victor Vollmer) and his hobbies, without fear and without worrying about his stutter. It is a huge step for Victor, showing that he, too, has grown and learned courage.



# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The novel is written as though typed by an eleven year old boy with a stutter. Since he has a stutter, the boy does not use commas because he thinks he has too many pauses in his speech, he would rather not have to pause in his typed words.

The point of view works well with this plot because it is a story told from the point of view of a child who suffers a stutter, giving the reader a close and personal look at what it is like to be a child in 1959 and to live with such a speech impediment. The writing style is quick and entertaining, filled with both humor and tension. The narrator is something of an unreliable narrator because of his age and his inability to understand a great deal of what is going on around him, allowing the writer to introduce heavy social issues without taking the focus away from the main character. In this way, the point of view works well with the plot.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English. The novel is set in 1959, so some of the language is a little more sophisticated than one might expect from a modern child of the same age. This is especially true when the character of Mr. Spiro converses with the main character. However, there are no foreign words or other types of language that might confuse or slow a reader.

The language of this novel works well with the plot not only because it is authentic to the main character, but it also fits the setting. The language expresses the social differences between the characters in a subtle way. It also uses an interesting style in which the author has chosen to show the stutter of the main character. The child often stumbles over words, but he also uses a gentle breath, a sort of "sss" sound before his words, to help him speak without a stutter. The author expresses this clearly in the text of the novel. For this reason, the language of this novel works well with the plot.

## Structure

The novel is divided into twenty chapters. The chapters are each written in narration that includes dialogue, but dialogue that is integrated into the narration rather than set apart as a modern reader might anticipate. The novel is written as though it is a collection of notes written by an eleven year old boy simply trying to write down the important events of his summer.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. One main plot follows Little Man as he works his friend's newspaper route while struggling to communicate with

strangers because of his stutter. One subplot follows Little Man's new friendships as well as his older friendships. Another subplot follows Mam's conflicts with Ara T, the junk man. All plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

## Quotes

I hate commas. I leave them out of my typing any time I think I can get away with it.  
-- Little Man (chapter 1 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** This quote appears early in the book. It illustrates some of Little Man's frustration with his stutter and his inability to express himself verbally.

I liked the colored junkmen who pushed their carts around our neighborhood because they minded their own business and just nodded at me when they passed and that meant I didn't have to go to the trouble of trying to figure out how to say something.  
-- Little Man (chapter 3 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** This also illustrates Little Man's frustration with his inability to adequately express himself verbally. It also shows his innocent trust of Ara T, the junk man who will later cause so much chaos in his life.

Mam said she trusted Ara T about as far as she could heave him.  
-- Little Man (chapter 4 paragraph 27)

**Importance:** This illustrates the fact that Mam knew Ara T was trouble long before anyone else and foreshadows trouble with Ara T later in the novel.

I missed Rat every time I had to talk to somebody who didn't know me but it didn't do any good to think about Rat because I would just miss him more.  
-- Little Man (chapter 5 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** This again goes to Little Man's frustration with his stutter, but it also shows maturity since Little Man continues to go door to door collecting the paper money despite his discomfort.

The Something I Was Coming Down With was the same thing I had been coming down with every minute of my talking life.  
-- Little Man (chapter 7 paragraph 39)

**Importance:** This illustrates Little Man's annoyance with the way his mother brushes over the importance of his feelings toward his stutter.

When Mam said Leave It Be that was what you did and you'd best not waste any more of her time.  
-- Little Man (chapter 9 paragraph 14)

**Importance:** Little Man knows Mam well and knows that when she does not want to talk about something, such as how she got her broken nose, he should listen. This goes to the depth of their friendship.



I don't know if I could ever say the word because it started with a hard N sound. But I know I never would try.

-- Little Man (chapter 12 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** This quote illustrates the time period in which the novel is set and how Little Man is different than some of the other people in the book because of his relationship with Mam.

My stutter always got worse when someone threw me a curve like Mr. Spiro had just done with his packed bags.

-- Little Man (chapter 15 paragraph 21)

**Importance:** This illustrates Little Man's deep sadness to see that Mr. Spiro, his new friend, is leaving town.

Before Mam did anything big at home like taking the rugs out to beat them or waxing the wood floors she would always stand with her hands on her hips to come up with how she wanted to go about things.

-- Little Man (chapter 17 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** This illustrates Mam's ability to plot and make plans, something that Little Man takes great comfort in during a time of crisis.

The knife went in as easy as when Mam opened a ripe watermelon on the kitchen table. Ara T could whet a knife better than anybody.

-- Little Man (chapter 17 paragraph 77)

**Importance:** In an odd way, this quote is a compliment to Ara T's skills as a knife sharpener. However, it is also ironic because it describes how easy it was for Mam to stab Ara T with Little Man's newly sharpened knife.

I wasn't surprised the back doorbell buzzed so early the next morning.

-- Little Man (chapter 18 paragraph 18)

**Importance:** This quote illustrates Little Man's naive belief that he and Mam are about to be arrested for stabbing Ara T.

My father on the birth certificate might have been Unknown but the tall man throwing ball with me in his white shirt with his necktie stuffed between the buttons was my father as far as I was concerned.

-- Little Man (chapter 19 paragraph 85)

**Importance:** This quote shows that Little Man has managed to come to terms with the fact that his father might not be his biological father. It shows a depth of maturity that is unusual for a boy so young.