

# **The Penultimate Peril Study Guide**

## **The Penultimate Peril by Lemony Snicket**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Penultimate Peril Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter One.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Two.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Three.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Four.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Five.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Six.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Seven.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eight.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Nine.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Ten.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eleven.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Twelve.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Thirteen.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>



# Plot Summary

The Penultimate Peril is the twelfth book in the thirteen-book Series of Unfortunate Events series. In this book, the Baudelaire orphans are sent to work at Hotel Denouement to uncover which of the guests are working for the V.F.D. and which are working against them.

This novel picks up exactly where the eleventh book left off, with the Baudelaire orphans in the back of a taxi driven by a pregnant stranger. This woman, Kit Snicket, claims to have worked with the Baudelaires' deceased parents and she sends the children on their first mission for the V.F.D. working as concierges in the Hotel Denouement to discover which guests are working for the V.F.D. and which guests are working against the organization. They also want to discover the true identity of the mysterious J.S. and discover the location of the sugarbowl, a most treasured artifact for the V.F.D. and its enemies. All the members of the V.F.D. are scheduled to arrive at Hotel Denouement by Thursday for a very important meeting and the Baudelaires are sent to make sure the hotel is still a safe meeting place. If not, they are ordered to send a sign to the organization saying that their last safe place is safe no longer.

To further complicate matters, the Baudelaires will be working with the hotel managers, identical twins Frank and Ernest Denouement. One twin is evil and the other is good, but no one can tell which is which. It is vital that the children keep their identities secret, lest they risk revealing their location to the enemies, including Count Olaf, who hunts them doggedly. On their first day at the hotel, the Baudelaires are overwhelmed by the amount of villains they see, including various villains from previous books in the series. Everywhere they go, the children take copious notes trying to discover who among them can be trusted. The hotel managers also send the children on strange errands - that may be for the benefit of the V.F.D. and may be for the benefit of their enemies - including handing sticky birdpaper to the rooftop and locking a Vernacularly Fastening Door in the laundry room.

On their second day at the hotel, a third manager is revealed: Dewey Denouement, the third Denouement triplet. Dewey has organized all of the V.F.D.'s information about the villains and he plans to present this information at the upcoming trial, which is the true nature of Thursday's meeting. When Count Olaf suddenly appears, he threatens Dewey with a harpoon gun, demanding the code for unlocking the Vernacularly Fastened Door, where he is sure the sugar bowl is being held. In their attempt to save Dewey, the Baudelaire children accidentally fire Olaf's harpoon gun, and Dewey is fatally wounded. The Baudelaires are put on trial for murder the next morning, but the trial cannot be completed as Count Olaf kidnaps the judge to use as a hostage to demand that the Vernacularly Fastened Door be opened. Down in the laundry room, the Baudelaire children unexpectedly decide to help Count Olaf escape the hotel because they know he won't be able to find the sugar bowl and that they will be able to escape beside him and Sunny sets Hotel Denouement ablaze as a sign to the V.F.D. that the building is no longer safe for their Thursday meeting. At the close of the novel, the children find themselves adrift in a boat beside their archenemy, Count Olaf.



# Chapter One

## Chapter One Summary

The novel opens with the Baudelaire children riding in a taxi with a woman they have just met. For the first time since their parents died, the children have returned to their hometown, and they marvel at how little has changed in the year they've been away. As they drive through the winding streets, Violet Baudelaire is reminded of many of the different caregivers that have held guardianship over her and her siblings, all to disastrous results. The mysterious woman driving the taxi, Kit Snicket, talks about the V.F.D. - the organization the Baudelaire children have been desperately seeking to uncover - who will be holding an important meeting in two day's time. Since the V.F.D. disbanded, there seem to be more enemies than ever: "There are countless wicked people in the world," Kat says (p. 8). When they hear this, the Baudelaires immediately question whether or not they should trust Kit: is she an evil member of the V.F.D. or a friendly one? In the end, the children decide that they must trust Kit, who has risked her life to save them from the enemy, because she shares too many lovely details about their parents with them to be evil.

Sure that their taxi is being tailed by the enemy, Kit makes a snap decision to drive full-speed into a bush hedge to escape them. She guns the engine, drives through the bushes, and safely stops the car on the other side. When she is assured that all the children are safe, she tells them to quickly pack up their belongings and follow her. She leads the children to a safe location. Also, it is revealed that Kit is pregnant, making her decision to drive into the bushes particularly risky. It is clear that Kit has worked alongside many trustworthy V.F.D. members, including the Baudelaires' parents, but the father of her unborn child has not yet been revealed.

## Chapter One Analysis

The Penultimate Peril, more so than any of the other novels in this series, drops the reader straight into the action of the previous novels. This can be an extremely alienating experience for readers new to the series, so the entire first chapter of the novel basically functions to catch the reader up on what they've missed in the first eleven books: the Baudelaire children are wealthy orphans doggedly hunted by their evil uncle, Count Olaf, who seeks to steal their inheritance from them. In each of the previous novels, the Baudelaire children have been sent to live with a new guardian, but Olaf has always found and terrorized them. Until now, the Baudelaires have always managed to escape Olaf's grip, but he is persistent.

In addition to fleeing Olaf's chase, the Baudelaire children are in a constant search for information about their parents - who died in a suspicious house fire - and the mysterious organization, the V.F.D. The Baudelaires are sure that once they get to the bottom of the V.F.D., they'll get to the bottom of how their parents died. While she's



driving, Kit informs the children - and the new reader - that the V.F.D. was once a happy organization of volunteer fire fighters, but now a schism has divided them into two groups: friends and enemies. Count Olaf, for example, is one of the enemies. In this opening chapter, the theme of illusion and perception is introduced. The entire novel will deal with the idea that one cannot tell simply by looking at someone whether they are good or whether they are bad. In the end, one must simply make an emotional judgment whether or not they want to trust someone, and hope they are right. The novel also opens with the image of a pebble being dropped into a clear pond: one tiny action can change the way you view everything.

This chapter also introduces the theme of destiny. The opera Kit Snicket watched with the Baudelaire parents was called *La forza del destino*, or "the force of destiny." It is Kit's knowledge of this opera that convinces the children to trust her, as if it was their destiny to work alongside her against the evil V.F.D. defectors. Lemony Snicket muses on the definition of destiny on pages 16-17, suggesting that some people believe destiny is something one can never escape, while others believe destiny is a memorable and unavoidable time in one's life (like birth, puberty, or death). Still others believe that destiny is a force compelling an individual through their life.



# Chapter Two

## Chapter Two Summary

Chapter Two opens with various sentences written backward and are only readable when the reader holds the book up to a mirror. This style reflects the Baudelaire children's first impression of their new home, Hotel Denouement, which has been cleverly built to be disorientatingly reflected in the nearby pond. It takes the children a few minutes of staring quizzically at the hotel before they realize they are staring at its reflection. Kit Snicket finally snaps the children out of their confusion by pointing to the real hotel and guiding them over to a picnic lunch that's been prepared for them on the nearby grounds. The children had no idea how hungry they were until they saw the gorgeous spread: bread, butter, jam, pastries, muffins, quiche, eggs, cheese, smoked fish, fruit, and every beverage one could imagine. Kit explains that the meal has been prepared and laid out by her associates, the "good" members of the V.F.D. As the children eat, Kit does her best to fill them in on what's going on.

Before the V.F.D. divided, there were plenty of places where volunteers could meet to discuss plans to defeat their enemies and exchange information, but slowly, the safe places in the world were infiltrated by evil spies who appeared to be honest. Now, even the Hotel Denouement, which was considered the last safe place, is overrun with enemies. She says, cryptically, "These are dark days, as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night" (p. 45).

The Baudelaires have been brought to the Hotel because someone has checked into the hotel pretending to be Kit Snicket's deceased brother, Jacques. Kit needs to find out if the mysterious "J.S." is at the hotel to help the V.F.D. or its enemies. The Baudelaire children are asked to work as concierges in the hotel, spying on the guests and trying to deduce which guests are trustworthy and which aren't. The V.F.D. and their enemies are both after the same thing: "the sugar bowl" and the rare mushroom, Medusoid Mycelium, which are both on their way to the hotel. In short, the Baudelaire children must infiltrate the hotel to find out whether J.S. is trustworthy. If he is, the Baudelaires must ensure that the sugar bowl falls into his hands, but if not, they must make sure it does not. To further complicate things, various untrustworthy enemies will likely pose as trustworthy members of the V.F.D. If they discover that the Baudelaire children are alive, they will immediately hand them over to Count Olaf and all hope will be lost.

## Chapter Two Analysis

The Baudelaire children are hugely terrified by their new task: "They could not remember a time in their lives when everything had been less clear than at this very moment" (p. 40). Trust has always been something the children struggle with, and rightfully so. Every guardian involved in the Baudelaires' young lives has exploited or abused the children in some way. Generally speaking, they are distrusting of most



adults as they all seem to be somehow tied to Count Olaf, but working at Hotel Denouement is particularly intimidating because there will be a plethora of trustworthy people mixed in with the untrustworthy people. All of Hotel Denouement is designed to perplex and befuddle visitors. From the onset, the Baudelaire children are disoriented and confused. The reader can safely expect these emotions to continue until the end of the novel.

The most important part of the Baudelaire mission is to discover the true identity of J.S. and find out whether s/he is working for or against the V.F.D. In addition, the Baudelaire children have been asked to locate the highly sought-after sugar bowl, an item of great importance to both the V.F.D. and its enemies. The Baudelaire children, and the reader, however, have no understanding of the item's worth. The contents of the sugar bowl are never revealed in this series, and it is most likely that the sugar bowl is merely a MacGuffin, a plot device whose contents are completely irrelevant and that functions as a much sought-after object motivating characters and driving the story along. Nevertheless, in *The Penultimate Peril*, the sugar bowl is of highest importance, regardless of its contents.

This novel, as well as the rest of the novels in this series, is written in an unusual style. The author of the series, Daniel Handler, wrote the first book as a "mock-Gothic book for adults," meaning that his books are a satire of the Gothic style. There are many allusions to famous Gothic stories - including many by Edgar Allan Poe - and a litany of tongue-in-cheek references to pop culture written in Lemony Snicket (Handler's pen name's) trademark sarcastic style. To fit this tone, every drama the Baudelaire children could face is amplified and exaggerated for the reader's pleasure. A great example of this is in the creation of Hank and Ernest. Not only are the children faced with the mind-boggling task of differentiating between V.F.D. members and their enemies, their main contacts within the hotel are identical twins, one good and one evil. The inclusion of these twin characters highlights the impossible task facing the Baudelaire children in such a ridiculous way the audience cannot help but be amused.



# Chapter Three

## Chapter Three Summary

The Baudelaires make their way to the hotel entrance, which is spelled backward on the building and reflected correctly in the pond below. The hotel lobby is bustling with activity, so the Baudelaires have no trouble passing through without being noticed. When he sees how busy the hotel is, Klaus immediately questions how in the world they'll be able to observe their enemies with so much activity around them: how will they ever figure out who's working with them and who's working against them? Before they can answer this question, they are greeted by the hotel manager, either (honest) Frank or (evil) Ernest. He explains that as concierges, the children will be at the guests' beck and call. They will not have bedrooms but will be forced to sleep under the desk whenever they have a break in demands. When a bellboy asks a question about the upcoming secret meeting on Thursday, the manager - either Frank or Ernest - rushes away.

Moments after he leaves, the second manager - either Frank or Ernest - arrives to greet the Baudelaires. As he continues the children's tour of the hotel, his face remains emotionless, so the Baudelaires cannot decipher what he is feeling, and whether he is trustworthy (or evil). During the tour, another bellhop arrives to deliver the morning newspaper which blares a headline about the Baudelaire case: "BAUDELAIRES RUMOURED TO RETURN TO THE CITY" (p. 59). The bellhop claims that if *The Daily Punctilio* says it's true, the Baudelaires have likely come to the city to perform more heinous murders. The Baudelaires obviously don't want to draw attention to themselves, particularly when they don't know if they're standing next to Frank or Ernest. Moments later, three different concierge bells ring and the children are forced to go their separate ways: one concierge per call. The children each take a deep breath and take their first steps toward their new, dangerous future.

## Chapter Three Analysis

The Baudelaires are forced to work at the hotel in extreme disguises so their enemies will not discover where they are. If anyone discovers that the Baudelaires are working at the hotel, they will surely tell Count Olaf, who will capture the children, or worse, kill them. The Baudelaires are also forced to wear disguises because in the previous novels, they have been wrongfully accused of many heinous crimes (most actually committed by Count Olaf) and they are technically living on the run. The Baudelaires' disguises consist solely of oversized sunglasses, a silly disguise highlighting just how stupid the enemies are, which fits well into the tone of the series. Until the Baudelaires know who can be trusted - and according to Kit Snicket, no one can be trusted until proven otherwise - it is vitally important that they keep their true identities hidden. Their enemies are everywhere, searching for clues about the Baudelaires whereabouts just as the Baudelaires search for information about their enemies. Sorting enemies from





allies is particularly difficult when the Baudelaires are dealing with Frank and Ernest, the identical twin hotel managers. According to Kit, Frank is evil and Ernest is good, but physically, it is impossible to tell them apart. The Baudelaires must use their intuition to discover which of the twins is trustworthy, and which is trying to trick them into revealing sensitive information. In this chapter, the Baudelaires meet both Frank and Ernest, but everyone is so guarded, clearly watching what they say, that no progress is made differentiating between them.

Everything about life in Hotel Denouement is confusing. The hotel is arranged in a very complicated system, following a library's method of organization: the Dewey Decimal System. The hotel has 10 floors, organized by the Dewey Decimal system, from the basement (information and general works) to the rooftop salon. Other interesting floors include the Second Floor (dedicated to religion, housing a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and shrine), the Fourth Floor (dedicated to languages and reserved for foreign guests). There are no guidelines to aid the Baudelaires as they navigate their new surroundings, so they must rely on their ingenuity and Klaus' excellent knowledge of a library's layout.



# Chapter Four

## Chapter Four Summary

Chapters four through seven are narrated simultaneously, but from only one character's point of view. Chapter Four is about Violet. When she steps out of the elevator on the roof sundeck (where she has been called by the concierge service), she is immediately grateful for her giant, oversized sunglasses, which shield her from the bright glare of the sun. She is also grateful for the sunglasses because they hide her shock and surprise: the person who phoned for her is none other than Esme Squalor, Count Olaf's atrocious girlfriend and one of the Baudelaires' most treacherous enemies. Esme is spending the day sunbathing with her horrid friend Geraldine Julienne, an irresponsible journalist from *The Daily Punctilio*, and the spoiled child Carmelita Spats. Esme has called for Geraldine to interview her about the big party coming up this Thursday, and has called Violet to tend to each of Carmelita's delusional requests.

Violet ignores Carmelita, who flops and splashes in the pool, as best she can, desperate to overhear Esme's conversation with Geraldine about Thursday's party and about the mysterious guest whose initials are J.S. Unfortunately, Violet's detective work is interrupted when Carmelita shouts that she needs a harpoon gun, claiming that "Countie" has promised to teach her how to shoot it. Of course Esme demands that Violet fetch a harpoon gun immediately and stop wasting everyone's time. Violet walks confused through the hotel: where on earth will she find a harpoon gun at such short notice, and stops to ask Frank (or Ernest, she still isn't sure which is which) for help. He snaps that Violet should know how to navigate her way around the hotel if she's, "who I think you are" (p. 92). Violet is dumbstruck. It's far too dangerous to reveal her true identity to Frank/Ernest until she knows who she is talking to. Avoiding the question, Violet calmly responds, "Of course I'm who you think I am. I'm a concierge" (Page 94). Frank/Ernest nods approvingly and opens a giant safe behind the front desk. He hands a harpoon gun to Violet and thanks her for being brave enough to "help with a scheme like this" (p. 95).

## Chapter Four Analysis

Chapters four through seven follow each of the Baudelaire children on their first concierge calls. These chapters are particularly confusing for new readers because many characters from the previous novels reappear. In the earlier books from this series, it was possible to start anywhere because the Baudelaires' back story, and their relationships with various villains, was compartmentalized in each novel, meaning that the villain from book six stayed in book six. The villain from book two stayed in book two, and so on. In this novel, however, all the previous villains return, making for a very confusing onslaught of flashbacks. It is clear that Lemony Snicket assumes that readers have a firm grasp of the Baudelaires' story and that *The Penultimate Peril* is not their first foray in the *Series of Unfortunate Events* collection.



When Violet comes face-to-face with Esme Squalor, she knows immediately the horrid woman has come to the hotel in search of her. Geraldine is at the hotel to interview Esme for the style section of *The Daily Punctilio*. Geraldine believes Esme is hosting a fashion party at the hotel this coming Thursday, but it's clear that the fashion party is just a cover for a much more sinister plan. Esme's fashion, too, is being used for alternate purposes. She wears "sunoculars" a cross between sunglasses and binoculars so she can shield her eyes from the sun while searching the sky for something. Violet suspects that Esme (and Count Olaf) expect the Baudelaires to arrive to the hotel by helicopter, which would explain Esme's strange fashion choice. Carmelita is also somehow involved in Count Olaf's treacherous plan, and now, she is armed with a harpoon gun, upping the suspense of violence. It is interesting to note that when Frank/Ernest helps Violet locate the harpoon gun, he thanks her for helping with this scheme. It is unclear whether he believes Violet is helping the V.F.D or their enemies.



# Chapter Five

## Chapter Five Summary

Chapter Five follows Klaus on his first concierge call. When Klaus steps out of the elevator on the sixth floor, a familiar, calming feeling. He rushes to room 647 and knocks on the door. A familiar voice answers him, but when Klaus pushes the door open, a veil of smoke clouds his vision and he is unable to see the guest's face. The man whirls around in his chair so all Klaus can see is the back of his head, but based on the shiny green suit the man is wearing, and the cigar butting prominently from the corner of his mouth, Klaus is certain that he knows who this man is: Sir, one of the villains from a previous novel in the series. Although Klaus is shocked to see his horrible old boss, he is pleased to see Sir's assistant, Charles, who had always been kind to the children during their stay at the lumbermill Sir ran.

Sir has called Klaus to the room to escort him to the hotel sauna. As a lumberman, he doesn't care much about the health benefits of saunas, he simply likes to smell hot wood. As Klaus leads Sir and Charles down the hallway, Sir snaps at Charles not to speak to the concierge; he might be a spy! Sir clammers into the steaming sauna and orders Klaus to wait outside, holding his cigar. As the door to the sauna swings shut, Klaus quickly wedges his foot in the door, providing a thin crack through which he can hear Sir and Charles' conversation. Immediately, it becomes clear that Charles has come to the hotel in search of the Baudelaires. Sir is not interested in finding the Baudelaires because he thinks they're nothing but trouble. Charles reminds Sir that Count Olaf is the real troublemaker, and if he finds the Baudelaires the first thing he's going to do is apologize for their horrific time at Lucky Smells Lumbermill. Their conversation is interrupted right as Charles is about to reveal something important about the Baudelaires' parents. Frank/Ernest has come to deliver a large package for Klaus' delivery. The package contains super sticky flypaper, so strong that whatever touches it is immediately trapped. He asks Klaus to hang the flypaper on the roof above the sauna to prevent any birds from resting there. Just as in Violet's chapter, Frank/Ernest asks Klaus if he's "who I think you are," and just like Violet, Klaus answers, "Of course I'm who you think I am. I'm a concierge" (p. 118).

## Chapter Five Analysis

Although the setup of Hotel Denouement is confusing and unnerving for the female Baudelaire children, Klaus finds the labyrinth of information strangely calming. There have been many instances in which Klaus has found the answer to his family's problems in a library. Libraries contain all the information known to man, so it stands to reason that the answer to all his family's questions can be found somewhere in this hotel: "It was as if he could hear this answer calling to him, like a baby crying at the bottom of a damp well, or an alarm clock ringing underneath a heap of damp blankets" (p. 101).

In the book *The Miserable Mill*, the Baudelaire children were sent to work Lucky Smells Lumbermill, run by their boss, Sir. Through the entire time the Baudelaires worked at the mill, they never saw Sir's face as it was always ensconced in smoke. As this chapter progresses, it becomes clear that both Sir and Charles have useful, hidden information about the Baudelaires' parents, information the children would be desperate to know. Unfortunately, whenever a character begins to speak about the Baudelaires' deceased parents, that conversation is interrupted. The presence of smoke and steam around Sir (and his information) is symbolic of the way truth is clouded, or covered up, in this novel. Nothing is as it seems, and it is difficult to see the truth through the haze.



# Chapter Six

## Chapter Six Summary

Chapter Six follows Sunny on her first concierge call. Pretending to be a concierge is difficult for all the Baudelaire children, but perhaps most difficult for Sunny who is just growing out of babyhood and can't yet even speak in full sentences. As she approaches the guest's room, she decides to adopt a taciturn demeanor, which means that she won't have to communicate unless absolutely necessary. As Sunny approaches room 371, she is alarmed to hear a dreadful squeaking sound interrupted by intermittent shrieks, mutterings, and an occasional melodic hum. When she knocks at the door, a strangely familiar voice shouts back at her, berating her for interrupting a musical genius. Sunny recognizes the voice immediately: it belongs to Vice Principal Nero, the evil man who ran Prufrock Preparatory School where Sunny had briefly worked. Whenever Sunny speaks, Nero mimics her in a high-pitched, mocking voice. Inside the room, Nero is joined by two Prufrock Preparatory teachers, Mrs. Bass (Klaus' old teacher), and Mr. Remora (Violet's old teacher).

Despite the constant mockery of everything Sunny says and does, she is still able to make some observations of Nero's room. The first thing she notices are bank bags lying on the table. When the trio of teachers demands Indian food, Sunny walks them to room 954, the Indian restaurant. When she opens the door she is shocked to see yet another person from the Baudelaires' past, a man named Hal. When the Baudelaires first met Hal, he looked much different than he does today in a giant turban secured in place with a red jewel. When Sunny follows Hal to the kitchen, she hides behind a cloud of smoke to overhear his conversation with Frank/Ernest. Frank/Ernest whispers that J.S. is in the building and that she has come to help, using her Vision Furthering Device to watch the skies. They appear to discuss culinary dishes including mushrooms and sugar. Suddenly, Frank/Ernest notices Sunny in the kitchen and calls her over, away from Hal. He takes Sunny down to the laundry room and orders her to install a Vernacularly Fastened Door to the laundry room. Sunny stares curiously at the giant funnel pumping smoke out of the laundry room. She has no idea what a Vernacularly Fastened Door is, but she accepts the chore.

## Chapter Six Analysis

Chapter six is perhaps one of the most confusing chapters in the novel as it references many back-stories from previous books, and because Sunny Baudelaire, being the youngest, doesn't have the same analytic mind as the older children. She simply accepts what is happening, and what is being said, at face value. It is up to the reader - and only then if they've read the previous books - to piece together the clues revealed in this chapter. What the reader does know is that, as with the guests in the previous chapters, the trio of teachers is at Hotel Denouement to attend the party thrown by Count Olaf and Esme Squalor. Vice Principal Nero has been asked to play his violin at



the affair, which is what he was practicing when Sunny arrived. It seems that each of the guests had tailor-made invitations to ensure they would attend the party: Nero's invitation, for example, catered to his huge ego, encouraging him to play at the event because important music scouts would be there. Mrs. Bass' invitation, on the other hand, claimed that the party was Metric System themed, and Mrs. Bass is obsessed with the metric system. It is interesting to note that all of the invitations requested that the guests bring their most valuable possessions, yet no one suspects that they might be stolen. It is clear to the readers, and to the Baudelaires, that if Count Olaf is organizing the party, there is no question that he will make off with everyone's belongings in his constant pursuit of wealth.



# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Seven Summary

After meeting back at the concierge desk at 3:00, the Baudelaire children have no time to relax, nor to discuss the curious events they have just experienced. Their duties call them hither and fro, running down hotel corridors and rushing to guests' rooms. It isn't until nearly midnight when the children can finally sit down behind the front desk to talk. Klaus records every detail of each of their days in his commonplace book, hoping that the net of information will puzzle out a clue to whom they can trust and whom they cannot. The Baudelaires find it most curious that Carmelita Spats should request a harpoon gun, that Frank/Ernest requested birdpaper to be hung above the sauna, and that there are conflicting accounts claiming J.S. is both a woman and a man.

Klaus frustratedly concludes that each of the children has seen a different part of the same story, but none of it makes any sense. This statement reminds Sunny of a poem by John Godfrey Saxe their father used to recite to them about explorers attempting to describe an elephant. All they know is that the highly sought-after sugar bowl is making its way to the Hotel, and they must find a way to intervene, collecting the sugar bowl before the villains do. The children wonder if they should do any more investigating that night, but Violet states that it's too dark. A few moments later, Klaus sits bolt upright, remembering something Kit Snicket had said before their mission began: "These are dark days, as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night" (p. 45). He realizes that the sugar bowl is going to be delivered to the hotel, but crow, tonight. This is the reason why Esme Squalor was watching the skies, and why Carmelita Spats requested a harpoon gun. Clearly, the plan was for Esme to spot the bird, Carmelita to shoot the bird from the sky, the bird to land on the sticky birdpaper, and the sugar bowl to drop into the funnel leading to the laundry room, where Sunny had recently installed the Vernacularly Fastened Door, ensuring that only the person with the code could unlock it. The only part of the plan that doesn't yet make sense, is how Violet, Klaus, and Sunny all could have been engaged in conversations with Frank/Ernest at the same time. How could two people be in three places at once?

The question is interrupted when Violet notices a man lowering himself from the ceiling in the hotel lobby. The Baudelaires immediately recognize him as Frank/Ernest. They worry that their enemy, Ernest, has just overheard them cracking the case, and hope that it is Frank, their friend, arriving to lend some assistance. The mysterious man tells the children they can trust him, and he even recites the same John Godfrey Saxe poem Sunny had earlier remembered. He reveals that he is neither Frank nor Ernest, which leaves the Baudelaires dumbfounded.





## Chapter Seven Analysis

Chapter Seven opens with the statement that quite a few things happened in the world when the clock struck three that afternoon (and chapters four - six each ended with the clock striking three). For three pages, Snicket lists ridiculous absurdities, some that may have something to do with the plot of the novel and some that might not. He lists them off so rapid-fire that it's impossible to tell which moments are important and which are sprinkled in for literary zest.

The funny poem Sunny references describes a group of six blind men attempting to describe an elephant. One man could feel the animal's smooth, tall side, another the animal's sharp tusk, another the animal's trunk, another the animal's four legs, and so on. Because none of the men could see the entire animal, they bickered and argued about what an elephant truly looked like. It's true that this poem could have been written about the Baudelaires. Overwhelmed by the mass of people and information in the hotel, the Baudelaires can only see snippets of truth, and they are unable to see the larger picture of anything. The reader may also feel confused and overwhelmed. A lot of information, relationships, and back-stories are introduced at a rapid-fire pace. Slowly, all this information will make sense, but it may require flipping back chapters and re-reading confusing passages.



# Chapter Eight

## Chapter Eight Summary

As the mystery man walks with the children outside of the hotel, he finally introduces himself as Dewey Denouement, the third triplet to Frank and Ernest. He complains that his brothers get all the attention for running the hotel, but he too is very much involved. In fact, it was Dewey's idea to organize the hotel by the Dewey Decimal System, and only he fully understands the building's layout. Dewey explains that before the schism, V.F.D. was like a public library: "Anyone could join us and have access to all of the information we'd acquired. Volunteers all over the globe were reading each other's research, learning of each other's observations, and borrowing each other's books. For a while it seemed as if we might keep the whole world safe, secure, and smart" (Page 179). Since the schism, unfortunately, all the books and research have been scattered around the world. No one has been able to unify the information again, leaving very few safe places for noble people in the world. The remaining members of the V.F.D. have dutifully been traveling the world, making notes about treachery, and sending those notes back to Dewey at headquarters to organize into his new library. They hope that one day, they will have collected enough information about evil to protect the world from it forever.

Klaus remarks that it would be nearly impossible to hide a library of that size within the hotel, and Dewey's face lights up. The hotel is not the last safe place for the V.F.D., the pond is. Dewey reveals that the hotel is simply an object casting its reflection onto the water. The hotel is of no particular importance, but the V.F.D. enemies do not know this. The real library is housed in underwater rooms exactly the size and shape of Hotel Denouement. Dewey has chosen to tell the Baudelaires the truth in the hopes that, after Thursday's meeting, they will make the V.F.D. headquarters their permanent home. All three children are overcome with emotions, not only at the thought of having a permanent home, but also at the thought of Dewey holding them in such high esteem.

The children's conversation is interrupted when two more people from their past suddenly arrive: Justice Strauss, a judge and previous guardian of the Baudelaires, arrives with Jerome Squalor, Esme Squalor's husband. Both people, whose initials are J.S. have been searching for the Baudelaires with the hopes of apologizing to them for their terrible behavior. It is revealed that all the members of the V.F.D. are arriving to the Hotel on Thursday not for a party, but for a trial against Count Olaf. Justice Strauss, along with all the other high court judges, will hear testimony of Olaf's trials, and hopefully put him in prison for the rest of his life. Jerome Squalor, being married to Count Olaf's girlfriend, has been called in as an important witness. The Baudelaires know better than to get excited - Count Olaf always manages to escape prosecution - and are painfully disappointed when out of the smoke, Count Olaf himself suddenly appears.



## Chapter Eight Analysis

It is thought that Hotel Denouement is the last safe place for the V.F.D., but now it is crawling with enemies. As Kit Snicket said, it is up to the Baudelaires (with the help of Frank and Dewey Denouement) to decide whether it is safe for the remaining members of the V.F.D. to gather for the meeting on Thursday. If not, they expect the Baudelaires to send them a sign. Of course the hotel is NOT the last safe place, the underwater library is. When Dewey is describing the layout to the children, he says that, "Our enemies could burn the entire building to the ground, but the most important secrets would be safe" (p. 185). This is foreshadowing to the end of the novel, when Sunny Baudelaire burns the hotel down as a signal to the V.F.D. that it is no longer safe to arrive for Thursday's meeting.

The purpose of Thursday's meeting is finally revealed. It appears that between Justice Strauss and Jerome Squalor (whose initials are both J.S. - one male, one female), every member of the V.F.D. and their enemies have been called to the hotel for a surprise trial. It is intended that the members of the V.F.D. will present their evidence of treachery against Count Olaf, and the villains will finally be brought to justice. Although it seems to be a good plan, the Baudelaires know better than to get their hopes up. It is also revealed in this chapter that Count Olaf is at the hotel with Medusoid Mycelium (poisonous mushroom) spores, and that he plans to unleash the spores, killing everyone in the hotel.



# Chapter Nine

## Chapter Nine Summary

The Baudelaires are horrorstruck to see Count Olaf outside Hotel Denouement, but they are not entirely surprised: he ruthlessly stalks the children and always manages to locate them, regardless of their hiding places. Olaf demands that Dewey hand over the children, but he refuses. Olaf gives a long, impassioned speech about how standing up to him is fruitless, and how the children should know better than to trust anyone: everyone, whether comrade or friend, will eventually fail you. The Baudelaires stand up for their friends, particularly Dewey, saying that he is dedicated to their well-being and would never fail them. Klaus agrees, saying that they've managed to survive Olaf's clutches until now, and they don't intend to stop. Olaf sneers at Klaus with malice: "And how did you survive me?" he asks. He goes on to list all the crimes the Baudelaires have committed, stating that the children have relied on treachery to survive, just like everyone else.

Esme Squalor interrupts the conversation by suddenly appearing with Hugo, Colette, and Kevin, three circus sideshow freaks she has hired to work, in disguise, at the hotel in search of the sugarbowl. The three freaks have been monitoring the Baudelaires at work and now believe they know where the sugarbowl is being held. The Baudelaires know these three freaks, and even worked with them while living with the traveling circus (in another book in the series). Violet appeals to the three of them, begging them to do the right thing. By nature, they are not treacherous people! Treachery, she argues, is a choice, not a destiny. Carmelita Spats is there too, pointing her harpoon gun at Kevin, demanding that he tell everyone where the sugarbowl is being held. Olaf snatches the gun away from Carmelita and points it at Dewey Denouement. Olaf is sure the sugarbowl is locked behind the laundry room door, and he needs Dewey to tell him how to unlock the Vernacularly Fastened Door. With a slight smile, Dewey tells Olaf the three clues for unlocking the door. "The first phrase is a description of a medical condition that all three Baudelaire children share ... The second phrase is the weapon that left you an orphan, Olaf ... And the third is the famous unfathomable question in the best-known novel by Richard Wright" (Page 225).

Unfortunately, Olaf is not satisfied with Dewey's answers. He wants to know the exact phrases, now! He hoists the harpoon gun higher, leveling it with Dewey's chest. He begins counting to ten, saying that if he doesn't have the phrases by then, he will shoot and kill Dewey on the spot. As he counts, the Baudelaires plead with him not to shoot. Violet begs him to change his mind; he doesn't have to do this wicked thing. They see a moment of question cross Olaf's face as he reconsiders; the harpoon gun slumps in his hands. In that moment, the children grab the harpoon gun from Olaf, but, startled by a noise behind them, accidentally fire the gun. They watch in horror as Dewey staggers backward and falls into the pond. With his last breath he groans, "Kit."



## Chapter Nine Analysis

In this chapter, the characters spend a lot of time arguing nobility versus ignobility, as well as destiny versus choice. These are two of the main themes in the novel.

In the first argument, nobility versus ignobility, Count Olaf claims that because the Baudelaire children have resorted to "acts of treachery," they are just as ignoble as he is: "There are no truly noble people in this world" (p. 211). When the Baudelaires think back on all the terrible events they've endured, they recognize that they have taken part in violent and devastating acts to survive. Yes, they've acted violently against the enemy, but does that make them ignoble, or just as evil as the enemy? In the previous chapter, Dewey Denouement said, "You're noble enough, Baudelaires. That's all we can ask for in this world" (p. 188). Yet the children still question their morality. They have resorted to their enemy's tactics in order to survive, including lying, setting fires, and even murder. This argument is particularly relevant because when the children try to do the right thing in rescuing Dewey, they accidentally kill him. Surely this event will further scar the children and call their nobility into question.

In the second argument, destiny versus choice, the Baudelaires argue with many of the villains, including Hugo, Colette, Kevin, and even Olaf himself, saying that wickedness is a choice, not a destiny. If any of these villains choose, they can do the right thing. They don't have to be evil. When Esme Squalor quits working with Olaf, her husband, Jerome, rejoices, hoping this means she has chosen nobility over ignobility. She hasn't, but her decision to sever ties with Olaf shows that all people, whether good or evil, have free will and are able to make choices, even in moments of extreme stress. Even Olaf embodies this theme when, as he has the harpoon gun pointed at Dewey Denouement, he becomes convinced that killing Dewey is not his destiny. He lowers the gun and, for the first time in his life, steps back from a treacherous deed. For a moment, there is a glimmer of hope, of redemption for Olaf, however short-lived. This proves that even the wickedest villains can change, that they can do the right thing. In the argument between destiny and choice, it appears Snicket is saying that Destiny is an unavoidable change in one's life: Dewey's death, for example, could be considered destiny. Even though Olaf stepped back and decided to let Dewey live, he still accidentally died.



# Chapter Ten

## Chapter Ten Summary

The entire hotel seems to have heard the crack of the harpoon gun hitting Dewey Denouement, and now everyone is awake, demanding to know what has happened, including Geraldine Julienne, the reporter from *The Daily Punctilio*. When they hear that there has been a murder, pandemonium breaks out and the Baudelaires are immediately accused (they are, after all, already murderers in most people's minds). The angry mob pulls the children inside and, when everyone sees that the murderers are indeed the Baudelaires, begin listing every crime the children have even been thought to have committed. Finally, Justice Strauss intercedes and says that Thursday's trial, which is meant to evaluate the crimes of all villains, has been rescheduled for tomorrow morning. That way, the hotel guests won't have to spend an extra night wondering whether the children are guilty or innocent. To keep the children safe until their trial the next morning, Justice Strauss locks the three children in a very small closet, so small the children cannot even lay down to sleep.

## Chapter Ten Analysis

When it becomes clear that everyone in the hotel thinks the Baudelaires are murderers, and that they will be unwilling to hear the evidence of the case before judging them, Klaus considers running away, suggesting that there may be no noble people left in the world to help them. The mysterious taxi driver who offers to give the children a ride is likely Snicket himself. It is also suggested that this driver has kidnapped a woman (who is being held in the trunk of his car), and that he has stolen the sugarbowl from the pond. These mysteries, like so many other mysteries in the series, are hinted at but never answered.



# Chapter Eleven

## Chapter Eleven Summary

On Wednesday morning, Ernest wakes the children in their closet and demands that they put on their blindfold. Confused, the children ask why. Everyone at a High Court trial must wear a blindfold, he tells them. They take the saying "Justice is blind" very seriously. After the children have put their blindfolds on, Ernest leads them to the courtroom, bumping into walls and tables, because he too is blindfolded. The ridiculousness ensues when Justice Strauss tries to call the courtroom to order, but the hundreds of guests who have shown up for the trial cannot find their seats because they cannot see them. The judges threaten anyone who removes their blindfolds to find their seat with contempt of court, so it takes a very long time before the trial can actually begin. Finally, Justice Strauss begins the trial, which will try the cases of Count Olaf and the Baudelaire children, to order. Count Olaf quickly pleads not guilty to all of the charges against him: "I'm unspeakably innocent," he says (p. 277). The Baudelaires, however, have a much harder time pleading innocent or guilty. In the end, they decide to plead "comparatively innocent" (p. 279). Next, Justice Strauss calls for evidence. The entire courtroom breaks into pandemonium as the hundreds of guests scramble, blindfolded, toward the desk with their collected evidence - of the Baudelaires' innocence as well as their guilt. Amidst all this, Jerome Squalor submits the book he's been working on for years, the comprehensive history of injustice.

Justice Strauss asks each of the defendants to give a statement explaining their innocence, and orders them not to leave anything out. Olaf gives a short, pithy answer, but the Baudelaires know that this is their opportunity to set the record straight about so many of the terrible events they've lived through. They start at the very beginning: when they learned their parents had been killed. As they talk, they hear very strange sounds coming from Justice Strauss, but as they are blindfolded, have no idea what to make of them. Finally, the children decide that they cannot continue their story and that they must find out what's happening, even if it puts them in contempt of court. They are shocked to see that Count Olaf has managed to bind and gag Justice Strauss and is now carrying her out of the room. The remaining high court judges are immediately recognizable as villains from the Baudelaires' past lives.

## Chapter Eleven Analysis

When the children are called to trial for their acts of treachery, they find themselves unable to plead innocent or guilty to their crimes. In the end, they decide to plead "comparatively innocent." When comparing themselves to Count Olaf, for example, the children decide that their violent actions were for a better purpose. While they may not be innocent of their crimes, they were forced into them. The children are, as Dewey Denouement suggested, "noble enough."

The trial itself starts out ridiculously, with the absurd literal translation of the idiom "justice is blind." The fact that everyone at the hotel mindlessly puts their blindfolds on shows how simple-minded many of the characters truly are. This theme, that children are much smarter than adults, is prevalent throughout the Series of Unfortunate Events books. One of the main ways Snicket appeals to his young audience is by giving them the feeling that they are smarter than the characters. Most readers will suspect that Count Olaf and Officer Luciana truly killed Jacques, but the adults have no idea. This not only creates a sense of excitement for the reader, it also creates a strong bond between the reader and that Baudelaire children. They feel united in their crusade against Olaf and his conniving, evil tricks. In the case of the trial, the stupidity of the adults not only bonds the reader to the Baudelaires, it also provides the perfect setup for Olaf to kidnap Justice Strauss.





# Chapter Twelve

## Chapter Twelve Summary

The Baudelaires shout to the rest of the trial audience to take off their blindfolds, the judges are convicted villains and Count Olaf is running off with Justice Strauss! The villainous judges come up with many different excuses as to why the audience should keep their blindfolds on, including accusing the Baudelaires of wanting the entire V.F.D. to be arrested for contempt. The audience argues back and forth as to whether or not the Baudelaires should be trusted, but the children do not wait around. They run past the squabbling crowd, following Count Olaf (and Justice Strauss in his arms) down to the laundry room where he believes the sugarbowl is being held. Count Olaf assures Justice Strauss, and the Baudelaires who have arrived to rescue her, that they will all help him open the door. Justice Strauss is now his hostage and he will kill her if anyone withholds information that may help him crack the code on the Vernacularly Fastened Door.

Immediately, Klaus steps forward to help Olaf. He knows the answers to all three of Dewey Denouement's questions, and he offers to type them into the keyboard. Olaf is hesitant but eventually allows Klaus to take over because his own spelling is so bad. Justice Strauss, Violet, and Sunny are all shocked: why on earth would Klaus offer to help their greatest enemy. Soon, they realize that Klaus is helping Olaf because he already knows the sugarbowl is not locked inside the laundry room. The Vernacularly Fastened Door is a decoy. The sugarbowl has been dropped in the pond, the last safe place on earth.

When he discovers the truth, Olaf is outraged. He vows to unleash the Medusoid Mycelium, killing every soul in the hotel as revenge. Then, he'll push his escape boat off the roof of the hotel and escape. This time, Violet steps in, offering to build a quick drag chute with some of the dirty sheets in the laundry room to ensure that Olaf gets his boat safely off the roof. Her siblings are flabbergasted: helping Olaf into the laundry room was one thing, but helping him escape is entirely another. Even Olaf questions her helpful attitude, to which Violet answers truthfully: "you need more than a one-person crew, and we need to leave this hotel without being spotted by the authorities" (p. 315). Olaf agrees to take the children with him because he assumes they would have ended up back in his clutches eventually anyway. Before they leave, Sunny has one last idea: to set the hotel on fire.

## Chapter Twelve Analysis

During Olaf's argument with Justice Strauss outside the laundry room, Justice Strauss assures Count Olaf that even if she is dead, the two remaining high court judges will ensure that justice is served. Olaf laughs maniacally; those two judges have been associates of his for years. In fact, whenever Justice Strauss discussed the Baudelaire



case with them, the two judges immediately passed their information on to Olaf making it possible for him to once again locate the children. This explains how Olaf was able to successfully stalk the children through the course of this series.

This chapter ends with one final cliffhanger as the children unexpectedly join forces with their arch enemy to ensure their safe escape from the hotel. The children now know that they will be found guilty of murder by the court (which is being run by two villains), and that their only chance of escape is to escape with Olaf. This is why Violet volunteers to help Olaf get his boat safely off the roof. The only question left at the end of this chapter is why Sunny wants to burn down the hotel. Keen readers may remember Kit's full request for the children at the opening of the novel, but other readers will have to continue reading. Clearly, this is a useful technique Snicket employs when he wants to propel the reader to the next chapter, and here, more than any other chapter, the technique works brilliantly.



# Chapter Thirteen

## Chapter Thirteen Summary

Despite the cries of outrage from her siblings, and the squeals of joy from Count Olaf, Sunny insists that she meant what she said: she wants to burn down the hotel. Count Olaf immediately sets to work, wondering why he didn't think of such an ingenious plan on his own: he drenches a set of dirty sheets with lighter fluid and sets them ablaze. Then he orders the children onto the elevator (even though the children warn him that one should never use an elevator during a fire) and up to the boat. Using a funny trick their father taught them while on vacation one year, the Baudelaire children immediately turn around in the elevator and push all the buttons, causing the elevator to stop at every floor. Now, they can warn as many people as possible that the hotel is burning down. It will be up to the guests to save themselves. They are shocked to see that most guests are still bumping around with their blindfolds on, and that many still believe the Baudelaires are trying to trick them into being held in contempt of court. They are pleased to see many of their friends, and known V.F.D. supporters, quickly making their way to the exits.

When they reach the roof of the hotel, the building begins to shake: the fire is weakening the infrastructure. They know they have to escape now, or they will die along with everyone else inside. Quickly, they board Olaf's boats as Violet rigs the drag chute. They call for Justice Strauss to climb to safety, but she refuses to leave the scene of a crime. She scolds the Baudelaires, saying they too should do the right thing, but the Baudelaires don't know what the right thing is anymore. As they lower the boat into the water and start rowing beside Count Olaf, the Baudelaires begin to wonder if they even know who they are anymore.

## Chapter Thirteen Analysis

When Count Olaf learns of Sunny's brilliant plan to burn down the hotel, he is overwhelmed with pride and uses this as an argument that he has, in fact, been a brilliant guardian. He looks at Sunny with a look something like love, and immediately sets to work on the flames. Although Sunny's idea is very dangerous, the effect is three-fold: first, and most obvious, burning down the hotel sends a very strong signal to the V.F.D. that the hotel is no longer a safe place for their meeting. Second, Sunny must have known that there would have been no hope for the guests' escape if Olaf unleashed the poisonous Medusoid Mycelium, which would have killed everyone instantly. At least this way, people have a chance of escape, however slight. This chance of escape is heightened as the Baudelaires travel floor-to-floor warning everyone of the fire. Thirdly, most volunteers for the V.F.D. still find the Baudelaires trustworthy and will therefore take off their blindfolds, believe the fire warning, and escape from the hotel. The enemies will likely believe the Baudelaires are trying to trick



them, wander around the burning hotel with the blindfolds firmly fastened, and perish in the fire.

Despite the Baudelaires' warning, Snicket insinuates that many people die in the fire, including Esme Squalor, Carmelita Spats, Mr. Poe, and many others. This knowledge, along with the knowledge that they are leaving the scene of a crime, calls the nobility of the Baudelaires into question one last time. While it's true that they set the fire, it was for the betterment of everyone in the hotel. At least some of them will have a chance to escape, and they did their best to warn everyone. The Baudelaires have come to realize that they can only be responsible for themselves and their own safety. It is up to everyone else to choose a side of their own. Still, the Baudelaires are overwhelmed with guilt as they paddle their boat to safety. Sitting next to their evil enemy, Count Olaf, and working with him for a common goal, causes the children to question one final time if they are good or if they are evil.



# Characters

## Violet Baudelaire

Violet Baudelaire is the eldest child in the Baudelaire family. She is described as being a very pretty fourteen-year-old girl who is a genius when it comes to inventing. Brett Helquist's illustrations suggest that she has wavy, dark brown hair. When thinking, she ties her hair in a ribbon, in order to keep it out of her face. After her parents' deaths last year, Violet has taken over the leadership role in her family, but insists that all three children must work together to overcome their obstacles. When working together, each of the Baudelaire children has a skill they are particularly good at, and Violet is particularly skilled at inventing devices. She often invents devices to help herself and her siblings in dangerous situations, using only simple objects such as everyday food items, rubber bands, and tin cans.

Violet, like the rest of the characters in Snicket's collection, is relatively two-dimensional. She does not undergo much character development and is the same character at the beginning of the series as she is in the end. This construction is typical in the Gothic, melodramatic style which focuses on plot rather than character. In this installment of the series, Violet must serve the guests of Hotel Denouement while trying to uncover the true identity of the mysterious "J.S." and discover whether this person is helping V.F.D. or its enemies.

## Klaus Baudelaire

Klaus Baudelaire is the middle child in the Baudelaire family. He is described as a bookish twelve-year-old who is a genius when it comes to researching. He remembers virtually everything he reads, retaining information that helps the Baudelaires to escape from situations Count Olaf places them in. Because he is a voracious reader, Klaus also speaks a variety of languages and knows the definitions to many of the difficult words used through the series' narration. Brett Helquist's illustrations suggest that he has wavy brown hair and large, round glasses. Although Klaus is an excellent team player, working with his two sisters to overcome the various obstacles in their lives, he is the most pessimistic about the outcome of their conflicts.

Klaus, like the rest of the characters in Snicket's collection, is relatively two-dimensional. He does not undergo much character development and is the same character at the beginning of the series as she is in the end. This construction is typical in the Gothic, melodramatic style which focuses on plot rather than character. In this installment of the series, Klaus must serve the guests of Hotel Denouement while trying to uncover the true identity of the mysterious "J.S." and discover whether this person is helping V.F.D. or its enemies.



## Sunny Baudelaire

Sunny Baudelaire is the youngest Baudelaire child, depicted as an infant throughout much of the series. Although she is just a baby, who cannot yet walk and who speaks in monosyllabic baby talk, Sunny demonstrates advanced problem solving skills and adult intelligence. She is best known for her four sharp teeth. Her biting skills often help the Baudelaires escape from Count Olaf's clutches.

## Count Olaf

Count Olaf is the villain of the Series of Unfortunate Events novels. Olaf is described as elderly and thin, with a unibrow, wheezing voice, and an eye tattoo on his left ankle. Olaf is the evil man first entrusted with the Baudelaire children after their parents' deaths. He proved to be a horrific guardian who is only interested in the fortune the Baudelaires left behind. Throughout the series, he doggedly chases the Baudelaire children with a series of heinous attempts to get his hands on the children's inheritance.

## Mr. Poe

Mr. Poe is the Baudelaire children's main guardian after their parents' death. Mr. Poe's main job is to find caretakers for the children, but after a string of unfortunate events, there are no longer any relatives, however distant, willing to risk Count Olaf's wrath by taking in the children.

## Esme Squalor

Esme Squalor is Count Olaf's nasty, fashion-obsessed girlfriend. Throughout the novel she wears ridiculous outfits such as a bikini made of lettuce leaves, and massive sunoculars - a cross between sunglasses and binoculars - to keep watch over the skies.

## The Denouement Triplets

Frank, Ernest, and Dewey are the triplet managers running Hotel Denouement. They are identical in appearance: "tall and skinny, with arms and legs sticking out at odd angles, as if [they] were made of drinking straws instead of flesh and bone. But the three could not have more different personalities. Frank is a friend of the V.F.D. and is therefore very trustworthy. Ernest is an enemy of the V.F.D. and is therefore unsavory, and he often tries to trick the Baudelaires into thinking he's Frank so they'll trust him. Dewey is painfully shy and spends his days hiding in the shadows. Before the Baudelaires accidentally kill Dewey with Carmelita's harpoon gun, it is revealed that Dewey is the father of Kit Snicket's unborn child.



## **Carmelita Spats**

Carmelita Spats is a horrible little girl obsessed with harpoon guns. She has been very spoiled by Esme Squalor and Count Olaf and now she feels entitled to anything she wants whenever she wants it.

## **Sir**

Sir is the head of Lucky Smells Lumbermill. The reader never gets a physical description of him because his face is constantly veiled by a cloud of cigar smoke.



# Objects/Places

## La Forza del Destino

La Forza del Destino is the play Kit Snicket watched with the Baudelaire parents. After she watched the play, Beatrice Baudelaire purchased the opera poster as a souvenir, and it is now one of Klaus Baudelaire's most prized possessions. In the opera, characters argued, fell in love, got married, went to war, ran away to monasteries, and many other dramatic actions that all called the argument for destiny into question.

## Hotel Denouement

Hotel Denouement is the setting of this novel. The hotel itself is a very large building organized like a library, following the same Dewey Decimal System. The hotel is owned by identical triplet brothers, Frank (who is good), Ernest (who is evil), and Dewey (who remains hidden in the shadows). The hotel has 10 floors, organized by the Dewey Decimal system, from the basement (information and general works) to the rooftop salon. Other interesting floors include the Second Floor (dedicated to religion, housing a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and shrine), the Fourth Floor (dedicated to languages and reserved for foreign guests). At the end of the novel, Sunny Baudelaire burns down the hotel to send a signal to V.F.D. saying that the meeting planned for Thursday is canceled.

## The V.F.D.

The V.F.D. is a super-secret group of volunteers whose main goal is collect information about villainy around the world. Many years ago, the world was a better place due to the work of the V.F.D. but after the great schism, enemies began taking over what were once safe places for the V.F.D. to share information. In *The Penultimate Peril*, the Baudelaires are sent to find out if Hotel Denouement is still a safe place for the volunteers to meet, or if it has been overtaken by the enemy.

## The Commonplace Book

The Commonplace Book is Klaus' most prized possession. In it, he keeps detailed records of all the treachery he has seen in the world. Whenever he is figuring out a puzzle, he writes down the clues in his commonplace book and then flips through the pages, searching for connections.





## The Poem

The Poem was written by John Godfrey Saxe, the Baudelaires' father's favorite poet. The poem describes a group of six blind men attempting to describe an elephant. One man could feel the animal's smooth, tall side, another the animal's sharp tusk, another the animal's trunk, another the animal's four legs, and so on. Because none of the men could see the entire animal, they bickered and argued about what an elephant truly looked like. It's true that this poem could have been written about the Baudelaires. Overwhelmed by the mass of people and information in the hotel, the Baudelaires can only see snippets of truth, and they are unable to see the larger picture of anything.

## The Sugarbowl

The Sugarbowl is the most sought after item in the novel. The contents of the sugar bowl are never revealed in this series, and it is most likely that the sugar bowl is merely a MacGuffin, a plot device whose contents are completely irrelevant and that functions as a much sought-after object motivating characters and driving the story along. Nevertheless, in *The Penultimate Peril*, the sugar bowl is of highest importance, regardless of its contents.

## Denouement

Denouement is not only the name of the hotel in the novel, but also the process of untying a knot, or "unraveling a mysterious story, such as the lives of the Baudelaire orphans" (p. 176). The denouement is the moment when all the mysteries of a story are revealed, and according to Lemony Snicket, *The Penultimate Peril* serves as the denouement of the entire *Series of Unfortunate Events*.

## Medusoid Mycelium

Medusoid Mycelium is a highly poisonous mushroom that Count Olaf has stolen from a submarine. Now, he plans to use the fungi to infect everyone at Hotel Denouement, killing them instantly.

## The Harpoon Gun

The Harpoon Gun is the weapon used to accidentally kill Dewey Denouement. At the beginning of the novel, Carmelita Spats asks for the gun to shoot crows (which may be carrying the sugarbowl) out of the sky. Count Olaf later uses the gun to threaten Dewey into telling him the code for unlocking the Vernacularly Fastening Door, which is how he is accidentally killed.



## The Vernacularly Fastened Door

The Vernacularly Fastening Door is a lock that can only be opened by typing in three unique phrases, "The first phrase is a description of a medical condition that all three Baudelaire children share...The second phrase is the weapon that left you an orphan, Olaf...And the third is the famous unfathomable question in the best-known novel by Richard Wright" (p. 225). In the end, Klaus Baudelaire works alongside Count Olaf to open the door.



# Themes

## Ambiguity

The main theme of the novel is that of ambiguity. From the beginning, the Baudelaires and often the reader, have no idea what is happening around them. Everyone wears disguises, it is unknown who can be trusted and who cannot, everyone lies, and it is unclear whom the Baudelaires are working with, and whom they are working against. The Baudelaires' very employment at the Hotel starts with an ambiguous letter signed only the initials "J.S." These initials could belong to anyone: Justice Strauss, Jerome Squalor, Jacques Snicket, or possibly even someone else, still unknown to the reader. All of the characters are chasing the elusive sugarbowl (which remains undescribed and misunderstood until the end of the series). The Baudelaires work under the Hotel managers, although they never know which manager they are actually working with at any given moment (Ernest, Dewey, or Frank). And on top of everything, the Hotel is often filled with steam or smoke, augmenting everyone's view of what is happening around them.

## Destiny

Throughout the novel, many of the characters claim that "this is your destiny" or "this is not your destiny." In Chapter Nine, the Baudelaires argue with many of the villains, including Hugo, Colette, Kevin, and even Olaf himself, saying that wickedness is a choice, not a destiny where, "being treacherous isn't your destiny. It's your choice" (p. 219). In the battle between good and evil, between the V.F.D. and their enemies, any of the villains could choose to do the right thing. They could choose to abandon Olaf's plans and join forces with the volunteers. They don't have to be evil. When Esme Squalor quits working with Olaf, her husband, Jerome, rejoices, hoping this means she has chosen nobility over ignobility. She hasn't, but her decision to sever ties with Olaf shows that all people, whether good or evil, have free will and are able to make choices, even in moments of extreme stress. Even Olaf embodies this theme when, as he has the harpoon gun pointed at Dewey Denouement, he becomes convinced that killing Dewey is not his destiny. He lowers the gun and, for the first time in his life, steps back from a treacherous deed. For a moment, there is a glimmer of hope, of redemption for Olaf, however short-lived. This proves that even the wickedest villains can change, that they can do the right thing. In the argument between destiny and choice, it appears Snicket is saying that Destiny is an unavoidable change in one's life. Dewey's death, for example, could be considered destiny. Even though Olaf stepped back and decided to let Dewey live, he still accidentally died.



## Nobility

Count Olaf claims that because the Baudelaire children have resorted to "acts of treachery," during their various escape plans, that they are just as ignoble as he is. He says, "There are no truly noble people in this world" (p. 211). When the Baudelaires think back on all the terrible events they've endured, they recognize that they have taken part in violent and devastating acts to survive. Yes, they've acted violently against the enemy, but does that make them ignoble, or just as evil as the enemy? In the previous chapter, Dewey Denouement said, "You're noble enough, Baudelaires. That's all we can ask for in this world" (p. 188). Yet the children still question their morality. They have resorted to their enemy's tactics in order to survive, including lying, setting fires, and even murder. This argument is particularly relevant because when the children try to do the right thing in rescuing Dewey, they accidentally kill him. Surely this event will further scar the children and call their nobility into question. When the children are called to trial for their acts of treachery, they find themselves unable to plead innocent or guilty to their crimes. In the end, they decide to plead "comparatively innocent." When comparing themselves to Count Olaf, for example, the children decide that their violent actions were for a better purpose. While they may not be innocent of their crimes, they were forced into them. The children are, as Dewey Denouement suggested, "noble enough."

# Style

## Point of View

This novel is told in third-person and omniscient narration from the perspective of Lemony Snicket, the fictional author of the series. Although the entire events are filtered through the consciousness of Lemony Snicket, he has perfect access into the thoughts and emotions of the Baudelaire children. This access is important because it highlights the special bond and unity between the siblings. Through this, the reader sees the children's unique ability to overcome obstacles and love each other in an increasingly dark, depressing world.

The point of view of this novel is unique because the "author" himself is a character. The true author of this series is Daniel Handler, but he has created a failed detective / journalist, Lemony Snicket, to narrate his tales. According to Wikipedia, Snicket is, "a harried, troubled writer" obsessed with the Baudelaire family. This novel, alongside the rest in the series, explain that as a teenager, Snicket fell in love with a woman named Beatrice, to whom he eventually became engaged. After a series of unfortunate events (after which the real-world series is in some ways named), he was falsely accused of a variety of crimes, including arson. While he was being held for these crimes, The Daily Punctilio falsely reported his death. Beatrice, although devastated, moved on and married a man named Bertrand Baudelaire. Later, she would give birth to three children: Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, the protagonists of this series. When Beatrice and Bertrand were murdered in a fire, Snicket embarked on a quest to chronicle the lives of their surviving children as a way of honoring the woman he loved. It's a somewhat silly premise, but it works with the series' sarcastic tone.

## Setting

This novel is set in the Hotel Denouement, the "last safe place" for the V.F.D. When the Baudelaire children first arrive at the hotel, they are confused by its layout. It isn't until a few moments later that the children realize they weren't looking at the hotel, they were looking at its reflection in the nearby pond. The hotel itself is a very large building organized like a library, following the same Dewey Decimal System. The hotel is owned by identical triplet brothers, Frank (who is good), Ernest (who is evil), and Dewey (who remains hidden in the shadows). The hotel has 10 floors, organized by the Dewey Decimal system, from the basement (information and general works) to the rooftop salon. Other interesting floors include the Second Floor (dedicated to religion, housing a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and shrine), the Fourth Floor (dedicated to languages and reserved for foreign guests).

At the end of the novel, Sunny Baudelaire burns down the Hotel Denouement to send a signal to V.F.D. saying that the meeting planned for Thursday is canceled, as the last safe place is no longer safe. However, the real last safe place is the reflecting pond, the



reflection of the Hotel in the water. The real last safe place contains all the V.F.D. secrets, including information on everyone ever involved or acquainted with the V.F.D.

## Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to follow. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also gains momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, and often this structure works. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing artistic words and phrases that may be a hindrance to some readers. Additionally, the narrator, Lemony Snicket, often uses big vocabulary words in his descriptions, but defines them immediately in the text. Violet also uses scientific words and phrases, typically when she is inventing something, but readers should be able to deduce contextually what these phrases mean. This language adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world that is made believable through the language used by not only the characters but by the narrator as well. Most of the novel is told in exposition so there is not a lot of dialogue to distinguish secondary characters - although the reader does learn a lot about the Baudelaire children, the large cast of village members have very little - aside from one unique characteristic (plaid pants, bright lipstick, etc) - to define them individually.

The narrator's language is ironic and snarky. There have been multiple arguments made as to whether or not young readers will understand the layers of humor, or if these books should have been marketed to an adult audience. Indeed, there are innumerable literary references and allusions and moments of complex foreshadowing, but there should be no denying that on the surface, Handler (Snicket) presents a series of stories about pluck and perseverance that will resonate with readers of all ages.

## Structure

The Penultimate Peril is comprised of thirteen chapters averaging thirty pages in length. The chapters are simply numbered at the top of the page, without titles or headings to distract from the action of the story. The chapters tend to be short to engage the reader in the immediate suspense and action of the tale. As many readers find themselves wading through lengthy chapters, Snicket creates many small problems and resolutions to maintain the novel's quick pace from beginning to end since adult readers do not have any trouble finishing the book in one sitting or a single afternoon. The addition of black and white pencil sketches also shortens the chapters and gives the reader's eye a break from the text.

This novel functions within the series basically as a way of reminding readers of everything that has happened in the series until now. As a result, The Penultimate Peril is full of many winding back-stories, characters without description, and long recaps of what has happened in the previous books. This novel is arguably the only novel in the series that cannot be read as a stand-alone story.



## Quotes

"A great man once said that right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant" (Page 6).

"To be daunted by no difficulty, to keep heart when all have lost it, to go through intrigue spotless, to forgo even ambition when the end is gained - who can say this is not greatness" (Page 9).

"In fact, when they considered all of their recent actions, they weren't entirely sure they hadn't performed a few acts of villainy, even if they'd had very good reasons for doing so" (Page 29).

"You're not children anymore, Baudelaires. You're volunteers, ready to face the challenges of a desperate and perplexing world" (Page 43).

"These are dark days, as dark as a crow flying through a pitch black night" (Page 45).

"Hidden somewhere in this hotel, he was sure, was something or someone that could answer all the Baudelaires' questions, solve all of the Baudelaires' mysteries, and put an end at last to all the Baudelaires' woes" (Page 101).

"We each observed a different story, but none of the stories make sense" (Page 157).

"You're noble enough, Baudelaires. That's all we can ask for in this world" (Page 188).

"Being treacherous isn't your destiny. It's your choice" (Page 219).

"Perhaps there had never been enough time to sit and tell their story just as they wanted to tell it, or perhaps their story was so unhappy that they dared not share all of the wretched details with anyone" (Page 287).

"It is very difficult to make one's way in this world without being wicked at one time or another, when the world's way is so wicked to begin with" (Page 316).

"The last safe place is safe no more" (Page 344).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the use of smoke and steam in the novel. Carefully describe at least three instances of "smoke in mirrors" from the novel and explain how they add to the themes of mystery and ambiguity. Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the use of mirroring in the novel. Describe the set-up of Hotel Denouement and how this fits into the theme of mirroring. Describe the relationships between the three hotel managers. How do the Denouement triplets fit into the same theme? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What is achieved by sending the Baudelaires to Hotel Denouement as flaneurs? Do you think the Baudelaires are good at their job? Why or why not? What information do the Baudelaires discover while working as flaneurs? What is the difference between a flaneur and a concierge? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

At the opening of the novel, Kit tells the children about the opera *La Forza del Destino*. First, why would Kit choose this particular play to discuss with the children? Second, how does the opera fit into the themes of destiny and choice, which the Baudelaires struggle with for the duration of the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Do you think the Baudelaires are noble characters? Why or why not? Why do the Baudelaires struggle to define their morality? Do you understand this struggle? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Are there any noble people left in the Baudelaires' life at the end of the novel? How can you tell? Do you agree with Count Olaf's assertion that all people, noble or not, will eventually fail you? How has this been true in the Baudelaires' lives? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the work of the V.F.D. What did they hope to accomplish? What stood in the way of the organization's success? Do you think there is any chance that the V.F.D. will be victorious at the end of this series? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.