

The People of Paper Study Guide

The People of Paper by Salvador Plascencia

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Plot Summary

This novel is written with a prominent stylistic emphasis on “magic realism,” a style of narrative in which “magical” elements are integrated into a story grounded in realistic characters, situations, and events, but are not regarded as anything unusual – in other words, in works of “magic realism,” magic is a part of an otherwise “normal” reality. Thus, when protagonist Federico leaves Mexico for a new life in America with his daughter, encounters everything from a baby that can tell the future, mechanical tortoises, and a co-worker who spits both blood and flower petals when he is beaten, both Federico and the reader simply accept these events as part of the experience of living.

What Federico cannot, and will not, accept is the growing and deepening sense that he and his life are being watched and controlled. Initially, he is unable to identify the force that he believes is shaping his life; eventually, though, he comes to believe and/or understand that it is, in fact, not only the giant planet Saturn, but the god Saturn, an ancient, paternal entity for whom the planet is named and who, according to Federico, lives in the sky.

As Federico’s feelings of resentment and anger towards Saturn become both more resentful and more rebellious, he gathers a small army of followers who, in their own ways, have experiences that fall into the realm of “magic realism” and who, like Federico, wish to free themselves of Saturn’s influence. These followers include Froggy (the aforementioned co-worker who spat flower petals); Julieta (who, narration suggests, caused the destruction of her home town simply by crumbling a bullion cube); and Smiley, whose curiosity about Saturn leads him on a journey into the sky. That journey ends with Smiley tearing a hole in the sky, going through, and discovering that Saturn is, in fact, a writer named Salvador Plascencia, who is having some struggles in his personal life; who feels the resentment and anger of Federico and the other characters he has created; and who doesn’t want to give up his control of those characters, but at the same time doesn’t want to fight with them. Smiley returns to the world he (as a character) inhabits with a sense of empathy for the writer and a determination to no longer antagonize him as part of Federico’s rebellion.

For a while, Saturn / Plascencia disappears from the narrative, leaving Federico in what he perceives to be a bit of peace. Eventually, though, Saturn / Plascencia returns, and Federico’s rebellion resumes, eventually resulting in attacks that cause the sky to crumble, bits of it falling into and onto the land in Federico’s world. Eventually, Saturn / Plascencia withdraws completely into his own life and, in the aftermath of his victory, Federico walks out of the pages of the book, never to be heard from again.

While all this is going on, the book also explores the experiences of several other characters, some more related than others to the central story. There is a woman made of paper (Merced de Papel), whose very active sexual life comes to an end when she is killed in an accident; the man who loved her (Ramon Barretto), who nurses chronic paper cuts; the mysterious Baby Nostradamus, to whose perceptions of time and space



and reality mean nothing; Cameroon, addicted to the poison in bee stings; Little Merced, Federico's daughter who is addicted to limes; and a saintly wrestler, a folk doctor whose mother was accidentally burned by the halo of the visiting Virgin Mary, a philosophical Mechanic, and a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic church whose ministry is defined by his experience of loving an exotic, wise, and insightful woman. All these characters and stories interact and entwine, creating a complex, colorful tapestry of magic and mystery that eventually resolves in a sense of peaceful independence and freedom for all.

Prologue

Summary

The prologue begins with the story of how a character known only as “she” was created out of paper by a man named Antonio. “She” was created in an abandoned monastery/factory.

The prologue first describes how the monastery was abandoned by the monks that lived there after a “papal decree” that determined that all new life should begin as the result of sexual activity rather than by being “born of the ground or from the marrow of bones.” The monks were instructed to wander the world and forget all about the location of the factory, which they did – all except the fifty-third monk, who disappeared during the journey.

The prologue then describes how Antonio became “the first origami surgeon,” using paper to create organs and other aspects of physical life. He first experimented on his beloved cat, bringing it back to life by reconstructing its body with carefully folded paper. He then studied medicine and began a successful career, but then his work and value were replaced by what might be described as “traditional” surgery. He then became a street entertainer, but eventually tired of that and decided, one day, to go on a search for “the factory.”

Following a long search, Antonio finally found it after a chance encounter with a mysterious, angry, elderly monk, known only by his number - fifty-three. Antonio makes his way to the factory, breaks through its locks, cleans its work rooms, and sets down to frenzied work. He creates a woman, and then collapses in blooded exhaustion as “she” goes out into the world, “her soaked feet tattered as they scraped against wet pavement and turned her toes to pulp.”

Analysis

The first point to note about the prologue, and indeed about the book as a whole, is that almost every character, every situation, every image and/or metaphor appears at some other point in the narrative. On a technical level, all these repetitions can be seen as part of an elaborate system of foreshadowing. On a thematic level, they serve as a clear and precise evocation of the novel’s thematic interest in interconnection, with all the various recurring elements demonstrating not only the interconnections of character and events, but also the interconnections of time (past, present, and in some cases future) and, most interestingly, of realities (i.e. the reality of a writer and that of the characters he creates).

Thus, the references to the woman made of paper foreshadow her appearances later in the narrative when she reappears and is given not only a name, but a life; the references to Antonio show up later not only in relationship to the woman but also to at



least one other character, whose family tree includes a reference to him; and the reference to the fifty-third monk, to the other monks, and to the factory, all of whom are referred to later in the story in connection to other characters and situations.

Discussion Question 1

In what way does the prologue introduce the novel's thematic exploration of the frailty of life?

Discussion Question 2

This chapter's reference to life having begun out of "the marrow of bones" can be seen as a reference to what story of creation? What parallels are there between the end of that story (i.e. what happens to the people "created" therein) and the end of the story of "she"?

Discussion Question 3

At this early point in the story, what do you imagine will be the fate of the woman made of paper?

Vocabulary

papal, propulsion, immaculate, conception, devout, formation, curvature, glacial, sanction, origami, velocity, cellulose, detractor, innovation, capillary, prestige, sterility, anonymity, vendor, stricture, excommunication, rectory, caliper, cursive, platina



Part 1 (El Monte Flores), Chapter 1, Section 1

Summary

Pages 18 – 23. This chapter is written from the points of view of several characters, narration for each character written in separate, parallel columns. All are written in first person except for those of Saturn, which are written in third person.

Saturn - Narration describes the marriage of the sickle-bearing Federico and his long-suffering wife Merced, whose unhappiness with his bed-wetting endured for years, until she finally gave him an ultimatum. Federico goes to get herbal treatment, feeling “the weight of a distant force looking down on him.”

Little Merced (Federico and Merced’s daughter) - First person narration describes how the treatment failed; how Merced left; and how Federico decided to move with Little Merced to Los Angeles.

Santos - Wrestling hero Santos describes meeting Federico and Little Merced as they make their last stop on their way out of Mexico.

Saturn - In the aftermath of Merced’s death, Federico develops both a depression and a painful itch, neither of which was cured for ten years, and then only by very painful means. Narration also describes his regret that he didn’t find the cure sooner.

Little Merced - Merced describes her version of meeting Santos, commenting on feeling like he was watching her. She also describes Federico telling her to not fall into her mother’s habit of eating too many limes - her mother’s teeth rotted from eating so many. Merced also describes how, after the wrestling match, she and her father went to a loteria table.

Loteria Caller – The man who calls the loteria game describes how it is played – players cover the pictures on their cards with beans when they’re announced by the caller: when the card is filled, a player calls “loteria” and the caller checks to make sure it’s accurate. His narration refers to the night in question (i.e. the night Santos won his wrestling match): the night that a pretty girl and her father came to play for the first time; how they had terrible luck; and how the first picture he called that night was “El Diablito” (the devil).

Saturn – Narration describes Federico’s bad luck at Loteria that night, covering only “the devil and the grim reaper” (i.e. “death”). Little Merced’s pictures, narration also comments, were of “watermelons and banjos.” After playing, Federico and Little Merced get on a bus to start their trip to America. As Little Merced falls asleep, Federico feels so sad that he worries he might start wetting himself again. He goes into the toilet, heats his sickle, and presses it into his stomach until the sadness goes away.



Little Merced – Little Merced describes how heavily Federico sleeps while on the bus; comments that she purchases three limes and hides them; and describes a conversation with a woman holding a baby that both slobbers and moves his lips without sound. The baby's mother says he is "meditating", and that she was told he would be able to tell the future, like Nostradamus. Little Merced, looking for insight into her future, stares into the baby's eyes.

Little Nostradamus – A black column with no words.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the breaking down of narration into columns, rather than paragraphs. On a visual level, this narrative choice suggests that the experiences of the characters, often of the same event, are taking place in parallel, in the same circumstance, but with different reactions or interpretations. This simultaneous experience, for the reader, of separation and unity is a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in interconnectedness, showing how possible it is to remain both separate and together.

Other important points to note include the presence of Federico's sickle, an object which has several metaphoric values: as a symbol of the harvest (i.e. sickles are traditionally used to cut grain); as a symbol of the ancient Roman god Saturn (who, throughout history, has been portrayed as carrying one); and as a symbol of death. There are also introductions of secondary protagonists (Little Merced); significant supporting characters (the Baby Nostradamus and his mother), characters glimpsed now and who reappear later (Santos); and one of the very few characters in the book who appear once but don't appear again (the Loteria Caller). While the relative significance of these characters varies, they still play key roles in the development of the theme of interconnectedness. Other themes introduced here include that of sadness and love (manifested primarily in the character of Federico, whose struggle to overcome his sadness continues throughout the novel and defines much of not only his journey, but those of other characters); the need for freedom (manifested in the journey of Federico and Little Merced, which can be seen as part of their struggle to be free of both Federico's sadness and the memory of Merced); and addiction.

As always with this novel, virtually everything that appears is a foreshadowing of future appearances in the work. The most significant foreshadowings here include the references to the limes (which eventually play a key role in a character's death later in the narrative); the appearance of the Baby Nostradamus (whose relationship with Little Merced plays a fundamental role in the latter character's later story); the reference to Federico feeling a force looking down on him (which recurs for both him and other characters later in the narrative and eventually drives much of the action); and the brief appearance of Santos (whose appearance here foreshadows his appearance in another wrestling match later in the book).



Some definitions: “Nostradamus” was, among other things, a prophet and “seer” who lived in France in the 1500’s. Opinion is divided about him and his prophecies: some claim that what appears to be remarkable accuracy is, in fact, the result of mis-translation and manipulation; others claim that his abilities to see and communicate the future were remarkable, and genuine, psychic gifts. Then: “loteria”, as described in the narrative, seems to have a great deal in common with the popular game “bingo” which, unlike the loteria (in which participants cover up pictures), players cover up letters. Finally, the term Saturn, which has a trio of meanings relevant to the novel. The first: “Saturn” is the second largest planet in earth’s solar system, notable for its complex series of orbiting rings. The second: “Saturn” was the Roman name for the Ancient Greek god Cronus, a Titan and father of the god Jupiter who, in his turn, became the king of the gods. The god Saturn was known for both killing his father and inheriting his heavenly power, and also for consuming his children so that he, in turn, would not face the same fate. There is the sense here that the Saturn, as referred to throughout the novel, is himself a god-like figure, watchful, powerful, and controlling: later, however, the true nature of Saturn is revealed, and while certain aspects of the god-identity are accurate, there are also more humanizing elements that define him as something less of a monster than the initial implications of his name might suggest.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the significance of Saturn’s narration being the only one in this chapter not in first person?

Discussion Question 2

Given that a sickle is associated with the so-called “grim reaper” (i.e. death), what do you think the reference to Federico owning a sickle might mean later in the narrative? What does it suggest about Federico?

Discussion Question 3

How does the novel’s thematic interest in addiction manifest in this section?

Vocabulary

conjugal, ferment, chafe, adobe, porcelain, premature, benign, meander, soothsayer, parchment, retina



Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 2

Summary

Pages 24 – 31, The narrative style of the previous section continues: vertical columns, with Saturn narration in third person, all the others in first.

Saturn – Narration describes what Federico and Little Merced ate on their five day bus trip to Tijuana; how Federico discovered some lime shells under his seat but thought they had been left behind by a previous passenger; and how Little Merced, before they got off the bus, embraced a woman who Little Merced says is made of paper.

Little Merced – Little Merced makes friends with the woman made of paper who, Merced says, was never given a name. Merced names her Merced de Papel, and learns that the woman is going to Los Angeles too, because it was “the last refuge for those who had lost their civilization and were afraid of the rain.”

Merced de Papel – Merced de Papel recalls how she left Antonio “passed out” on the factory floor, how she made her way to Guadalajara, and got on the bus to Tijuana. She describes making friends with a little girl who gave her a name and told her “a baby Nostradamus” was also riding the bus. De Papel looks back and sees a “retarded” baby.

Saturn – Federico reflects on how the man-made city is so different from the natural environment of his home. Federico feels himself being watched from above. Federico then follows a tortoise into a repair shop; sees that the shop constructs large lead tortoise shells, and asks to look inside one. Narration comments on how Federico feels safe inside it.

Little Merced – Little Merced learns that Federico wants to stay in the lead shell. She talks to one of the mechanics, who says that Federico can stay, and then reads to her from Nostradamus. He sends her to buy some supplies, and in addition to buying what he wants (including supplies for a fire) she buys some limes and keeps them hidden in her blouse. Narration reveals that the turtle Federico followed was a robot.

Mechanic – The mechanic, in the precise language of an engineer, describes his practice of repairing mechanical turtles; describes his conversation with Little Merced, referring to how he feels watched from above; and how, while Little Merced was gone, Federico came out of the lead shell, prayed, and then crawled back in.

Saturn – Outside the shell, Federico reflects on his state of sadness, and then returns to the shell.

Little Merced – As Little Merced eats a lime, a group of “Glue Sniffers” arrives. Little Merced describes how Federico told her that the Glue Sniffers, as a group, used to be a tribe of Indians that worked leather, but “they became sad and stopped pounding and



stitching leather and sniffed glue instead.” Two of the Glue Sniffers go into the shell and talk to Federico.

Glue Sniffer – An unnamed Glue Sniffer describes his encounter with Federico, including Federico’s reference to having lived in a land where turtles were made of flesh, not metal. The Glue Sniffer describes how his own cure for sadness (sniffing glue) was replaced, as the result of Federico’s teaching, by self-burning, a technique that, when practiced, led the Glue Sniffer to get rid of his glue.

Saturn – Narration describes how the planet Saturn hung directly over Federico, but withdrew only when he was safe in the lead shell.

Little Merced – Little Merced describes how her father eventually comes out of the lead shell, cleans himself up (saying he feels lighter), and prepares to move on. They arrive at a white chalk border, and after checking that they’re alone, cross into “a world built on cement.”

Analysis

Important points to note include the reappearance of the paper woman from the Prologue (now given a name and an identity: as might be expected, “papel” is Spanish for “paper,” meaning that her name translates into Merced of Paper); the appearance of The Mechanic (a character who appears later and whose formal and intellectual language is different, perhaps surprisingly, from that of other characters); and the further reference to Federico’s sense of being watched by someone from above. The meaning of this becomes at least partially more clear with reference to the planet Saturn at the end of the chapter, a reference that is indirectly linked to the narrator Saturn. The nature and function of that link becomes even clearer, and more actively engaged with Federico’s story, later in the narrative. Finally, there are the references to the mechanical tortoise (one such tortoise appears as a significant “character” later in the story) and to the sheltering properties of lead. This last plays an even more significant part in the action later on, as Federico takes the lessons he learns about safety in lead that he learns here and applies them to what he sees as other unsafe situations later on.

Themes developed in this section include new references to addiction (i.e. with the introduction of The Glue Sniffer, glue sniffing being a common form of addiction, and the references to Little Merced’s lime-eating), to sadness (here, as always throughout the book, a defining state for Federico that he is desperate to escape); and, somewhat indirectly, the need for freedom. This manifests in Federico’s disappearance into the lead shells which, for him, seems to bring a sense of freedom and safety from the watcher overhead.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you think narration makes such a point of Saturn feeling safe within the lead shell?

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of interconnectedness developed in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the reference to the kind of people attracted to Los Angeles? Which characters (and there are more than one) might it be referring to?

Vocabulary

rankle, vestige, metallic, density, bayonet, quatrain, calibrate, configuration, infringe, sprocket, ominous, adhesive, combustion, guava, chaparral



Part 1, Chapters 2 and 3

Summary

Chapter 2 - In first person narration, Little Merced describes how she and her father made their new home in a town called El Monte, a short drive from the home of actress Rita Hayworth and where Federico got work picking flowers. This narration sets the time of the story in the mid-1940's. Little Merced describes how the town was full of members of a union that was like a gang (El Monte Flores, or EMF). Little Merced watched the initiation by fistfight of a new member (Froggy) during which Froggy spat blood and rose petals.

Little Merced shared through narration how, on occasion, her father became thoughtful as he reminisced about Merced. She also describes her continuing habit of eating limes, their seeds creating a small orchard; and how, one day, she came home from school to find the lime tree in their back yard cut down.

Chapter 3 – This chapter consists of a series of short, third person narratives about a series of characters.

Froggy El Veterano – “Many years after the Saturn War and in the unwritten afterward of this book,” Froggy lives to be an old man, happily married but treated disrespectfully by “men clad in beige uniforms.”

Margarita – Narration describes how movie star Rita Hayworth was born with the name Margarita. She tried to grow plum trees, but was unsuccessful at growing anything but sour, bitter fruit. Narration says no-one hated Rita for that or for having her picture painted on an atomic bomb.

Julieta – A girl named Julieta triggers a local disintegration of land, stone, and steel (in the community of El Derramadero) by crumbling “a cube of chicken bouillon into a cup of boiling water.”

Froggy El Veterano – In the aftermath of the attack from the men in beige, Froggy cleans up, narration describing how he still has, on his walls, battle plans drawn up by Federico for a life-or-death battle against Saturn.

Margarita – Narration describes how Margarita (Rita Hayworth) got a reputation for being promiscuous. Her movies began to be shown in Mexico, and her appearances on the screen were ridiculed.

Julieta – The destruction of El Derramadero continues. Julieta discovers that plastic is not affected by what's going on, and soon the town's citizens are acquiring and making plastic, and reshaping their town. Julieta, however, doesn't want “to live in a town made from melted plastic.”



Froggy El Veterano – Narration describes how El Monte and EMF have both changed since the days of Federico’s rebellion against Saturn who, narration comments, only wanted to watch and observe. Because of Federico’s obsession with feeling watched, however, he led a rebellion against Saturn that, in turn, led EMF to become violent and spill blood, not flower petals.

Rita – Narration describes the physical transformation Margarita underwent to become Rita; how she hated the film (“Gilda”) that made her famous; and how, on her trips back to Mexico, she felt increasingly strange and sad.

Julieta – Julieta leaves her home town and her home country, seemingly carrying the curse of destruction with her; perhaps “it was just a coincidence that she found a gap in the 300-mile-long fence where the steel had corroded” She crosses the border into America.

Froggy El Veterano – Froggy gathers the members of EMF for a barbecue and a meeting, narration revealing that his wife’s name is Julieta. When he makes his presentation, using one of Federico’s plans, the members of EMF refuse to participate, saying they’re not going to fight the war against Saturn again.

Rita – After the premier of “Gilda,” a lettuce picker brags about having sex with Rita even though it never happened.

Julieta – Narration describes how Julieta arrived in El Monte, met Froggy while working, and got together with him even though she told him about her relationship with decay and even though his house was filled with debris from his relationship with a woman named Sandra.

Analysis

Chapter 2 introduces a major character (Froggy) and of a real-world character whose life is the subject of narration and/or speculation (Rita Hayworth, a world-famous movie star of the mid-twentieth Century). Other important characters introduced in this section include: Julieta and the EMF (both of whom play key roles in subsequent sections / chapters of the narrative); the reference to the character of Sandra (who also plays a significant role in the story); and the reference to lettuce pickers (working class people from Mexico who, for some reason, carry a particular grudge against Margarita / Rita: perhaps a resentment of her having gotten away from a life that they are still forced to live).

Of particular note here is the reference to Froggy, in the aftermath of his initiation, spitting both blood and flower petals: he might be expected to spit out the former, but probably not the latter. This is an example of a type / style of writing that pervades the novel from its very beginnings: the idea of “magic realism”, in which magic (such as spitting flower petals, or people made of living paper) is accepted by the characters, and the world in which they live, as being part of everyday life. “Magic realism” is a form of writing particularly popular with, and frequently practiced by, writers of Latino / Spanish



heritage, of which the author of this novel is one. The style adds elements of fantasy and mystery to a narrative: with no set definition of what is “real” and what isn’t, a reader working through a piece written in this style will arguably be in a constant state of suspense not only about what is going to happen next, but HOW it’s going to happen.

Themes developed in this section include the need for freedom (explored in the stories of Margarita and Julieta), addiction (again manifested in Little Merced’s desire for limes); and the fragility of life (manifested in the story of what happens to El Derramadero, which translates into “spillway,” a manmade conduit for water overflowing from a dam). Finally, amidst all the other foreshadowings in the piece (remembering that virtually every reference to character, situation, etc. is a reference to a future reappearance of same), one is particularly important: the reference to Federico’s war, an aspect of the narrative that takes up a great deal of story time later in the book.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of interconnectedness developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What other examples of “magic realism” appear in this chapter? What about in previous chapters?

Discussion Question 3

In what way does the reference to Sandra evoke the theme of sadness and lost love?

Vocabulary

fluorescent, furrow, potpourri, mescal, menudo, acidity, mimeograph, dilute, endurance, pasteurization, enuresis, sapling, martial, curdle, denouement, dilute, equilibrium, injunction, celluloid, solicit, etiquette, lucid, barrage, projective, celestial, cartilage, linguist, dementia, gazebo, oppressive, corrode, formality, haphazard



Part 1, Chapter 4

Summary

This chapter is again written in the character-by-character, column-by-column style of Chapter 1. Saturn's chapters are all written in third person: all the others are written in first person.

Saturn – After dreaming of Merced, Federico wakes to find himself having wet the bed again. He feels the weight of something from above, so he goes out and looks into the sky. He sees and feels Saturn looking down at him, acknowledging his “implicit declaration of war.” In order to keep from dreaming again and wetting the bed again, Federico forces himself to stay awake.

Little Merced – The next night, Froggy and other men come (Froggy and Federico being the only ones who aren't tattooed with “EMF”). Froggy wins the nightly dominoes game and gives Little Merced two folded dollar bills.

Froggy – Froggy reveals that in the folded dollar bills, he hid a switchblade. He then describes how Federico showed him and the others at the domino party the first of his plans to combat Saturn.

Saturn – After the meeting, a fungus from carnation stems spreads quickly through the town, killing several young members of the EMF in spite of everyone's best efforts at cleanliness. Federico begins recruiting young women into the EMF, including one named Sandra, who is fleeing an abusive father and who tattoos EMF onto Froggy's neck.

Little Merced – Little Merced describes her successful battle with the fungus; how different from the other members of the EMF Sandra is; and how Sandra and Froggy once came back from the fields bloody.

Sandra – Sandra's violent father finds her at Froggy's and attacks her. Froggy kills him, and he and Sandra bury him in one of the fields, getting spattered with his blood. Sandra moves out of Froggy's, unable to live with the man who killed her father.

Saturn – The war against Saturn begins. Separate columns under the same heading describe two fronts for the battle: one led by Froggy, with Little Merced on his lap, at the head of a convoy of trucks into Tijuana (where Margarita / Rita danced) to get supplies; and the other led by Sandra, who tended a smoky fire designed to hide the others from Saturn's gaze.

Little Merced – Federico and Froggy gather supplies, including mechanical tortoise shells. After collecting what they can, Froggy's convoy moves on.



Mechanic – The mechanic who helped Federico and Little Merced before describes his determination, triggered by a verse from Nostradamus, to be wary of “the strength of machines” (i.e. mechanical tortoises, which he – the Mechanic - invented).

Saturn – Again in two columns, the two fronts of the Saturn war are described. In one, narration describes a successful search for metal turtle shells, and an encounter with a burn-marked mother of a slobbering baby. In the other column, Saturn pushes through the smoke triggered by Sandra’s fires, but only enough to hear parts of what she’s saying.

Little Merced – As Federico, Froggy, and the woman’s husband (an exiled mechanic capable of building shells) talk, Little Merced talks to the woman, Maricela, who explains that she is a Burn Collector: she burns stars onto herself using the red-hot end of a star-shaped screwdriver.

Maricela – Maricela describes how her husband (the mechanic), Ignacio, is not the man (Tacho) that she wants to be with, but comments that Ignacio takes care of her and doesn’t mind her being a Burn Collector.

Saturn – Again, there are two columns for narration to describe the war. In the first, there is a description of the large number of empty shells in the mechanic’s yard. In the second, there is a description of the fading of Sandra’s fire.

Little Merced – As Federico and Froggy are loading Froggy’s truck, Little Merced realizes that Maricela is the mother of Little Nostradamus. Maricela tells her fortune, and Little Merced has a vision first of the home she and Federico left, and then of her mother enjoying a new life with another man. She angrily cuts the vision off and rejoins her father and Froggy.

Baby Nostradamus – Another solid black column.

Saturn – Two more columns begin this section. In the first column, Froggy and his convoy return to El Monte. In the second column, Sandra watches and waits: when she sees Froggy’s truck, she rekindles the fire. Text then joins into one column: the convoy hurries towards El Monte as the smoke from Sandra’s fire spreads. Federico tries to tell Sandra to sleep, but he is unintelligible.

Little Merced – Little Merced discovers that her father has set up a pair of roosters in preparation for a cockfight. Federico then shows Froggy and other members of the EMF how to milk goats in preparation to run its own dairy farm and, as such, finance the war against Saturn. All they need, Little Merced adds, is more shells.

Analysis

It could be argued that with this section, the novel’s actual plot gets into motion: specifically, Federico’s war against Saturn. It has been foreshadowed in several ways (perhaps most notably, in the references in previous sections to Froggy’s memories and



artifacts from that war) and now starts to anchor the forward movement of the narrative. Other columns, other narrations, and other events, are tied directly or indirectly to the war: in previous chapters, there were more peripheral events and characters than there are here – at least, after the war actually begins. Up to this point, there are still diversions and secondary elements: the story of Froggy, Sandra, and Sandra's father; the story of the fungus (which can be seen as a metaphoric parallel to the “infection” of Saturn's omnipresence that “sickens” the town); and the story of Maricela. Granted, Little Merced encounters the latter as a result of her father's search for supplies for his war, but the exploration of Maricela's background and nature takes on an identity, a relevance, and a resonance more its own.

Meanwhile, themes developed in this section include the theme about sadness and loss (returning here alongside the return of Federico's bed wetting problem) and the addiction theme (which can be seen as manifesting in Maricela's story of being a Burn Collector – like the Glue Sniffers, the experiences and desires of Burn Collectors echo the experiences of real world addicts).

The passing, and somewhat unexpected, reference to Rita Hayworth, a famous actress in real life, creates a link between the real world and the fictional world of the book.

Also to note in this section is the reshaping of the stylistic choice to present the narrative in columns. Again, as noted before, this stylistic choice suggests to the reader that the action described in the columns is taking place in parallel with each other. It's also worth noting a particular style of column, the block of black ink that represents the narrative line of Baby Nostradamus. Here, as elsewhere in the book, there is a particular meaning associated with this black block, a meaning that emerges later in the narrative as the relationship between the Baby and Little Merced, reintroduced here, deepens.

Discussion Question 1

How is the book's thematic interest in the need for freedom developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Little Merced have the reaction she does to Maricela's vision / prophecy?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the metaphoric significance of the story of the death of Sandra's father? What aspect of the novel might it be seen as relating to or symbolically illustrating?

Vocabulary

implicit, roughage, perpetual, alleviate, emanate, schematic, pumice, crevasse, carapace, aviation, jurisdiction, cumulus, tributary, incidental, infidelity



Part 1, Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

Chapter 5 - This chapter is written in first person narration from Froggy's point of view. In an attempt to repair his relationship with Sandra, Froggy visits a curandero, or doctor of folk medicine, named Apolonio. Nothing he suggests helps, but Froggy takes home a songbird to keep him company. As he describes his new life, Froggy reflects on how much help Federico has been, mostly because he knows what it's like to be left by a woman. Nevertheless, Froggy longs to meet someone else. One day, back at work for the first time in weeks, he encounters a beautiful woman who, it turns out, is Julieta. He describes the story she tells him about her origins (i.e. being from a town where everything decayed and fell apart), how he took her home and they made love, breaking the bedframe for reasons that had nothing to do with decay, and how the bird continued to sing.

Chapter 6 – This chapter is written in short, third-person paragraphs written from the points of view of different characters.

Ramon Barreto – Ramon was once the lover of Merced de Papel. Narration describes how he gave his tongue a semi-permanent, frequently bleeding paper cut while trying to perform oral sex on her; how he became glad when she left (i.e. not having to worry about crumpling her or damaging her); and how he continued to miss her in spite of his gladness.

Apolonio – Narration describes how Apolonio discovered his abilities while taking care of his ill mother, troubled by recurring visions of the Virgin. Narration comments that in many ways, he came to his knowledge and practice in the same way as other curandero's, with one exception – his knowledge of Oaxacan songbirds (i.e. the type of bird he gave to Froggy).

Santos – This is the wrestler from Chapter 1, revealed by narration to be a saint. He passes all the qualifying tests, his name revealed to be Juan Meza, and ordered to report to a cathedral to start his new life. He ducks out of the appointment, however, and travels to Tijuana.

Ramon Barreto – Narration describes how Ramon left his homeland and made a life and career for himself in Hollywood. He fell in love with Merced de Papel, but was glad to leave her, because her fragility reminded him of his hometown, El Derramadero, which was crumbling.

Apolonio – In the aftermath of his mother's death (as the result of being burned to death by a fire set by the visiting Virgin's halo), Apolonio sinks into a deep, unshakable grief. Meanwhile, a flock of Oaxacan songbirds is caught in a cloud of toxic smoke and mostly killed. One of them, however, falls through a hole in the ceiling left by the fiery death of



Apolonio's mother and lands on her charred bed. Over time, the bird recovers its voice and ability to fly, helping Apolonio recover from his grief.

Santos – For a while, Santos enjoys the freedom of being unknown in Tijuana, but he decides to fight in one more wrestling match. He makes the arrangements, including making sure his fee goes to a shrine of the Holy Virgin. On the night of the fight, Santos is shocked to discover his opponent is his former partner – Tiger Mask.

Ramon Barreto – Ramon, who has kept bits of Merced de Papel in a jar, meets a flesh and blood woman named Karen and enjoys having sex with her without any danger of papercuts.

Apolonio - Apolonio develops a deep affection for / connection with the bird, named Pio-Pio. After narration comments that Apolonio kept the cause of his mother's death quiet out of fear that the Vatican would take over both her life and her death, it also describes his discovery of the eggs laid by the bird.

Santos – Santos tells Tiger Mask (whose real name, in Japanese, is Saturo), that the match can end quickly. Neither fighter backs down. In the fourth round, Tiger Mask drops Santos to the floor, which has no spring or give, breaking Santos' back. As Santos dies, "a splintered black cross appeared on every poster and souvenir that bore his face."

Ramon Barreto – While Ramon and Karen enjoy a night out in Los Angeles, moths invade Ramon's home, eating their way through almost everything, including the scraps of Merced de Papel. Narration reveals that Ramon had inadvertently put fertilized moth eggs in the jar with those scraps.

Apolonio – Apolonio goes out to visit a client, leaving Pio-Pio with her newly hatched eggs. The Virgin, not knowing that Apolonio's mother has already died, comes back for a visit, and accidentally sets fire to the house. The fire is put out before Apolonio gets home. He takes the birds and leaves Mexico for California.

Santos – The auditorium where Santos died soon empties. His body is left uncared for, his blood draining out and mixing with that of roosters killed in cockfights.

Analysis

Chapter 5 introduces a new character, Apolonio, who becomes increasingly important to the story as the narrative develops.

Chapter 5 also notably slips into the past, specifically, with its description of the end of Froggy's relationship with Sandra.

The content of Chapter 5 as a whole is a clear and vivid manifestation of the novel's thematic interests in both sadness (i.e. through the creation of an echo / parallel between the experiences of Froggy and Federico) and the interconnectedness of life



(i.e. that same parallel, and also the development of Froggy's relationship with the fleeing Julieta). The theme of interconnectedness also manifests, later in this section, in the connection between Ramon and Julieta (i.e. their shared hometown and reasons for leaving it, also an echo of the book's thematic interest in the need for freedom). There are also further explorations of the theme of sadness, manifest in Ramon's feelings in the aftermath of Merced de Papel's departure, albeit feelings different handled from those of Federico and Froggy, who share a similar experience.

Chapter 6, meanwhile, also introduces a new character (Ramon), albeit one whose story is of less overall significance to the story as a whole, but whose brief story is nevertheless thematically important. This chapter also brings in a passing reference to another previously seen character - Merced de Papel (whose active sex life might be somewhat surprising to the reader, and simultaneously foreshadows later references to how far reaching that life actually is); and, perhaps unexpectedly, brings back yet another character. This is the wrestler Santos, whose story, as revealed here, has much more depth than his initial appearance suggested.

Like Merced de Papel's sexuality, Santos' sainthood is unexpected, even in a narrative style where the unexpected (in the guise of "magic realism") seems to specialize in exploring and defining reality in unexpected ways. Worthy of particular note, in relation to Santos and his story, is the detail about the black crosses. In the tradition of sainthood, people who fall into that category do so partly as a result of miracles associated with them: in that context, the appearance of the crosses can be seen as a miracle associated with Santos, a miracle that suggests he was, in fact, a truly saintly individual whose life (and death) were touched by God. There are also miracle-like aspects in the experiences of Apolonio and his mother (killed as the result of a visitation from the Virgin Mary), notable here for Apolonio's apparent, and firm determination that his mother not be treated / seen as a saint. All these foreshadows saint-like events in the life (death?) of an important character later in the story.

Discussion Question 1

How do events in this section manifest / dramatize the novel's thematic commentary on the fragility of life?

Discussion Question 2

What are the parallels between the story of Ramon Baretto and Merced de Papel and other narrative elements in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the real name of Santos' rival, Tiger Mask?



Vocabulary

residual, sterile, formality, logistic, canonize, revoke, ailment, progenitor, retina, perpetual, alleviate, visitation, apparition, placebo, heretic, stigmata, celibate, estranged, melancholia, pestilence, injunction, alchemy, concoction, concerto, cadenza, alleviate, acrid, pliancy, notorious, indiscriminate, impropriety, aphrodisiac, amputate, regurgitate



Part 1, Chapter 7

Summary

This chapter is again written in a series of columns. The Saturn columns are in third person: the other columns are in first person.

Saturn – From a vantage point above El Monte, Saturn watches as the people of the town go about their business. He then descends into the home of Federico and Little Merced: he sees the latter sleeping, and the former again combating sadness with fire and pain. He watches as Federico pulls out “two slabs of lead from the shell of a tortoise.”

Little Merced – Little Merced wakes up to find her bed and room littered with debris left behind by what she believes to have been Saturn passing through. She refers to being cut by Saturn later, blood on her shorts and sheets. When she tells Federico, he laughs, tells her not to worry, and calls Sandra.

Sandra – Sandra visits Little Merced, and realizes (as Federico seems to have done) that she has begun to menstruate. She teaches Little Merced how to keep herself clean, and then goes. As she passes Froggy’s house, she realizes how much she wishes she could apologize and things could go back to how they were. Then, she says, “there would be no reason to write this war.”

Saturn – Federico cuts and shapes the shell of one metal tortoise, unaware that another has escaped. Underneath the lead, there are drawings and diagrams of battle plans, but Saturn cannot see them.

Little Merced – Little Merced describes the community’s plans for the ongoing war against Saturn, expelling him “from a quiet and clear sky, not one shattered by violence.” Part of those plans include calculations of potential loss of life by a man named Smiley.

Smiley – Smiley describes how he came to work with EMF after a career dealing cocaine, commenting that he came from a tribe that invented “the marks for nothingness and everythingness.” He describes being challenged by Federico to fight Saturn, but comments that he (Smiley) felt differently about Saturn’s presence.

Saturn – Saturn uses pieces of lead tortoise shell to create a lead barrier within Little Merced’s bed so that “no-one, not even Saturn, could see into the leaden room of Little Merced.”

Little Merced – The activities of Federico and EMF take place in Little Merced’s lead-lined bedroom until Federico manages to lead-line the entire house. He talks about lining every home in El Monte with lead, in order to keep Saturn from watching and



listening too much. There are also references to people thinking inoffensive thoughts in order to prevent Saturn from knowing what they're truly thinking.

Elote Man – The elote man (a local traveling salesman) describes encountering the “foreman” of a construction job that was contained within the walls of a home. He also describes going into another, nearby city named Arcadia.

Saturn – Soon everybody in the town, including Froggy (who spends most of his time listening to his bird) has a lead-lined home, and when outside of their homes, are talking about superficial, everyday things.

Little Merced – This chapter consists of a description of the flower fields: the flowers, the scent of fertilizer, and plant food being given to the plants.

Pelon – An EMF member named Pelon thinks a looping string of unimportant thoughts as his home is being lead-lined.

Saturn – Poetic narration describes how Saturn's attention is diverted from the people of El Monte to the flowers that are grown in the nearby fields.

Little Merced – The process of spraying insecticide is described.

Sandra – Sandra describes the pleasures of the six-day rainy season, and describes how Froggy got his nickname: when he was little, he was like a tadpole, swimming in puddles left behind by the rain. He then grew up into the nickname of Froggy.

Saturn – Narration is filled with descriptions of houses, work boots, and clay roofs damaged by rain.

Little Merced – She watches planes pass, and then goes inside.

Smiley – Federico tells Smiley that Merced, his wife, was taken by Saturn, and that the war is being fought to protect other wives, and also children. Smiley wonders whether Saturn, in fact, might be watching protectively.

Saturn – The mechanical tortoise that escaped from Federico makes its way out of the city, but pauses for a while and withdraws into its shell. Saturn also withdraws, unnoticed by Federico and the others.

Little Merced – A blank column, indicating no thought, or silence.

Mechanical Tortoise – A column of zeros and ones: computer code language.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the shift in the character of Saturn: for the first time, the character seems to have an actual presence, active if not physical. The



description of his journey through the home of Federico and Little Merced, and eventually through the town, foreshadows revelations in the following section of who exactly he is.

Another new character, Smiley, is introduced. On the relative scale of character importance, Smiley turns out to be less important than Apolonio but more important than Santos, and who, here and later in the narrative, adds an important and intriguing counterpoint to Federico's obsession with Saturn.

The author again mixes magical realism with the real world readers are familiar with through exploration of the onset of Little Merced's menstrual cycle. While the blood on Little Merced and in her bed is initially perceived (by both the character and the reader) as being part of the novel's stylistic emphasis on magic realism, turns out to be something all-too real-world in origins.

A significant plot development in this section is all the action taken by various characters to keep Saturn out of their thoughts and lives as much as possible. The town decides to line all of their homes with lead, which will have important, plot-defining consequences later in the narrative. The sections of narration focusing on Little Merced can be seen as reflecting her, and her father's, intention that Saturn not be allowed access to their real thoughts (which, in turn, foreshadows further actions taken by Little Merced in order to achieve this goal). The simplistic and banal thoughts reported in the columns of Pelon and Sandra are also reported with their intention of keeping Saturn confused and/or uninformed.

An interesting choice by the author is to include the "thoughts" of the mechanical tortoise. While the reader's initial reaction to the interpolation of the tortoise's "thoughts" might be one of amusement, later in the story, narration describes the tortoise's actions in such a way that suggests there is more significant metaphoric value to his inclusion that might be initially perceivable.

Finally, themes explored in this section include the novel's interest in interconnectedness (which shows up in the glance at the Elote Man, another of the few characters in the book who reappears rarely, if at all); and the reference to the sky in Little Merced's thoughts about the battle with Saturn, which can be seen as foreshadowing important elements of Part 3, including its subtitle and the fact that in that section, the sky actually does fall.

Discussion Question 1

How does the "need for freedom" theme manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What elements of this story might be described / defined as falling within the definition of "magic realism"?



Discussion Question 3

This section marks the end of the first part of the novel. Given what you know, at this point, of the characters and their situations, what do you think might happen in the following section?

Vocabulary

asbestos, pummel, solidarity, arnica, silhouette, schematic, emancipation, extrapolate, increment, impenetrable, foliage, rectory, meteorologist



Part 2, “Cloudy Skies and Lonely Mornings”, Chapters 8 and 9

Summary

Chapter 8 – This chapter is narrated from the first person point of view of Smiley, who describes himself as rejecting everything Federico is saying; as wanting to fight on Saturn’s side, even though it would mean the destruction of the planet; and how aware he is “of [his] own place in this novel.” For all those reasons, Smiley goes to visit Apolonio, who tells him that he learned about Saturn’s identity from a monk who abandoned his wandering brothers, but who later wrote a profound apology – “The Book of Incandescent Light.” Apolonio goes on to say that Saturn is simply the pseudonym of Salvador Plascencia (the author’s name). Smiley resolves to find Plascencia / Saturn, pays Apolonio (who draws him a map), goes on a long journey, and eventually arrives at a place where a hole in the sky has been patched. He reopens the hole, climbs through, and finds himself in Plascencia’s home, where he expects to find the author in a particular state of being, but in fact finds him depressed and slovenly. The two eventually talk, and Plascencia / Saturn tells Smiley that he (Plascencia/Saturn) has given up watching the goings on of the EMF and, in fact, given up control of his story. For his part, Smiley decides to not follow the instructions given to him and the other members of the EMF as to what to do if they ever encounter Saturn: he has overheard a telephone conversation, realized that Plascencia / Saturn is in the middle of a relationship breakup, and decided that enemies in that situation deserve respect. Smiley then watches as Plascencia/Saturn goes to bed.

Chapter 9 – This chapter is written in a series of paragraphs from different points of view.

Saturn – In spite of the advice of his great-grandfather, Don Victoriano, to not become involved with a particular sort of woman, Saturn does. He worries about the relationship lasting, in spite of the assurances of his partner (Liz, whose name is included in the novel’s dedication), but eventually the relationship does end in spite of his best efforts and on the same day that Federico started lead-lining his house. The break-up is metaphorically likened to a complete breakdown of communication systems. Saturn leaves the scene of his battle and travels to El Monte.

Ralph and Elisa Landin – Narration poetically describes Ralph Landin as having survived World War II, and adds that once he heard about Saturn’s war with EMF, he decided to help. His wife Elisa agrees.

Don Victoriano – The strength and durability of Saturn’s great-grandfather is discussed, along with his family tree, which includes “the first origami surgeon” and “a novelist.” Narration describes how, on his 100th birthday, he told the people who wanted to interview him that they should talk to his wife, who had been dead for 33 years.



Saturn – When Saturn arrives in “this” El Monte, not Federico’s, he is overcome with sadness. He goes around the town scratching out any references to EMF that might have been painted on any of the town’s walls. Narration then describes the parallels between Liz starting a new life in Los Angeles with another man and Merced’s affair, conducted through a small opening in her kitchen wall, that grew bigger and eventually led to her departure. Narration describes Saturn’s eventual encounter with Liz, in which she tells him about her new man (but doesn’t reference the fact that he is white) and in which he weeps heavily and is unable to leave until Liz forces him to go.

Ralph and Elisa Landin – Accountants and lawyers go through the story of Saturn’s war, totaling the amount of sadness and making arrangements to protect the Landins. Their money is then released, on the condition that a disclaimer appear clarifying that they are not responsible for the views expressed about the war.

Don Victoriano – Narration describes how Victoriano was on the receiving end of unpleasant miracles, and begged God to make them stop, which they soon did. It then describes how Victoriano’s wife died while waiting for a pair of paper lungs to be made for her by their son, Antonio.

Saturn – Saturn returns home to New York from El Monte. There, in New York, it is winter.

Ralph and Elisa Landin – The disclaimer appears.

Don Victoriano – Victoriano grieves the death of his wife for a very long time, but after a while he tells her (at her grave) that he is going to fulfill a promise he made to her to travel. Narration comments, however, that he never left: “he was afraid of dying away from his wife.”

Analysis

The first point to note about this section of the book is the introduction of a new element: the self-awareness of the characters that they are in a novel. On one level, this is another manifestation of the novel’s stylistic grounding in “magic realism” – specifically, the premise that magical things can happen in the so-called “real” world and be entirely acceptable and/or unremarkable. This includes, in this work at least, the idea that characters in a book can be aware that that’s exactly what they are. On another level, the reference in Smiley’s chapter to his awareness foreshadows the later revelation in the same chapter that Saturn is, in fact, the novel’s author, Salvador Plascencia, who seems to be writing himself into the story, interjecting what may or may not be autobiographical elements (i.e. his relationship with Liz) and, arguably, using Federico as an avatar alter ego for himself, given that the two “characters” both seem to be struggling, on some level, with issues of abandonment.

Meanwhile, Smiley’s journey to, and eventually meeting of, Saturn / Plascencia is once again a manifestation of magic realism. This action is a very intriguing meditation on the relationship between writers and their characters (and vice versa), It also lays the



groundwork for the actions and title of Section 3, in which the sky transcended by Smiley actually starts to fall apart and descend to earth. Meanwhile, Plascencia / Saturn's decision to abandon the members of the EMF to their own free will sends the novel in a very different direction, and yet again explores the character / author relationship in a new and different way.

Another key point to note includes this section's many references to both the story's past and its future, in many cases said references functioning as both echoes and foreshadowings. These include the reference to the monk (clearly the previously referenced fifty-third monk) and his book (which is referred to repeatedly from this point on). Then there are the reference to the Landins (who, it seems, may or may not be based on real-world individuals, and who recur intermittently throughout the remainder of the narrative) and the references to Don Victoriano (whose family background is an intriguing, magical blend of fiction and possible reality, in the same way as the story of Plascencia/Saturn and Liz). What's worthy of particular note, when it comes to Don Victoriano, is the emotional integrity of his relationship with his dead wife. Some would argue that his 30-year devotion (particularly his fear of dying while away from her, even though she's already dead) is obsessive, to put it mildly: on the other hand, it's clearly intended to be an element of contrast, juxtaposing Victoriano's emotional loyalty with what seems to be the unpredictable fickleness of other lovers. At this point, it seems to be worth noting that virtually all the departing partners in the story to this point – Liz, Merced, Sandra – are women.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events of this chapter reflect the novel's thematic emphasis on sadness and loss?

Discussion Question 2

What is significant about the two members of Victoriano's family tree identified here?

Discussion Question 3

Given what the novel is, at this stage, saying about the writer / character relationship, what would you say is the connection, literal or metaphoric, between Federico's lining of the house with lead and Saturn/Plascencia's breakup with Liz?

Vocabulary

luster, pliability, preliminary, apostasy, incandescent, seraphim, omniscient, proximity, etiquette, dictum, nullify, stringent, bohemian, fidelity, recessive, belated, pensive, accumulate, imminent, follicle, copulate, compulsion, annals, comply, provision, inventory, methodical, evocative, secular, proximity, heretical, resuscitate, valance



Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11

Summary

Chapter 10 - This short chapter is written in two columns. On the left: Saturn's angry narration of the destruction that happened to him when Liz left him to "fuck a white boy." On the right: Liz's short protestations. Saturn tries to win her back, but Liz says it's too late. Saturn loses his temper, but Liz reminds him of the "white girl" he was apparently with. Saturn says that happened after Liz left. Liz says she loves her new boyfriend (whose name is scratched out). Saturn starts ranting about how he'll damage her home in the way she damaged his. The black text fades into gray, and then white blankness.

Chapter 11 – This chapter contains short paragraphs about different characters.

Cameroon – Cameroon is a young woman who repeatedly stings herself with honeybees she keeps in her closet. Saturn takes care of her, and at one point attempts to destroy her honeybees, but she orders more, which are delivered by beekeepers. Meanwhile, Saturn revises the dedication to his book, changing the ways in which it refers to Liz.

Natalia – Natalia was born and raised in a warm climate. As she was getting married at 35, she asked her husband Quinones for a honeymoon in a cold climate so she could see snow. Fifty years later, they still live "on the frozen banks of the Georgian Bay."

Jonathan Mead – Jonathan, after finding his abandoned daughter after 16 years, prepares to speak with her over the phone.

Saturn – When he receives the first installment of the money from the Landins, Saturn takes Cameroon on a trip to help break her bee habit. They travel through several honeymoon resorts, the first being Niagara Falls (the so-called ninth wonder of the world). On one occasion, they gain admittance to a honeymoon hotel with a forged marriage certificate. At each location they have a great deal of sex (at first traditional and conservative, later increasingly wild). At one point, Cameroon cleans herself, talking about how she is going to wash herself clean of Saturn.

Natalia – While devoted to his wife, Quinones is also devoted to the running of their hotel (for example: checking the authenticity of marriage certificates) and to the lifelong task of refuting the teachings and principles of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte who, among other things, claimed that love was "hurtful to the world, and to the individual happiness of men." Natalia joins him in his rebuttals, but in more subtle ways.

Jonathan Mead – Mead repeatedly practices, and fails at, his attempts to communicate with his daughter.

Cameroon – Cameroon and Saturn are evicted from their honeymoon hotel because of their forged marriage certificate. As they drive away, they and their car are immobilized



by snow. After they are freed, they continue driving, conversation revealing that Cameroon uses both the honeybees and sex to help her counter the sadness in her. In Philadelphia, she gets a new supply of bees, so she can keep being stung.

Natalia – Narration describes the three times that Quinones and Natalia evicted couples with forged marriage certificates, the third being that of Saturn and Cameroon (who, narration comments, arrived with a halo over her head).

Jonathan Mead – Jonathan fails to reach his daughter, narration revealing that three days before he called, his daughter had left for the ninth wonder of the world.

Cameroon – While Cameroon sleeps, Saturn injects himself with the venom from one of her bees. Immediately, he forgets Federico, Cameroon, and Liz, and feels very, very good.

Analysis

The intriguingly designed Chapter 10 is, essentially, a transcription of a conversation between Saturn/Plascencio and Liz, with the disappearance of the ink in the words serving as an effective visualization of the slow slide into silence not only of the conversation, but of the relationship as a whole.

Chapter 11, meanwhile, introduces a new character (Cameroon), a new situation (her relationship with honeybees and the poison in their stingers) that has echoes of other situations in the book (i.e. Federico's self-burning) because of her use of the bees to numb her pain in the same way as Federico's burning of himself with the sickle helps him cope with his sadness. What's interesting to note is that the novel never explicitly identifies the reasons for Cameroon's pain / sadness, although it does offer hints, the most apparent emerging late in this section.

Other new characters introduced in this section include Jonathan Mead (who, later in the book, is revealed to have a relationship, significant on a couple of key levels, with one of the book's major characters), as well as Natalia and Quinones. The latter doesn't get a section of his own here, but does later in the narrative. Their presence is interesting on a couple of levels: they have one of the few successful male/female romantic relationships in the book, but ironically are supportive of other such relationships as long as they exist within very limited parameters. Finally, there is the reference to Napoleon Bonaparte, the real-world emperor of France whose habits of both life and battle thread their way through the remainder of the narrative, providing echoes in the stories of life / battle experienced by other characters.

Themes developed in this section include sadness and lost love (apparent in the character of Jonathan Mead); interconnectedness (apparent in the implied connections between Natalia / Quinones and Saturn/Cameroon); and addiction.



Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of addiction developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Given that the narrative is setting up parallels between the real-world experience of Saturn / Plascencia and Federico, what would you say is the Federico parallel to the Saturn/Cameroon relationship?

Discussion Question 3

Do you agree or disagree with the comment made by Napoleon Bonaparte, referred to in this section, about love? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

desiccate, emanate, perpetual, reconcile, alleviate, insatiable, debilitate, precedence, impervious, reciprocate, emphatic, aphorism, replenish, proprietor, consolidate, indigenous, fraudulent, calligraphy, emanate, typographical



Part 2, Chapters 12, 13, and 14

Summary

Each of these short chapters is told from the perspective of a single character.

Chapter 12, Saturn – Narration describes Napoleon’s waste of human lives, and how the word “cunt” came into usage in France as a result of what he did.

Chapter 13, Beekeeper – In first person narration, a Beekeeper describes Cameroon as a “saint”, how he and she together sting each other with bee venom, and how she keeps a long list of lies told to her by Saturn. They also talk about “The Book of Incandescent Light”, which the Beekeeper says is beautiful and Cameroon says is “drivel.”

Chapter 14 – This chapter is written from the perspective of an unnamed character, but who is clearly Liz, who asks to be left alone, and left out of Saturn’s book (she calls him Sal, short for Salvador – the author’s name). The next page contains a single word: “cunt.” The page after that: a title page, “The People of Paper,” by Salvador Plascencia. The page also displays an image: an open left hand with a halo over it. Next: a page offering a dedication, in Spanish, to the author’s father, mother, and sister.

Analysis

These three chapters are notable for their brevity, for the way each focuses on the perspective and experiences of a single character, and for the way they again blend realities – those of character / author Saturn / Plascencia, and those of Cameroon / Liz. There is also another reference to “The Book of Incandescent Light,” a reference like, so many others in the book, refers both to what has come before (specifically: the reference to the book being written, by the fifty-third monk, as an apology) and what is to come (specifically: later references in the narrative to what the monk might be apologizing FOR, and other later references that define the relationship Cameroon has with the book).

The theme of addiction is vividly developed in this section, specifically in the suggestion by the Beekeeper that he and Cameroon “used” bees together. Sharing the act of “using” an addictive substance is a common experience among users of drugs, particularly hard drugs that require injection.

Finally, the glancing reference to sainthood (specifically: Cameroon being seen as a “saint” by the Beekeeper) echoes references to other characters being considered “saints” and, simultaneously, foreshadows events later in the story that suggest yet another character might also be considered a saint.



Discussion Question 1

How does this chapter develop the novel's theme of interconnectedness?

Discussion Question 2

Given what you know / understand at this point about the book's story, characters, and themes, why do you think the Beekeeper and Cameroon have such different points of view about "The Book of Incandescent Light"?

Discussion Question 3

What is the author suggesting by presenting what he does on the last three pages of Chapter 14?

Vocabulary

diatribe, etymology, precedent, drivel



Part 3, “The Sky is Falling”, Chapter 15

Summary

This chapter consists of a series of columns of first person narration.

Saturn – The first column in the chapter is empty: a blank page.

Little Merced – Scientific investigation proves that Saturn is gone, and there is no residue of him left in El Monte. As life in the town gets back to normal, Federico, Froggy, and Sandra continue to arm themselves and keep watch.

Julieta – Julieta finds traces of Sandra around the house she shares with Froggy, and has a particularly difficult time handling the fact that he still has the EMF tattoo Sandra gave him on his neck (the tattoo resembles the writing in “The Book of Incandescent Light”). Julieta is not comforted by Froggy’s reassurances that he no longer thinks of Sandra as anything other but a comrade in war, and finds herself licking the tattoo, in deluded hopes of cleaning it off.

Saturn – Another empty column: another blank page.

Little Merced – Little Merced comments on the secrecy of curanderos like Apolonio, whose only loyalty is to their customer(s) like her and who therefore, she adds, make no comment when she comes in to buy a sack of limes.

Froggy – Froggy reflects on how quiet things are now that he and Federico no longer have to talk about making military plans, and he refers to how free they are now to imagine or remember other possibilities from earlier in life.

Saturn – Another empty column: another blank page.

Little Merced – Little Merced uses the knife given to her by Froggy to cut up her limes, and enjoys being able to eat them outside. When she takes the rinds back to Apolonio, he shows her ways to keep Federico from suspecting what she’s been doing. He can’t, however, help heal her tongue, which is starting to lose skin as the result of so much acid (i.e. lime juice) being consumed.

Smiley – Smiley reveals that he never told Federico about his encounter with Saturn / Salvador, describing how Federico refuses to believe that Saturn was just sad.

Saturn – Saturn returns (narrative in third person). The community of El Monte panics, everyone rushing back into their lead-lined houses. Federico fires a flare gun into his bathroom sink, catching the flare in his hands, and burning himself. Smiley is the only one who remains outdoors, taking off his shirt and “exposing his belly to the sky.”



Little Merced – Little Merced completes her transaction with Apolonio, buying herself more limes, and then hurries home when she learns that Saturn has returned. She arrives just in time to see the house fill with smoke and her father emerge from the bathroom with burned hands.

Sandra – In the aftermath of Saturn’s return, weather patterns change. El Monte enters a hot drought that leads the flower company that owns the gardens outside the city to commandeer the community’s water supply and use it to water the flowers during the day. The people of El Monte quickly get used to filling all their available receptacles (buckets, etc.) at night when the flower company is gone.

Saturn – When the siren ends, the town is deserted – except for Smiley, who finally goes to bed. Saturn describes some of his dreams: Smiley killing Saturn, or Smiley and Saturn playing quiet games of dominoes.

Little Merced – Little Merced contemplates the adaptable qualities of water.

Pelon – In the aftermath of the siren sounding, Pelon (who had been in the middle of working with a tractor) reflects on the different ways of agriculture since the tractor was invented.

Saturn – Narration describes how the escaped metal tortoise, as it digs its way to freedom, moves dirt and earth in such a way that it brings El Monte and Tijuana closer together.

Little Merced – Little Merced again contemplates various aspects of water, describing how waves break in the ocean when Saturn and the moon are aligned.

Analysis

As Part 3 of the book begins, Saturn seems to be silent, and the characters inhabiting El Monte seem to return to their normal lives, at least for a while. There are several notable elements in this brief interlude of relative peace: the images of Julieta’s relationship with memories of Sandra, and tying those images to “The Book of Incandescent Light”, which foreshadow later revelations of how the book and its contents are generally known, both aspects of this section relating to the theme of sadness and lost love; Little Merced’s reference to the secrecy of curanderos in general and of Apolonio in particular relates to another of the book’s central themes. This latter reference, together with the reference to Smily’s choice to not tell Federico about his encounter with Saturn, suggest a fleeting narrative and thematic interest in the power and nature of secrets, a minor thematic development with echoes later in the story (particularly in the experiences / story of Cardinal Mahony, a character yet to be introduced).

When Saturn returns, so do other aspects of the narrative, including the masking of thoughts (most evident in the section of the chapter narrated by Pilon) and the idea of safety (developed in the hurried return of the El Monte citizens to their homes which, it



must be remembered, are still lined with lead in the hopes of masking the thoughts of the people who live there from Saturn). Here, and throughout this section, it's important to remember that Saturn is, in fact, a second name / identity for the author, Salvador Plascencia. With that in mind, it's possible to see now that the characters in the story are fighting not for privacy, but for independent lives of their own. These people of paper (i.e. the characters in the novel) are, like Merced de Papel (herself a person of paper, only literally so), determined to have lives of their own determination at whatever cost. Here it's also important to note the very brief, but very telling, description of the tortoise who, among other things, seems to be changing his relationship with the world in the same as Merced de Papel and the characters are changing the relationships of "people of paper" with those who created them, and therefore with THEIR worlds.

Finally, the description of the skin on Little Merced's tongue is an important double foreshadowing: a metaphoric one, of the shedding of the sky that takes place later in this part of the book; and a more literal one, of what eventually happens to Little Merced as the result of her eating so many limes.

Discussion Question 1

Which of the novel's themes is developed through the descriptions, in this section, of Little Merced and her limes?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think the metaphoric meaning / value is of the references in this section to water?

Discussion Question 3

How does the brief description of the digging of the mechanical tortoise develop the novel's thematic interest in interconnectedness?

Vocabulary

particulate, putrid, corrosion, allegiance, tenet, complacent, pensive, accumulate, palpitate, muzzle



Part 3, Chapters 16 through 19

Summary

This chapter takes the form of several paragraphs, in third person narration, written to focus on the experiences of different characters.

Baby Nostradamus – Narration describes how, after the baby's mother died (the circumstances are at this point undefined), the baby was sent to live with Apolonio, and was babysat by Little Merced. The baby telepathically instructed Little Merced how to think and how to block her thoughts from Saturn, a technique represented in the text by a block of black ink. Narration describes the transcendent breadth of the baby's knowledge (including his awareness of the experiences of several other characters), but how he focused his energy on tutoring Little Merced.

Merced de Papel – Narration describes how Merced de Papel writes down stories and details of her life, including her experiences with sex. Narration also describes how she repairs herself, after encounters with fire and water, with newspaper purchased from a local newsstand, although she's not as good at paper construction as Antonio. She hides her mistakes in self-reconstruction with clothing.

Smiley – Smiley resigns from the EMF, and from the war with Saturn. Federico and the others eventually forgive him, but the tattooed EMF on his neck is covered over with a block of black ink.

Baby Nostradamus – Little Merced becomes very good at blocking her thoughts: narration and illustration both refer to her initial efforts at blocking the thought of "EMF" with blackness. Eventually, she is able to block even the baby, but whispers her thoughts to him as a courtesy.

Merced de Papel – Narration describes how the different men who had sex with Merced de Papel received paper cuts from her; how she never left evidence of their presence on her body (narration describes, for example, her habit of replacing the parts of her on which men had written grocery lists); and how the men had a kind of silent fraternity, subtly licking and/or showing their cut lips to one another, "a gesture that was both a greeting and a sign of solidarity with those who had been cut by paper."

Smiley – Smiley removes the lead from his home and opens his ceilings to the sky. Narration describes him as both a mathematician and an exhibitionist.

Baby Nostradamus – The baby's breadth of knowledge includes the final phrase of the book ("And there would be no sequel to the sadness"), the fates of its characters, and the habits of its readers. He is, however, of the utmost integrity, and resolved to never reveal what he knew, except to pupils like Little Merced. He even knew the date and time of his mother's death, but said nothing.



Merced de Papel – Narration describes how Merced de Papel never stays with a man longer than a month; how she can't understand the difficulty they have in leaving her; and how she always regarded the gifts and/or communications they sent, either lovingly or bitterly, with clear dispassion, noting that their pride was “lost somewhere among the lint and car keys in their pants pockets.”

Smiley – Smiley goes through his days taking care of his plants and experimenting with mathematics. He sleeps naked beneath his open skylight, hoping Saturn will notice him and how gifted he is.

Chapter 17 – This chapter is written from the third person perspective of Saturn. He writes Cameroon a letter, telling her how much he misses her. Three weeks later, there is no reply: all he put in the address was her name. He “did not know her zip code or apartment number or the city where she had gone.”

Chapter 18 – This chapter is written from the third person perspective of Apolonio who, according to the instructions of the mother of the Baby Nostradamus, has the child baptized in the only church in which he (Apolonio) feels comfortable. This is The Church of Thieves, where members of the congregation practice theft on each other and return what has been stolen; where the Cardinal and two altar boys have a secret understanding; and where the stained glass window contains graphic, vivid depictions of hell and the sins that brought people there. The baby is finally christened, and his footprints stamped onto a certificate, the right footprint revealing just how powerful he is. Apolonio donates some money to the church, and he and the baby leave.

Chapter 19 – This chapter is presented as an excerpt from “The Book of Incandescent Light.” It consists of three blank staves of music, all bass clef, which are themselves presented as “The Ballad of Perfidy – The silent hymn sung on the days of snow and bees.”

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its implied explanation of why, up to this point, the columns focusing on the Baby Nostradamus (which, unlike those of the other characters, have been columns of black ink) have been presented in the way they have been: the Baby has been protecting his thoughts from Saturn and from others. The reference to his shielding in this section foreshadows the way in which Little Merced learns from him and, eventually, applies the shielding to her own thoughts.

Other points to note about this section's focus on Baby Nostradamus include: the references to the death of his mother (Maricela), the details of which re revealed later in the book; his transcendent awareness that he is a character in a book (such an awareness, in fact, can be seen as putting him on the same level of omnipotence and knowledge as Saturn / Plascencia); and his eventual baptism in the Church of Thieves, an incident which foreshadows appearances, later in the book, of the characters involved in the baptism.



Merced de Papel, who has been absent from the narrative for some time, reappears in this section. There are several intriguing aspects to her return. The first is the fact that she, in spite of being made of paper, is very sexual. Her story evokes the novel's thematic interest in the frailty of life: while she is much more easily damaged physically, there is the sense that this physical damage evokes / reflects the emotional damage experienced by so many of the other characters. This last is also an important piece of both echoing and foreshadowing, in that it contains references to how Ramon Baretto (Part 1, Chapter 6) kept the pieces of her that he found around his home, and how, later in the novel, Merced de Papel eventually meets her end.

Smiley's action of leaving his roof open to the sky foreshadows later developments in the relationship of all the characters to the sky.

The reference to Saturn's letter to Cameroon is important for three reasons: it invokes the loneliness and sadness theme through the implied desperate hopefulness of Saturn's sending a letter into the unknown; it foreshadows letters eventually sent from Cameroon to Saturn; and it simultaneously foreshadows a letter sent later in the narrative from Federico (who, it must be remembered, is Saturn / Plascencio's alter ego) to a female character which, unlike Saturn's letter, is actually received.

Discussion Question 1

Which character's actions in this section reflect the book's thematic exploration of the need for freedom?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance / intention of the choice to have the Baby Nostradamus baptized in a Church of Thieves? What, if anything, is the author saying about religion and/or faith?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways might elements of Merced de Papel's story, as presented here, be seen as representing / manifesting the experiences of women in general?

Vocabulary

adjacent, devoid, esoteric, incubate, savant, epicenter, buoyant, volition, acronym, tangent, proficient, studious, hermitage, theorem, derivation, omniscience, hieroglyphics, papyrus, diaspora, seclusion, sentiment, archival, foliage, agronomy, affix, prosthetic, dexterity, ligament



Part 3, Chapter 20, Section 1

Summary

Chapter 20 – This chapter returns to the multi-columned style of earlier chapters. Saturn's columns are in third person, while those of other characters in first.

Saturn – On an extremely hot day, Froggy leaves his home and goes to lie out in the field. Federico goes after him, carefully stepping on a nail as he goes, because the pain clears his head. Federico tries to persuade Froggy to come back inside, telling him that “Saturn is back.” Froggy promises to think of nothing that Saturn could use in the war. Narration reveals that he and the town began to suffer from lead poisoning, the result of everyone having lined their homes with lead to keep Saturn out.

Little Merced – Little Merced describes how Federico sterilized a nail before he went out to meet Froggy. She later saw blood on the front steps of the house, and the sight made her vomit.

Froggy – After commenting on how Federico came after him at Julieta's instigation, Froggy describes how, as a result of being affected (to the point of hallucination) by the heat, he sometimes imagines Sandra taking care of him, and other times Julieta. He describes imagined visits by Sandra's father in which he is not killed by Froggy. He also describes how the sounds of songbirds, none of which he has in his home, cheer Sandra up; and how those birds continually hunt and kill.

Saturn – Federico and everyone else in El Monte (“except for Smiley, who had torn down his lead walls, and Apolonio, who had never erected them”) suffer from lead poisoning. Smiley attempts to help them all by moving all the water sprinklers from the flower fields and onto people's roofs, cooling them off as they collapsed outside.

Little Merced – She is the first to recover, helping Apolonio (who has concocted a cure) and Smiley. The cure doesn't work for Federico, but does for Sandra, who insists that the lead in the town's homes all be taken down.

Federico – This column consists of a single word: “Blarghhh,” seemingly evocative of the sound of Federico vomiting as a result of the lead poisoning.

Saturn – As Smiley and Froggy start tearing the lead out of Federico's home, Little Merced gets him to take some of the cure. Some of it spills on his shirt, leading him to take it off and reveal all the scars there from all his self-burnings. “Sometimes,” he tells her, “I really miss your mother.”

Little Merced – Little Merced discovers just how much her father longs for her mother, and how lovingly he remembers her. She comments on how he seems to prefer his suffering to that of knowledge that Merced has moved on, and keeps her knowledge of where she is (Part 1, Chapter 4) to herself.



Analysis

Once again in this section, characters seem to become aware (or to remember) that they are characters in a book, or at the very least that their lives are being manipulated and observed by a force outside of themselves. What is interesting to note, however, is the way that the narrative suggests that their determination to have their own private identities and thoughts is not a positive thing.

Meanwhile, this section contains an important revelation – not so much for the reader, but for one of the main characters. For the first time in the story, Little Merced becomes aware of just what her father (Federico) has been doing to help him get over his experience of loss and grief in the aftermath of Merced's departure. This is one of the most poignant moments in the novel – and more specifically, one of the most poignant evocations of the theme of sadness and love ... Federico's reference to how much he misses Little Merced's mother is achingly simple in its understatement, full of feeling of the sort that, for the most part, he and the other characters have tried to avoid expressing. Little Merced's response is also moving, and becomes even more so in the following section.

The removal of the lead shielding is also an important piece of foreshadowing – specifically, of events later in the narrative, when the lead shielding is gone and there is once more free interaction between Saturn / Plascencia and the characters, also foreshadowed in this section's final moments.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include the passages of the narrative that evoke Froggy's heat-induced hallucinations. The reference to the singing birds here is particularly poignant, in that the hope they represent, here and throughout the novel, is at this moment imaginary.

Finally, there are the actions of Apolonio, a reinforcement of his essential compassion, manifested earlier in his adoption of the Baby Nostradamus.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the connection, metaphoric or literal, between the lead poisoning and the decision of the characters to cut themselves off from Saturn? Keep in mind the nature of Saturn's identity (i.e. that it is an alter ego for the author).

Discussion Question 2

How do the various narrations of this chapter reflect the novel's theme of the fragility of life?



Discussion Question 3

Given that the songbirds referred to by Froggy in his hallucination represent hope and possibility in the rest of the book, what do you think the narrative is saying by having them also be described as hunting and killing?

Vocabulary

atrium, chaparral, lenient, larceny, countenance (n.), topography, perfidy



Part 3, Chapter 20, Section 2

Summary

Sandra – As Sandra and Smiley clear away the lead lining of people’s homes, she asks him whether he wants to come back to the EMF. He says he would, but that he doesn’t want to be at war with Saturn. Sandra comments that she thinks he wants to be known by Saturn - to be a celebrity.

Saturn – Narration describes Saturn’s voyeuristic watching of Little Merced and Federico as they try to come to terms with the latter’s sadness, a situation in which, narration continues, Little Merced feels Saturn’s presence more than ever, and also the presence of the book’s readers.

Little Merced – Little Merced’s narration of the conversation she has with her father about his self-burning and about her mother is partially blocked by a square of black ink, which represents her ability to block her thoughts from Saturn. Her narration concludes with a description of his recovery, and of her desire to protect him.

Apolonio – Apolonio describes his surprise at discovering that Federico is a Burn Collector, commenting that when he was young, Burn Collectors were flamboyant and public about their practice, quoting the Bible’s teachings about how human beings all would return to ashes. Federico, he says, practiced humility.

Saturn – As Little Merced’s power to block thoughts increases, Federico and Froggy devise a new plan to hide from Saturn, saying that it’s time to take control and “push him out.”

Little Merced – Her column begins with a reference to her peeling limes and to her practicing the techniques taught by the Baby Nostradamus. The rest of the column is a block of black ink, with parts of only the first words of lines and the final line (“those with the past written upon them”) being visible.

EMF – Members of the EMF gather to hear the plans of Frederico and Froggy which include recruiting others into the fight. Their efforts result in only a small number of recruits: they are accused of wanting to destroy the only thing holding people together, while veterans who have lost other wars refuse to fight in another one.

Saturn – Narration describes how EMF’s recruiting continues; how Saturn, in his efforts to keep thoughts of “she whose name he now refused to say” from his mind, focused on learning about military strategy; and how his research focused on Napoleon Bonaparte, both his military strategy and his method of self-improvement.

Little Merced / Veteranos (Veterans) – these two columns are fully and completely blocked out by black ink.



Analysis

As the evolution of the relationship between Federico and Little Merced continues to deepen in this section, it's important to note how the tables have turned. In the immediate aftermath of Merced's departure at the beginning of the novel, it was Federico who took care of Little Merced: now, the situation is reversed, and the daughter is taking care of the father. It's also important to note how, in this section, a large portion of Little Merced's thoughts is portrayed (by the block of black ink) as being blocked from Saturn. On one level, this shows Little Merced's increasing strength and independence: on the other hand, it shows how the characters are ostensibly taking more and greater control of their own lives. This, in turn, continues to intensify over the course of this section, as Little Merced gains more and more skill at concealing her thoughts (and, in a non-coincidental circumstance, her relationship with limes).

The other main point to note about this section has to do with the new plans developed by Federico and Froggy for a new attack on Saturn. The planning here foreshadows developments later in this, the final part of the book, that show the result of these plans (and echo references earlier in the novel to the aged Froggy still having those plans on his walls). Here it's important to note how the other characters are refusing to join in this new battle: the sense here, keeping in mind what the narrative has revealed so far about the relationship between Saturn / Plascencia and the characters, is that the latter, as a group, seem to be more willing to accept the fates that Saturn / Plascencia has in mind for them.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative explore its theme of addictions here?

Discussion Question 2

What point do you think the narrative is making not only with the partial concealment of the words "those with the past written upon them" but also with the words themselves?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the fact that the thoughts / reactions of the Veteranos are blocked (from both Saturn and the reader) in the same way as Little Merced's thoughts are blocked?

Vocabulary

coagulate, tutelage, carafe, proficient, toxicity, ruminant, rotisserie



Part 3, Chapters 21, 22, and 23

Summary

Chapter 21 – This chapter consists of entries “from the notebooks of Smiley, mathematician and botanist.” The first set of notes is presented as being a list of metric conversions taken from the Bible and, among other entries, includes this: “the death of Lazarus = a short nap.” The second set of notes is presented as being a list of conversions from “The Book of Incandescent Life” and includes these references: “a girl with stings on her arms = redemption,” “a novel = the apology,” and “a phone call in which she says: I don’t want this book to ruin my life = It won’t, he says.”

Chapter 22 – This chapter consists of third person, paragraph-by-paragraph narrations about various characters.

Little Merced – Froggy finds Little Merced’s body: “there was no breath in her, only the smell of citrus” and “cold dabs of blood.” Narration describes how Apolonio attributes her death to citrus poisoning. Everyone at her funeral cried, except for the commissioned nun from the Vatican. Federico broke his own rules of self-burning (i.e. his method of dealing with sadness) and burned himself where everyone could see. He also wrote a letter to his daughter’s mother announcing her death. Narration describes his “strange excitement” at being once again in contact with Merced, but also how he felt a trickle of urine stream down his leg and into his shoe. He realizes that the only way he can get the letter to Merced is through Apolonio’s “network of widows and postmen.” Apolonio agrees to help.

Merced – The letter is first received by Merced’s new husband, a European who leaves it for her to open and read. He finds her sobbing after she’s read it, “her grief staining deep into the grain of the wood” of the table at which she sits.

Merced de Papel – Merced de Papel is destroyed in a car accident, leaving behind shreds of herself in the gutters. “As with all people made of paper,” there is no official record of Merced de Papel; her lovers remember her, and she left a memoir.

Little Merced – As Smiley expresses his grief for Little Merced, the official period of mourning continues. After “five days, three hours, and twenty six minutes,” Little Merced comes back to life. The commissioned nun intends to report what happened to the Vatican and make Little Merced a saint, but Froggy and the other members of the EMF pull their knives and “convince” her to remain silent.

Merced – After Merced receives word of her daughter’s resurrection, her husband tries to remove the stains of her tears from the table, but fails. Merced applies a simple solution, and the tears disappear. Narration describes how happy she is with her husband in spite of not being Mexican and his lack of success with anything having to do with the practicalities of their life together.



Merced de Papel – Merced de Papel’s memoir describes (on a page written on paper taken from her stomach) her preference for non-Spanish lovers, but narration comments that it was Spanish lovers who mourned her the most.

Little Merced – Narration describes how Federico thanked God for his daughter’s return to life, but didn’t necessarily believe that it was only God: he thinks it was due to a potion given to Little Merced by Apolonio. Narration describes how, on the fourth day of mourning, Apolonio slipped some potion into her mouth. Meanwhile, Little Merced wakes up with no knowledge of what happened to her.

Merced – Narration describes how, as the result of circumstances surrounding some spontaneous lovemaking between Merced and her husband, they invented caramelized milk. After a couple of prosperous years, however, their recreation of those circumstances fails, and they are no longer able to produce the milk.

Merced de Papel – Narration describes how Antonio, the creator of Merced de Papel, watched her leave him (see “Prologue”) without any sense of blame or upset or abandonment. Narration then describes how bits of de Papel remained on her car after the accident.

Chapter 23 – This chapter is written in first person narration from the perspective of Federico. As Little Merced continues to recover, her breath is very bad: the result, narration suggests, of Apolonio forgetting to add peppermint to his potion. He tells Federico that recovery from death takes time, and then, after Federico tells him that he knows Merced got all his communications but hasn’t responded, suggests that Merced is one of three types of women. Two of the types, he says, come back to the men they left after a self-torturing journey. The third never comes back. Narration comments that although Apolonio is careful to not say which type he thinks Merced is, Federico goes and prepares a soft path for her leading to his door.

Analysis

Chapter 21 contains several elements that can be seen as evoking both the novel’s thematic interest in the interconnectedness of all things and its stylistic interest in magic realism. For example: keeping in mind that “The Book of Incandescent Life” was written, ostensibly, before the main action of the novel takes place, there are unusual implications in its reference to “the girl with stings on her arms = redemption,” and in its reference to the woman who doesn’t want the book to ruin her life. This is because both can be seen as references to characters and situations given narrative and thematic attention elsewhere in the narrative. Meanwhile, this also suggests there is a parallel to be seen between the author of “The Book ...” (the so-called fifty-third monk) and the Baby Nostradamus, whose abilities as a seer are portrayed as transcending time and place.

The multi-layered, multi-faceted exploration of death in Chapter 22, meanwhile, has several important, intriguing elements. First is the fact that the central female characters



in this chapter all share the same first name, one that visually resembles the English word “mercy” and which translates from the Spanish as “favor.” Another important element: the parallel experiences of grief, loss, and sadness experienced by the various characters, differences in which can be seen as evoking the novel’s thematic explorations of just such loss. Here it’s particularly interesting to note that while Federico expresses his sadness at the loss of Little Merced in the same way as he expresses the loss of her mother (Merced), he does so in public; there is the sense here that grief over a daughter is socially acceptable, where grief over a wife is not. Then there are the similar preferences, in the two older Merceds, for non-Latin lovers; the references to bits of Merced de Papel that were left behind after her death (similar to the “bits” of memory “left behind” by Merced when SHE left); and the representations of joy (the memoir, the caramelized milk) that the two Merceds experience.

The most significant event of this chapter is the resurrection of Little Merced, whose death had been foreshadowed earlier in the references made to potential overdoses of lime juice. This is the third reference to saints, or to possible sainthood, in the novel: the first is to the wrestler Santos, the second is to Apolonio’s unnamed mother, killed during a sainted visit from the Virgin Mary. The narrative makes it clear that Little Merced’s recovery is the result of the more earthly potion made for her by Apolonio, but the question could arguably remain in the reader’s mind: how much of that recovery was the potion, and how much was God? In any case, the incident is another example of the novel’s stylistic interest in “magic realism.”

Then there are the events of Chapter 23, which again reveal Apolonio’s sense of compassion, but which add a layer of meaning and/or identity to Federico: there is the clear sense, in his building of the path, that in spite of grieving his loss for years, he still believes Merced will come back to him.

One last point to note: there is no reference to Saturn, either by the characters or in narration, in this section. Given that his presence has, to this point in the narrative, been suggestive of authorial / narrative control over the lives of the characters, there is the sense that, at least for a while, the characters are controlling their own destinies – that is, as much as they can in a work that actually was written by someone.

Discussion Question 1

How does this chapter explore the theme relating to the fragility of life?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the various references, in Chapter 21, to characters and situations that seem to echo characters and situations throughout the narrative. Who might these references be referring to? How does this develop the novel’s theme of interconnectedness? What are the implications, metaphoric / thematic / narrative, of these various references?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the fact that the three central female characters in this section share the first name Merced?

Vocabulary

decorum, esoteric, ineptitude, affinity, stagnant, halitosis, penance



Part 3, Chapter 24, Section 1

Summary

This chapter returns to the format of columns devoted to the narratives of individual characters: Saturn's narratives in third person, those of other characters in first.

Saturn – Saturn receives a postcard from Cameroon “on the day that EMF and its recruits launched their assault.” The postcard triggers fond memories, but he doesn't have time to dwell on them: the characters are coming.

Little Merced – Little Merced describes her inability to get rid of the lingering stench of death about her. She also tries to build her protective mental shell, but the smell keeps distracting her. The black marks of ink on the page obliterating her thoughts, however, become larger.

Froggy – Froggy gives a speech urging the EMF to fight “against the history being written by Saturn.” After the speech, characters pull out their own words, their own stories, in letters or passages from other books, saying all the things they always wanted to say.

Saturn – After referring to an ancient military defensive technique, narration describes how Saturn became determined to fight back against the assault from the EMF, referring to how he had been so distracted by Federico and his story that he didn't notice the beautiful woman leave his bed and go into the life of another lover.

Sandra – Sandra describes how, on a recruiting trip, she met a woman who had been with Saturn. Froggy asks why the woman didn't slit Saturn's throat.

Smiley / Apolonio / Lettuce Pickers – short paragraphs about these characters are stacked in a column. Smiley: more and more people join the fight against Saturn. Someone arrives in a limousine. Apolonio – other characters, some “who had been absent for chapters and chapters, a cardinal and two altar boys” arrive in El Monte. Their presence begins to overwhelm Saturn. Lettuce Pickers (a term used for those who both adored and hated Rita Hayworth) describe Rita's arrival in El Monte (i.e. in the limousine) and how she looks up into the sky for “a sign of Saturn.”

Saturn / Froggy: Two paragraphs in one column. Saturn: the paragraph describes how Saturn's discipline is interrupted by the reference to Sandra and “she whose name was once cited on the dedication page,” letting himself begin to write a love letter. The EMF forces advance. Froggy: the paragraph describes the advance of the characters.

The next several columns are printed sideways: three columns on the horizontal plane of the page. Pelon: celebrates the freedom to think whatever thoughts he wants, thoughts about “the till of the land and the planting of seeds.” The Two Altar Boys: the



boys announce the arrival, in El Monte, of the Cardinal. Baby Nostradamus: a black block of ink. Cameroon: a postcard to Saturn from France.

The next columns are four on one page. Saturn: finishes his letter, seals and addresses it, then mails it. He keeps his porch light on for Cameroon. Cardinal Mahony: the Cardinal suggests that God exists above Saturn. Jonathan Mead: Jonathan continues looking for his daughter, Cameroon. He has no luck finding her, the people he asks pointing only to “a falling sky.” Rita: comments on how bitterness, pain, and resentment are passed on from generation to generation, like the bitterness of those who resented her success has been passed on to their grandchildren.

Analysis

In this section, the novel begins to build momentum towards the book’s climax, later in this same chapter. Federico and the members of the EMF begin their final assault on the control and manipulations of Saturn (which, it must be remembered, is the pseudonym of the novel’s ostensible author, Salvador Plascencia); Cameroon’s distracting presence threatens to upset Saturn / Salvador’s plans to combat the determination of the characters who, in turn, all start watching the sky for evidence of successful attack; and, in a clear stylistic / presentational effort to change / intensify the reader’s perspective on / reaction to events in the story, the way in which words and events are presented on the page also changes. These changes continue throughout the rest of the chapter and into the remainder of the book.

Meanwhile, and even at this relatively late stage of the narrative, new characters are introduced: specifically, Cardinal Mahony (whose experiences and history play an increasingly important role as the narrative continues to unfold) and the two altar boys, who don’t appear much but who, like the Cardinal, are the same characters who participated in the christening of the Baby Nostradamus (Chapter 18). Then there is the reference to Jonathan Mead, whose return to the story here foreshadows later developments that reveal just what happened to his relationship with Cameroon; the reference to Saturn leaving the porch light on for Cameroon, which can be seen as echoing Federico’s choice to leave a soft, clean path for Merced to return home (again reinforcing the connection between character and author); and the reference to the “falling sky,” which foreshadows later events in which bits of the sky actually do fall to the ground. Here again, the book reveals its narrative / stylistic tendency towards “magic realism.”

Other important elements include the reference to the smell of death that surrounds Little Merced (which can be seen as a metaphoric equivalent to the “smell,” or feeling, of grief that surrounds Federico, which has rendered him, in some ways, metaphorically “dead”); and the return of Rita.

Discussion Question 1

How does this section develop the book’s theme of interconnectedness?



Discussion Question 2

Who is “she who was once cited on the dedication page”? What is her relationship with Saturn / Plascencia?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the relationship between the comments made by Rita and the rest of the action of this section, and of the book as a whole?

Vocabulary

residue, impervious, sacerdotal, laity, despotic, minutiae, inconsequential, crystalline, sedimentary, igneous, acrylic, complacent, treacherous



Part 3, Chapter 24, Section 2

Summary

Presented as four columns on one page: Little Merced: efforts continue to freshen her air and breath, as well as to increase the thought shield. The shield is bigger, but the smell continues. Little Oso: a citizen of El Monte comments that the life s/he has in the city is all that s/he cares about. Apolonio: he describes how, even in the midst of the battle with Saturn, Federico tended Little Merced and continued to make plans for his wife's return. Cameroon (this is set at right angles to the other columns): a postcard, addressed to Salvador, from Cameroon, describing her travels.

Presented as four columns on one page: Saturn: becomes increasingly bitter and angry when the woman to whom he was writing does not return. Natalia and Quinones: they sell their hotel to a man who will make love between the couples who want to stay there easier. As they leave, they stop to watch a planet falling from the sky, the "ravages" of love. Sandra: she celebrates the impending victory over Saturn; the freedom it will bring; and the role of Federico in bringing the war to bear in the first place. Cameroon: another postcard, this one addressed to Saturn, and is written from Africa. It comments that there is no more Saturn.

Presented as four columns on one page: Lettuce Pickers: further complaints about Rita, and how the hurling of lettuce at her movies and at her home displayed their contempt for her. Julieta: Julieta comments on the devastation of the sky wrought by the war, but also offers the reassurances of impending calm from Froggy. Sideways column, Smiley: he stays inside, watching as El Monte is destroyed by all the random words, the town "liberated ... from the order that for years had kept us in line ... now the order had been upset, lost in a melee of voices that for years wanted their freedom." Sideways column, Elote Man (a traveling food vendor): he describes selling food to the crowds; there being no ultimate defeat of Saturn; and only a small fragment of blue, falling to Federico's lawn.

Presented as five columns on one page: Saturn, "in his last days," cleans up dried blood left behind from walking on the harshly jagged path he left in front of his home. Baby Nostradamus: a block of black ink with a white line drawing of Saturn. Apolonio: blue flakes continue to fall from the sky, Apolonio collecting them in jars. Legal Counsel for the Landin Foundation: a disclaimer of responsibility. Cameroon: a postcard addressed to Sal from Morocco, referring to the selling of honeybees, the writing of letters, and to the book she's reading.

Presented as four columns on one page. The Marching Monks: narration describes the disappearance of the fifty-third monk and how they found traces of him that were photographed and included in his book "The Book of Incandescent Life," published after his death. Mechanic: a quote from Nostradamus, describing the fall of Saturn and the appearance of a mechanical tortoise. Satoru (Tiger Mask): the man who defeated, and



ended the life of, the wrestler Santos, describes how he was left Santos' mask in his will. Ralph and Elisa Landin: they comment that they came to read the work that they had funded, commenting that they had learned to be careful of anything written on paper.

Analysis

Momentum continues to build towards the novel's climax. That momentum manifests in many ways: perhaps the most apparently notable is the brevity and placement of so many columns describing and narrating so many incidents in such a relatively compact visual space. This gives a clear impression of energy, of intensity, and of conflict. There are also images of destruction, of a general sort of common to any fierce conflict but of a particular sort unique to both this particular battle and the style of narrative in which it takes place. Specifically: there are references to the incident that give this third part of the novel its name (i.e. the falling sky) which, in turn, can be seen as representing the way the characters' world (as originally created by Saturn / the author) is crumbling. The stylistic choice, common throughout the narrative, is the combination of metaphor and magic realism: here, as is the case throughout this chapter, the primary theme being symbolically enacted is the need for freedom, in that the characters seem to have finally had enough of being controlled, and are winning the battle to be out from under that control.

There are glimpses of other themes in this section: the reference to honeybees in Cameroon's postcard is a reminder of how the bees continue to serve as a metaphor for addiction; the interjections of minor characters (some entirely new, like Little Oso, which translates into "Little Bear") is a reminder that even in the midst of large events and their impact on smaller lives, there is still a sense of connection and interrelationship; and the references, in narratives of characters both significant and small, of interactions and/or ideas and/or circumstances that, continue to develop the theme of interconnectedness (i.e. The Mechanic's reference to a prophecy by Nostradamus that, in turn, refers to the defeat of Saturn and the mechanical tortoise).

Some of the smaller points to note from this section include: the glimpse of grace and nobility in Santos' gesture towards his opponent; the pointedly satirical glances at the attitudes of good-hearted but cautious arts patrons like the Landins; and Apolonio's collecting bits of the fallen sky in jars (which echoes Ramon Baretto's habit of collecting bits of Merced de Papel in jars).

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in the need for freedom develop in this section?



Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the reason why the author chose to set certain bits of writing (i.e. Cameroon's postcards, Smiley's commentary) at different angles from the other columns?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is being represented in the line drawing of Saturn presented as being in the thoughts of the Baby Nostradamus?

Vocabulary

punitive, exemplary, inclusive, isthmus, posthumous, treatise, quatrain, vellum, folio, tectonic



Part 3, Chapters 25 and 26

Summary

Chapter 25 – This chapter is written in a series of short paragraphs each written in third person perspective on a single character.

Cardinal Mahony: Narration describes how the Cardinal was born and grew up in El Monte. He left when he was made a cardinal, but he came back to witness the fall of Saturn. Narration also describes how the Cardinal was wounded once by a piece of falling sky. The Cardinal's strong emotional attachment to the past is seen when narration describes his love for a beautiful woman named Ida, who was descended from slaves and whose hair was so beautiful that when he ran his hands through it, all the lines on them were erased.

Apolonio: Narration describes the continuation of his mistrust of the church, even after the visit of the two altar boys to his shop, boys who, narration reveals, retrieved the church wine from underneath the priest's bed.

Cameroon: Narration describes her death from an excess of bee stings. Her body was thrown into the sea, and the next morning, there were crowds of fish on the shore, spitting out poison.

Cardinal Mahony: Narration describes how the Cardinal, during his romance with Ida, gave her a series of gifts. On the day that she set the last gift, unopened, on a windowsill for him to pick up, the Cardinal was struck by a falling piece of sky.

Apolonio – The Cardinal leads a raid on Apolonio's shop that confiscates all his supplies and reference books, leaving him charged, convicted of heresy, and with nothing but a kite. Apolonio and the Baby Nostradamus fly the kite.

Cameroon: Maids cleaning up Cameroon's hotel room find a stack of books (including "The Book of Incandescent Light," the legendary book of lost love) and an unsent letter, angrily addressed to Saturn / Salvador / Sal and berating him for writing about her and their sex life together. She comments that the people who read his book think they know her but don't know the truth; she's "not of paper" and doesn't deserve to be treated this way; and how much she taught him about lovemaking and life.

Cardinal Mahony: Narration describes his immediate thoughts after being struck by the sky: "of apartheid where black girls could not hurt him, and of professions that could mend the sky."

Apolonio: Apolonio spends his time flying his kite and playing with the baby. When planes get caught in the kite and crash, he asks for compensation for the ruined kite and not only gets it, but the company that owns the planes reroutes future flights.



Cameroon: Cameroon picks up a copy of “The People of Paper” and reads about her death, a halo of honeybees over her head. She leaves the shop where she found the book, musing on her fate and that of other women who dare to challenge Saturn.

Cardinal Mahony: Narration describes how a group of monks took care of him after the encounter with the falling sky, and how he entered into a safe life free of memories.

Chapter 26 – This chapter is a letter from Jonathan Mead to Cameroon. He describes how he and his wife brought Cameroon home from the hospital; how he destroyed the many houses of wasps he found there, but missed an actual insect or two; and how he got stung and became so addicted to the feeling of the stings that he once abandoned Cameroon for three hours in a playground. That, he says, was the moment he knew he had to leave. He describes himself as being free from insects, free enough to remember her happily; how birds flying south did so in the shape of the country she was named after; and how he wants to come back to her.

Analysis

Important points to note include the story of Cardinal Mahony (which has clear parallels to other key stories in the piece); the parallel story of Apolonio (who, unlike the Cardinal, chose not to develop a relationship with God and who finds a new kind of freedom); and the reference to the two altar boys, which not only links the two stories but also manifests the book’s thematic interest in inter-connectedness. Then there is the first reference, in the book, to the themes / focus of “The Book of Incandescent Love”: while it has been referred to several times throughout the narrative, in several different contexts, this is the first point at which the narrative suggests what it is about and its ties to the theme of sadness and love.

Meanwhile, there are intriguing developments in the character of Cameroon, whose initial death can, at first, be seen as a representation of the novel’s theme relating to the frailty of life, but whose letter suggests that she, like other characters in the book, has been fighting a war with Saturn for freedom from his authorial control. The reference to her picking up a copy of “The People of Paper” again blurs the line between realities: a character picking up a copy of the book in which s/he appears can, like so many other incidents in the book, combine magic realism with thematic explorations of both interconnectedness (i.e. of realities) and the need for freedom. The reference at the end of the section, to her thoughts on Saturn’s attitude towards women, can be seen as an affirmation that the question raised in relation to the treatment of the book’s female characters (Analysis - Part 2, Chapters 8 and 9).

Also: the motif of the falling sky continues which, as presented in relation to the story of the Cardinal (which took place in the past), suggests that the war between Federico and Saturn was not the first time that pieces of the sky had fallen to earth – in other words, that the battle between the characters and their creator was not / is not the first time that there has been a war fought for freedom from a “creator” in the sky. A related point: the term “apartheid” is one used to describe a political / economic system, particularly



deployed in South Africa, in which non-white races were controlled, dominated, manipulated, and used by white races. Mahony's wish can therefore be seen as a prayer for white, conservative, Christian dominance.

Finally, there is Chapter 26, in which the reader finally learns the truth at the heart of the relationship between Jonathan Mead and Cameroon. Noteworthy points here include the ironic parallel to the relationship between Federico and Little Merced – how the former relationship, when faced with challenges, came to an end, while the latter relationship, when faced with challenges of its own, strengthened and became closer. The reference to the country from which Cameroon's name comes is a reference to the real world country of Cameroon, a country on the western coast of Africa.

Discussion Question 1

How is the novel's thematic interest in addiction developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Now that the narrative has revealed what "The Book of Incandescent Light" is ostensibly about, how do you think the references to it earlier in the narrative reflect its content and ideas?

Discussion Question 3

What is your reaction to the Cardinal's reference to apartheid? What do you think it says about him as a character? How does it fit in, ironically or otherwise, with other aspects of the book, thematic and/or narrative?

Vocabulary

fissure, envision, heresy, sacrilege, confiscate, allusion, apartheid, catacombs, mandible



Part 3, Chapter 27, Section 1

Summary

This chapter is a series of short columns of narration.

Presented in four columns on one page: Saturn: a description of how the biblical hero Samson, shorn of both his hair and his strength, gained strength from the columns of the temple in which he found himself. Froggy: he describes the war against Saturn as both successful and ongoing, saying that people should be subservient to God but not to “a floating satellite made of dirt and gas.” Cardinal Mahony: the Cardinal blames “them” (women) for the breakup of the sky, saying that in spite of all his efforts and sacrifices, he still thinks of the woman he left. Rita: she refers to the Samson story, how the woman who brought him down never forgot who he was and managed to defeat Samson even though she was believed to be of the weaker sex.

Presented in four columns on one page: Little Merced: she describes Federico’s continued obsession with preparing a welcoming lawn for Merced’s return. Ramon Baretto (the man who loved Merced de Papel): he reflects on the many encounters with paper he has that remind him of Merced, insisting that he did the right thing by leaving her. Quinones: he describes a key part of Napoleon’s Arc de Triomphe, a tortoise shell shield dedicated to his beloved, Marie-Louise. Apolonio: he briefly lists all the things the Cardinal and the others took from him, and talks about how the one thing they left him, the kite, being weighed down by bits of falling sky.

Presented in three columns on one page: Saturn: he retells the story of how Samson regained his strength from the columns upon which he leaned; pushed the columns apart; and brought not just the temple down, but also the whole city, killing himself and everyone therein in the process. Froggy: he describes how the bits of falling sky, even after being collected, felt like nothing and tasted like communion wafers. Beekeeper (last scene in Part 2, Chapter 10): the Beekeeper describes investigating a mysteriously quiet beehive; finding the queen was missing; going back into the house; and finding Cameroon (Cami) inside, covered in dead worker bees who had died trying to protect their queen, who is found crawling on Cami’s hand.

Presented in six columns on one page: Apolonio: the kite breaks free, soaring away and disappearing. Meanwhile, the EMF celebrates the defeat of Saturn, unaware that the planet is actually coming closer. Sandra: she describes the steady fall of sky, and the resulting belief that Saturn had been defeated. Cameroon: she comments that she doesn’t miss “the shy snail” between Saturn’s legs. Little Merced: she describes her continually failing ability to maintain the thought shield. Rita: she protests that in the Samson story, Delilah (the woman who took Samson’s strength) is the real hero of that particular Bible story. Smiley: he reports on Froggy’s belief that Saturn will fall, and then on the fact that he never did ... only the sky kept falling.



Presented in three columns on one page: Saturn: he recalls his days of sadness, his attempts to reach out to “she whose name is no longer cited in the dedication page” and the phone bills that list his repeated calls to her. He pays the bills unquestioningly. Mechanic: he describes finding the last mechanical tortoise, the one that had escaped from Federico’s, and noticing that with each of its small moves, it changes the surface of the land. The Marching Monks: the monks refer to how their factory is forgotten, but how they are reminded of it when they see elderly people, struggling with cold and hunger.

Analysis

This section introduces a new element: the story of the Biblical character Samson, a man with superhuman strength who was seduced by a woman commissioned to find a way to remove his strength; who indeed lost that strength; and who regained it as the result of an act of faith. The sense of relationship between this story and other narrative elements is clear: the characters reflecting on Samson and his story clearly connect his experience (i.e. losing power because of a woman) with their own. This, in turn, ties in with questions raised by Cameroon (in the last chapter) and in this analysis about how the author (both Saturn and the real-life author) view the role of women in male-female relationships.

Once again, the novel’s theme of interconnectedness, of different but parallel experiences of the same event, is manifest in how the words are placed on the page: the emotional and narrative energy generated by this stylistic choice continues to propel the novel, and the stories of its various characters, forward with significant power. Among those stories, there are glimpses of characters who haven’t appeared for a while: Ramon Barreto (with his collection of bits of Merced de Papel, which can be seen as a metaphoric expression of memory); Quinones (who, along with reintroducing Napoleon Bonaparte into the story, reiterates the examination of the role of women in male-female relationships – see below); and the Beekeeper, whose commentary adds a layer of meaning to both the story of Cameroon and the book’s related, thematic exploration of addiction.

At the same time, the motif of the falling sky continues, developed in several ways. Froggy’s reference to the bits of sky tasting like communion wafers can be seen as connecting with the experience of the Cardinal, with both the latter and the wafers tying the experience ironically to experiences of faith in general, and the Catholic Church in particular. Then there are the descriptions of how so many characters are convinced that the falling sky means they are free of Saturn, and finally of Smiley’s perhaps wiser, perhaps truer comment that can be seen as suggesting that there is, in fact, no way to every be fully free of Saturn. All this can be seen as metaphoric exploration, from two different sides, of the novel’s thematic interest in the need for freedom.

One last, smaller moment: the reiteration of the earlier stated idea that the movements of the mechanical tortoise are physically changing the world, which can be seen as a metaphoric suggestion, perhaps, that the smallest emotional and/or physical change in ANYONE, of any size / importance, changes the world.



Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of sadness and loss manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric implications of the disappearance of Apolonio's kite? What can this moment be seen as representing / evoking?

Discussion Question 3

In this section's final moments, the monks refer to experiences of the elderly and abandoned. What does this have to do with the rest of the narrative?

Vocabulary

affront, relegate, servile, rancor, penitence, ornate, excrement, incumbent, perforate



Part 3, Chapter 27, Section 2

Summary

Presented in three columns on one page: Cardinal Mahony: he describes how the woman he once loved (Ida) came into his confessional, and how he believed she would be confessing the sin of making the sky fall on him. Instead, she says, she described how she destroyed a man made of paper by making love with him in a full bathtub. Rita: she describes two types of lettuce pickers, the ones who threw rotten lettuce at screens showing her movies, and representatives of lettuce growers associations, who brought clean lettuce and their respects. Julieta: she describes her hope that Froggy could be believed (i.e. about defeating Saturn), but admits that no-one had any way of knowing how powerful Saturn was, or could be.

Presented in three columns on one page: Saturn: After describing both the act and the aftermath of dumping a load of lettuce into “her” pool, narration describes Saturn’s happy memories of their relationship (in spite of her habit of eating limes); the moment “she” confessed she was made of paper; his unhappiness at being unable to forget “her”; and the real reason he went to war. Smiley: he judges the movement of Saturn by the amount of ash coming from the plants, and sees Saturn is coming closer. Mechanical Tortoise: binary code, zeros and ones.

Presented in six columns on one page: Mechanic: The mechanic destroys the last mechanical tortoise, narration revealing that he was also the creator of the tortoises, and was determined to destroy all his mistakes. Little Merced: in a short piece of narration mostly obscured by a large black dot (representing her thought shield), Little Merced describes a “new presence,” no more falling sky, her father staring at that sky, and the appearance of a flock of songbirds. Cardinal Mahony: he describes the penance he gave Ida, telling her that only people who are meat matter. She leaves, and he is tempted to follow, but chooses not to: “it was one of those days,” he says, “where the sky seemed fragile and my fingerprints and lifelines had finally resurfaced.” Apolonio: he describes the scientific process of a planet safely expanding. Ralph and Elisa Landin: the Foundation announces withdrawal of financial support, citing “falsified wedding certificates and nests of honeycombs” as things they don’t wish to be seen supporting. Ida: “From pulp you are and to pulp you shall return.”

Presented in two columns on one page: Saturn: narration describes how, after several nasty letters sent to “her,” Saturn has an epiphany, and realizes he can be bigger than the smallness of his anger. He realizes that all he wants to do is “save the falling sky and restore the quiet that was there before.” Baby Nostradamus: a single column of black.

Presented in four columns on one page: Apolonio: he describes how, as the war came to a close and Baby Nostradamus became tired, he mentally communicated to Antonio that Saturn would win, the only time the baby did so. Beekeeper: he describes how,



throughout history, bees, their stings, their honey, and their wax have been signs of power and inspiration. Cameroon: she describes a playful encounter with Saturn in a hotel room that Saturn, she says, wanted to repeat. But that, she adds, was before everything else he did to her. Cardinal Mahony: he describes how, in seminary, one way of finding God was taught, but that he also tells his theology students of another way: through the touch of a woman's hair.

Analysis

Important to note in this section is the appearance, in Ida's story, of another "person of paper" (interesting to note how these characters of paper – the unnamed man here, Merced de Papel – seem to have very active sex lives). There is also a reference to "her" being a person of paper (although there is the sense here that this reference is more metaphorical: the idea that "her" sees herself as a creation of Saturn/the author, as opposed to an actual living being made of paper, which is what Ida's "man" seems to be).

This section also continues the multi-faceted blurring of realities through things like the references to rotting lettuce, to "her" habit of eating limes, and the Cardinal's reference to the sky, et al.

Joy is described as returning to Little Merced and the citizens of El Monte in the form of songbirds which, throughout the book, have represented hope, possibility, and happiness.

All of this is communicated within the context of the continued, reiterated stylistic choice to cram as much information about as many characters as possible into the smallest space: that is, the multiple columns on a single page. This is the final section of the book in which this takes place: perhaps an indication that while the action climaxed earlier in this chapter, the war that has driven the narrative to this point has finally come to an end. This is not to say, however, that the book's thematic exploration of the need for freedom has also come to an end: that takes place in the following, final section.

This section offers the last (dying?) glimpse of communication from the mechanical tortoise, which can be seen as metaphoric representation of the end of its fight to live as paralleling the death of Federico's fight to be free.

Saturn's realization that he can be bigger than his anger and/or his sadness can be seen as a foreshadowing of his actions in the following section: as he walks away from being driven / defined by feeling here, he walks away from other aspects of his life there and then.

The Beekeeper's comment about bees can be seen as heavily ironic, given that throughout the narrative bees, their stings, and people's reactions to them have been representative of the rather more negative experience of addiction.



The increasing size of Little Merced's thought shields might, on one level, represent her personal continuation of the war against Saturn. On another level, it can be seen as a character claiming freedom from having her thoughts perceived by a reader. On a third level, it can be seen as foreshadowing the novel's very, very final moments at the end of the following section.

Discussion Question 1

How is the book's thematic interest in the fragility of life developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What possible connection, literal or metaphoric, does this section suggest between the power / actions of The Mechanic and the power / actions of Saturn?

Discussion Question 3

What are the fuller meanings, literal or metaphorical, of Ida's comment "from pulp you are and to pulp you shall return"?

Vocabulary

exuberance, rectify, divisive, allegiance



Part 3, Chapter 27, Section 3

Summary

This section is third person narration from Saturn's point of view. The section begins with a description paralleling Saturn to Samson: in the aftermath of a woman's betrayal, finding the strength to push aside that which was overwhelming him and regain control – in Saturn's case, of his story.

Saturn sees Sandra in her little house, mourning the loss of Froggy; he sees Froggy's sadness as he realizes the war is over, and hears the violence of his quiet, angry whisper as he has furious sex with Julieta ("This is what you want ... to watch me while I make love..."); he passes over the eager Smiley and instead focuses on Apolonio and the Baby Nostradamus, finally able to penetrate the Baby's consciousness. He sees into the Baby's sense of the future, and realizes that he will continue. He also sees the future of the other characters: Froggy's lingering, detailed research into Saturn's phases; Julieta's continued work in her garden; the transformation of the flower fields into an airport and runways; and the adult life of the Baby Nostradamus, occasionally carrying the elderly Apolonio, occasionally falling with him, occasionally knocking his own head, and occasionally changing both the past and the future. Saturn also sees Sandra's disappearance; her regular, lead-lined letters to Froggy; the day those letters end; and Froggy's intense grief.

Finally, Saturn sees the older Liz, narration revealing that she is made of paper; that she has grandchildren; and that her granddaughter likes reading about the solar system and the planets. This glimpse of the future reminds Saturn of the past – specifically, his past with Liz – and how much he'd like to go back to that past.

Narration then describes how, while Saturn is distracted by all these things, Little Merced and Federico leave the book, walking "south and off the page, leaving no footprints that Saturn could track. There would be no sequel to the sadness."

The book concludes with a large, black dot: the shape and size of Little Merced's "parasol" of protection from Saturn's penetrating thoughts.

Analysis

This section of the book is part epilogue to the main story (i.e. the battle by the community of characters for freedom from Saturn / the author) and part conclusion of its central character's journey (i.e. Federico's personal battle for freedom from both Saturn and sadness). It continues the late-developed motif comparing the experiences of both Federico and Saturn to that of the Biblical character of Samson (which is arguably a continuation of what seems to be becoming something of a misogynist attitude in the book towards women) and, in the extended middle section in which Saturn visits the other characters, suggests that while he might have less control over them, he still



watches over them – just as Smiley, earlier in the narrative, suggested was as much of an option for him as the control that Federico believed was Saturn's only true interest.

There is one final reference to a “person of paper”: Liz, to whom the actual, published book ‘The People of Paper’ is dedicated. “And to Liz,” it reads, “who taught me that we are all of paper.” This can be taken to mean, as the references to people of paper throughout the novel can all be taken to be, that all people are as fragile as paper (making the dedication, and the idea it incorporates, an iteration of the novel's thematic interest in the frailty of life); that people are all as carefully made as a piece of humanized, animated origami; and that all people, like the characters (who are, after all, themselves people of paper – that is, of paper and imagination) capable of achieving freedom from that which controls them, be it a god, an addiction, grief, or something else that saps individual will, courage, and strength.

Discussion Question 1

How does the need for freedom, one of the book's key themes, manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the fact that Sandra's letters to Froggy are lined with lead?

Discussion Question 3

How do you interpret the dedication of the book “And to Liz, who taught me that we are all of paper”?

Vocabulary

prophetic



Characters

Federico

Federico is the novel's central character and protagonist: he is both the focus and the initiator of much of the action; his experiences and values define and/or inform many of the book's themes; and his relationships with many of the book's other characters influence their journeys of transformation as well. Most specifically, it is his experience of sadness and loss in the aftermath of the unexpected departure of his wife, Merced, that lie at the core of much of what the novel has to say, and the events that embody that.

Another powerful element of Federico's character is his determination to live his life in relative privacy, free from what he sees as the controlling influence of a powerful external force. The two aspects of his experience / identity are perhaps intertwined: the narrative suggests that as he moves further away physically from what remains of his life with Merced, and indeed of what remains of anything / everything that has defined his life in general, he becomes more and more aware of this "presence"; comes to believe that that presence is in some way responsible for what happened between him and Merced; and stages what seems at first to be an unlikely rebellion against that force, which he identifies as the god / planet Saturn.

Another important aspect to note about Federico is his initial method of getting rid of his pain (burning himself with a hot weapon) which, in addition to being a facet of his and the novel's exploration of sadness and loss, is also an exploration of another of the novel's themes: its interest in / exploration of addiction. Federico's self-burning can be seen as functioning in the same way as, in contemporary society, a self-cutter engages in addictive self-mutilation in order to allow painful, uncomfortable feelings to release and/or escape.

Finally, it must be noted that Federico is not entirely self-absorbed and/or self-centered. While he is deeply driven to resolve his own pain and his own issues, he is simultaneously compassionate towards others, with the seeming goal of helping them avoid feeling the same kind of pain, the same kind of imprisonment, and the same kind of despair as he does. It is arguably the compassion of all leaders of rebellion, of which Federico is one: the sense that the problems of one are, on some level, the problems of all, and can be overcome with collaboration, support, and teamwork.

Saturn / Salvador Plascencia

Initially, this character (the novel's primary antagonist) is referred to as Saturn – more specifically, the planet Saturn. In the perception and experience of protagonist Federico, "Saturn" the planet is the influence that he feels is watching him, controlling him, and oppressing him. Later, as Federico's feeling of being controlled intensifies, he comes to



believe that Saturn is a kind of entity, or force – which can be seen as appropriate, given that the planet Saturn is named after the ancient Roman God Saturn, a god of death and of harvest (hence his frequently being pictured as carrying a sickle, which Federico himself carries and uses to harm himself). Eventually, the narrative reveals (through the actions of Smiley) that the “force” in question is, in fact, a writer – who happens to have the same name as the author of “The People of Paper”, Salvador Plascencia. Smiley’s response to his discovery is to leave Federico’s rebellion and open himself to contact and experience of the writer on his own terms. In other words, one character (Federico) feels the presence of his creator and rebels against him, while another character (Smiley) discovers the true, human nature of that creator and acts out of empathy towards it him.

It’s important to note that throughout the narrative, “Saturn / Plascencia” is never referred to as anything other than “Saturn.” The experiences of Salvador Plascencia the character (who has several experiences in common with Federico, including being left by a woman with whom he/they was/were involved) are always described in third person as if they are happening to Saturn. Meanwhile, narration about Saturn is itself also written in third person, a point of view unique among all the characters, who are otherwise written about in first person. There is the sense here that in writing from this particular point of view, the author (the real Salvador Plascencia, as opposed to the fictionalized Plascencia who appears in the book) is creating a sense of distance between the writer in the book and his characters (as opposed to the writer OF the book, whose relationship with the characters may or may not be the same as that of the writer IN the book). Eventually, Saturn / Plascencia’s attention is taken elsewhere, and Federico simply leaves the book, finally gaining the thematically central freedom he so desperately sought.

Merced

Merced is Federico's wife, whose departure from their marriage before the novel begins sets the entire narrative in motion. She is referred to several times, and in a variety of contexts, before she actually appears in the aftermath of her daughter's death. At that point she is glimpsed relatively briefly, and is portrayed as vulnerable, loyal, and loving to her new husband who, like Federico, has his flaws but who, unlike Federico, doesn't wallow in them and doesn't define his life by them.

Little Merced

Little Merced is Federico's daughter. Like him, she is devastated when Merced (Federico's wife / Little Merced's mother) leaves the family, but gets over it more quickly and more easily. Little Merced supports her father in his actions and choices re: leaving Mexico for America and his war against Saturn, but her presence in the novel is more notable for her embodiment of the novel's thematic interest in addiction: her habit of consuming the flesh and juice of limes (a habit that her mother also had) becomes a kind of obsession that has a cumulative, detrimental effect on Little Merced, eventually



contributing to her death. She is also notable for the development of her relationship with the Baby Nostradamus who is able, because he is so mentally powerful, to not only see the future but also psychically shield his thoughts from others, an ability he passes on to Little Merced.

Froggy

When Federico moves to the town of El Monte in California, he makes friends / allies there with people who, like him, feel both the presence of a god-like figure that seems to be controlling their lives, but also feel a drive to freedom from that control. Froggy is among the first, and is definitely the most loyal, of the many people Federico recruits into his army. Sad and lonely, Froggy develops relationships with two very different women as he fights alongside Federico, the novel indicating that his dedication to Federico's cause lasted into Froggy's elder years.

Sandra

Sandra is the daughter of an abusive father, and the first woman with whom Froggy becomes involved. In the aftermath of Froggy's killing of her father, Sandra leaves their relationship, saying she can't be with a man who killed. She does, however, remain in Federico's army, proving herself to be one of his most effective and staunchest allies.

Julieta

Julieta is the second woman with whom Foggy becomes involved. She is generally of a quieter, more thoughtful nature than Sandra, an aspect of identity that perhaps results from Julieta's history: the novel suggests that her crumbling of a bouillon cube contributed to the crumbling destruction of her home town. She flees to California and eventually settles in El Monte, where things no longer crumble and where she makes her home with Froggy.

Apolonio

Apolonio is another citizen of El Monte, the "curandero" or specialist in folk medicine. Like many (most?) of the other principal characters, Apolonio has a tragic story in his background: his mother died in the fiery aftermath of a visit from the Virgin Mary. Apolonio has a great many skills with traditional, somewhat magical medicines that play important roles throughout the narrative.

Smiley

Smiley is another citizen of El Monte, and another ally in Federico's war against Saturn - at least at first. Smiley's curiosity about Saturn takes him on a journey into the sky



where he discovers that the god is just a man, and a man struggling with a very human personal loss. This sends Smiley back into the town and out of Federico's army. Smiley then opens himself and his home to the sky, welcoming the influence of Saturn.

Santos

As Federico and Little Merced leave Mexico, they encounter the champion wrestler Santos who, later in the novel, is revealed to be a saint. Santos' death occurs later in the narrative, evidence of his sainthood materializing in, among other things, the jagged black crosses that appear on the posters advertising his wrestling appearances.

The Baby Nostradamus

On their bus journey from Mexico to America / California, Federico and Little Merced encounter a woman (Maricela) traveling with a baby that seems, in narration, to be somewhat unattractive but who is eventually revealed to be a seer - into the past, into the future, and into alternative realities. The Baby Nostradamus (named after a famous French seer) is silent but powerful, eventually befriending both Apolonio and Little Merced.

Maricela

Maricela is the mother of the Baby Nostradamus; a fortune teller herself (she tells Little Merced secrets of her vanished mother); and also a Burn Collector, someone who, like Federico, finds self-healing / cleansing in the addictive practice of burning oneself. She dies under mysterious circumstances, leaving the Baby Nostradamus to the care of Apolonio.

Rita Hayworth

1940's movie star Rita Hayworth appears several times throughout the narrative, initially referred to by her real name (Margarita) and frequently described as being hated and/or resented by working class Mexicans who see her leaving Mexico as a kind of betrayal of their country. She returns to witness the fight between Federico and Saturn, narration of her visit referring to the importance / necessity of transcending the negative thoughts and influences of other people.

Cameroon

As the narrative explores characters, situations, and events outside those of Federico and the other citizens of El Monte, it glances at the lives of characters on another plane of reality: specifically, those directly and/or personally involved with creator/god Saturn. Cameroon, a young woman addicted to the poison in bee stings (it helps ease her pain)



is one of these characters, with narration describing the complicated, prickly intimate relationship she has with Saturn and how she eventually leaves him after realizing that he has made her a character in his book and that she doesn't want to be treated as something to be manipulated and tossed away. In other words, she doesn't want to be a person of paper.

Jonathan Mead

Mead is another character who exists on the same plane / level as Saturn. Mead is the long-estranged father of Cameroon. He is trying to find his daughter so the two of them can once again be in each other's lives. Narration reveals that Mead's addiction to the venom in Wasp stings was a contributing factor, if not THE contributing factor, to the development of a similar addiction in Cameroon.

Liz

Liz is another character who appears on the so-called "Saturn" level of reality. She is described / portrayed as a woman with whom Saturn was romantically involved, and whose exit from his life sent him into the emotional tailspin that led, the narrative implies, to the creation of the novel "The People of Paper." She is referred to several times, and with several variations, as the woman who no longer appeared in the dedication to the book, and the woman whose name would not be mentioned.

Merced de Papel

The book's prologue describes the creation (by a man named Antonio - see below) of a living woman made of paper. She leaves the factory where she was made and journeys into the world, eventually encountering Federico and Little Merced, the latter giving her the name "Merced de Papel" (Merced of paper). She appears on only a few occasions in the story, but those appearances are notable for their thematic significance (de Papel is one of the novel's most vivid embodiments of the novel's thematic interest in the frailty of life); for their repeated portrait of de Papel as being very sexual; and for the description of her death, in the aftermath of which only bits and scraps remain.

Antonio

Antonio is Merced de Papel's creator, a man endowed with the seemingly magical ability to bring objects of paper to life.



Ramon

Ramon is one of de Papel's lovers. They are together for some time, but he eventually leaves. He is notable in the story for collecting bits of de Papel that she leaves around their home, bits of her that are, perhaps inevitably, torn away from her by life.

Monk Number 53

There are several references in the novel, including in the Prologue, to a kind of rogue monk (identified only by the number he took in the monastery where he once lived) whose book of atonement for his sins, "The Book of Incandescent Life" becomes kind of a manual of suffering for characters who have lost love.

Cardinal Mahony

Late in the narrative, this holy representative of the Roman Catholic church (specifically the Vatican) appears in the story as a representative / embodiment of the power and authority of religion ... and how humanity (specifically: the recognition of / need for love associated with just being human) will ultimately control one's life in spite of the efforts of others (such as Saturn, or the church, to control that life).

Ida

Ida is the name of the African American woman, descended from slaves, whom the Cardinal loved. She humanizes him, and teaches him to open his heart, soul, and mind to other ways of being alive.



Symbols and Symbolism

People of Paper

Aside from being the book's title, the phrase "people of paper" refers to both characters constructed out of actual paper (i.e. Merced de Papel, other characters referred to more glancingly) and also the book's other characters who are alive only because their stories and/or identities exist ON paper (i.e. the paper on which the book is published). The concept "people of paper" is significant because it evokes / manifests the novel's thematic interest in the frailty of life / existence, and also evokes how "people of paper" (i.e. characters in novels) can come "alive" during the writing process and take over their own stories, as the characters in the book "The People of Paper" attempt to do.

The Sickle

In mythic iconography / symbolism, a sickle has several meanings: it is a tool for harvesting (i.e. grain); it is a weapon for Death (i.e. in that Death harvests the living); and it is a symbol possession for the god Saturn (i.e. in the same way as the god Jupiter was / is represented by a thunderbolt). Throughout the narrative, particularly in its early stages (where it appears most), it can be seen as representing the desire of Federico to end (i.e. bring to death) his suffering and sadness.

Limes

Two characters - Little Merced (Federico's daughter) and Merced (Federico's ex-wife and Little Merced's mother) consume a great many limes. In both cases, their teeth rot: in Little Merced's case, her over-consumption of limes is a contributing factor to her death. Limes, in this context (i.e. over-consumption causing ruin) are one of the novel's most potent symbols of addiction.

Bees and Bee Stings

In the same way as Federico attempts to burn his sadness out of him by heating his sickle and then applying it to himself, the character of Cameroon attempts to burn her sadness out of her by letting bees sting her repeatedly. This leads, in turn, to Cameroon becoming as addicted to the stings and the poison in them as Little Merced is to limes. In other words, bees and bee stings function on the same symbolic level as those two items: as a manifestation of the theme of sadness and loss, and as representatives of the theme of addiction.



Pio-Pio

This is the rare bird rescued by Apolonio and given to Froggy as a cure for his sadness over the loss of his girlfriend. Pio-Pio represents possibility and hope.

Lead

Lead, the heavy metal which is impenetrable by x-rays (among other things) is seen as a means of safety and freedom, primarily by Federico (who feels safe from what he believes are the psychic invasions of Saturn) but eventually by the entire town of El Monte, the citizens of which come to believe that Federico is right about both Saturn and lead.

Tortoise Shells

These shells are the primary way, throughout the novel, that the characters obtain the lead necessary to protect themselves from Saturn. In the same way that the shell of a tortoise provides it with safety, the shells (both literal - as in shell-shaped - and metaphorical - as in shaped to fit the inside of the dwellings in El Monte) represent safety and a kind of freedom, therefore manifesting the novel's thematic exploration of the need for both.

"EMF" (El Monte Flores)

This is the term used by the citizens / field workers of El Monte to define the organization, part-gang / part-union / part-army to which they belong. It represents the idea of power and security in numbers, ideas particularly important to Federico, as he builds an army to take on Saturn.

"The Book of Incandescent Light"

This book is referred to several times throughout the narrative. On many occasions, it is described as being a kind of guide to lost love. As such, it can be seen as an evocation of the novel's thematic interest in sadness and loss. Written by the lost / abandoned monk (Monk 53), it becomes something of a bible for grief.

Burn Collectors / Glue Sniffers

These two forms of addict attempt to numb the pain and sadness of their lives with distracting, self-harming behaviors. In the case of Burn Collectors, they attempt to overwhelm their emotional suffering with the physical suffering associated with self-burning; in the case of the Glue Sniffers, they attempt to overwhelm THEIR emotional suffering with a substance addiction - in this case, the sniffing of glue. The novel seems



to be making the suggestion that both techniques for avoiding sadness - or, for that matter, any techniques - are ultimately self-destructive and self-defeating.

The Sky

Throughout the narrative, and as a component of its style of "magic realism," the sky is presented as having an actual, physical identity. A door can be opened in the sky and characters can pass through; bits of the sky can fall and be picked up by characters. The fragility and permeability of the sky seem to represent / develop the idea that human beliefs about things that seem immutable and unchangeable (i.e. the sky) are as fragile as human bodies - in other words, the book's interest in the fragility of life is developed not only through explorations of physical life, but also through explorations of beliefs.



Settings

Mexico

The first part of the novel is set in Mexico, which is the setting for key events like the departure of Federico's wife from their marriage; the creation out of paper of "she", and her eventual receipt of the name "Merced de Papel"; and the beginnings of Federico and Little Merced's journey to freedom in America. It is a place of both endings and sadness, a clear and vivid contrast to the qualities associated with America.

America

America is the setting for much of the remainder of the novel. In contrast to the darkness and unhappiness associated with Mexico and the events that take place there, America is associated with hope, possibility, and transformation.

El Monte

This is the community in which Federico and Little Merced settle when they move to America, and where much of the action of the story is set. It is a community populated mostly by people who work in the nearby flower fields, and in the industry that grows and harvests the flowers. Many members of the community join with Federico in his battle to protect himself and those around him from the controlling influence he feels above him, identified in the novel as Saturn.

The Sky

The sky, or rather a world reachable through the sky, is the setting for a key encounter in the narrative: specifically, the encounter between a character (Smiley) and Saturn / Plascencia (i.e. the creator "god" and his originating alter ego, the author of the book in the "real world" and Smiley's creator). The sky is not necessarily seen / portrayed as heaven, but because Saturn is perceived as something of a god, there are possibilities that the sky might be seen as such.

The Story

Because the book is, on a fundamental level, a contemplation and dramatization of the relationship between an author / creator and his characters, and because a key aspect of the story is the awareness of the characters that they are, in fact, in a novel, it could be argued that the story itself is a setting for the action and confrontations that take place. Mexico, America, El Monte, and the sky are all places / circumstances in which things happen: in this particular story, with its stylistic emphasis on magic realism (i.e. a

style in which magical things are seen as normal in the "real" world), the story can also be seen as such a place.



Themes and Motifs

The Need for Freedom

The need for freedom is the first of the novel's many themes to be introduced, and is arguably the one that is at the core of most of its action. Its first manifestation is in the Prologue, when the recently created woman of paper (who, later in the narrative, is given the literal name of Merced de Papel) leaves the place and the man who created her and ventures out into the world, in spite of the evident (and immediately experienced) dangers it holds for her.

In the chapters that initiate the story proper, protagonist Federico and his daughter Little Merced also act on their need for freedom, although in their case that need originates in a different experience: they are, as discussed below, desperate to get out of a situation of sadness and loss, driven to be free of their grief. As they move further into what Federico hopes will be a new life, however, he experiences an increasingly oppressive sense that he is being watched and controlled: as his knowledge / understanding of the force that he believes to be controlling him intensifies, so too does his need to be free of that force, to the eventual point that he stages an active rebellion against it. That rebellion eventually and conclusively comes to an end when he literally leaves the pages of the novel: he, more than any of the other characters (with the possible exception of Cameroon, who dissociates herself from her relationship with the story's creator) has decided that he is not only going to fight the battle for freedom, but he is going to win it, on his own terms.

Federico's passion for freedom is so strong, so definitive, and so attractive that he manages to draw to him several other characters who develop similar feelings and similar determinations to act. These include Froggy (whose experience of oppression is never as strong as Federico's, but whose drive to be free eventually surpasses that of his former leader); Sandra (whose fierce determination to Federico's cause seems to emerge from her desire to be free from an abusive father); and several other, mostly unnamed members of the community in which Federico and the others live ... a community that, given the book's contention that the characters know they are the creations of an author, might be described as a community of the created, a community that wants, in contrast, to live in self-determination.

Sadness and Loss

The primary actions of central character Federico – his departure from Mexico for California, his rebellion against the force (Saturn) that he believes to be controlling his life – are, to varying degrees, primarily defined and motivated by his feelings of sadness and loss. Those feelings are the direct, long-lasting result of being abandoned by his wife Merced and, although the narrative never explicitly says so, by his failure to change the parts of himself (primarily his bed-wetting) that eventually led to her departure. As



the narrative progresses, and as Federico becomes more and more convinced that he is being not only watched but controlled by Saturn, there is also the sense that he comes to believe that Saturn is at least partly responsible for the circumstances in which he (Federico) finds himself – specifically, his grief and sadness. In other words, Federico's anger and rebelliousness emerge from his experience of loss.

Other characters and situations echo this theme. The characters of Julieta and Ramon, in various ways, experience grief and loss when their home community essentially self-destructs and they are forced to leave, while Ramon experiences another loss when he ends his involvement with Merced de Papel (even though he ends their relationship, he still feels grief at its conclusion). Then there is the character of Froggy, whose experience of loss at the departure of Sandra is deeply intense, only coming to an end when a singing bird comes into his life; and the experience of Apolonio, whose loss of both his mother and his livelihood affect him, but not to the point where he is as debilitated as some of the other characters. Apolonio, in very telling contrast to / with the other grieving characters, is able to move past his experiences and get on with his life.

Perhaps most significantly, Saturn himself (who, in his own reality, is a writer named Salvador Plascencia) has an experience of being abandoned, and therefore of grief, that is very similar to that of Federico. There is the clear sense, in fact, that because Federico is a character created by Saturn / Salvador, that Federico's experience is a recreation of Saturn / Salvador's, a reiteration, a fictionalization ... a story telling a truth that is not necessarily that of the character, but an experience of the author's around which an experience of a character's has been constructed.

The Fragility of Life

Throughout the narrative, key triggers for experiences of sadness and loss are experiences of life's fragility – or, perhaps more specifically, the fragility of important, significant aspects of life. On one level, there is the fragility of love: several key relationships end when love fails to endure – or rather, becomes overwhelmed by other factors. These include the relationships between Federico and Merced (ended when love is overwhelmed by frustration and disgust), between Froggy and Sandra (ended when love is overwhelmed by fear and vulnerability), between Cameroon and Saturn / Salvador (ended when love is overwhelmed by addiction and helplessness), and between Saturn / Salvador and Liz (ended when love is overwhelmed by emotional distance).

On another level, there is the frailty of physical life. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this is in the character of Merced de Papel, the woman of paper who, in the moments after she comes to life, quickly becomes damaged by water (there is the metaphoric sense here, in fact, that the novel is suggesting that like Merced de Papel, all life is fragile even from the moment it comes into existence). The experience of de Papel is, in fact, perhaps the most vivid example, both literal and metaphoric, of this theme: her physical life is eroded seemingly every moment she is alive, paper being as fragile as it is (paper again serving as a metaphor for human life in general), while the



end of that life leaves only scraps and bits of her ... which is, really, all that any human being leaves behind in the lives of others.

Other examples of the frailty of physical life can be found in Little Merced (whose addiction eventually gets the better of her); in Apolonio's mother (killed in the flaming aftermath of a visit from the Virgin Mary); and perhaps even in the experience of the mechanical tortoise which, in spite of being carefully made of dense, tough metals, eventually meets a destructive end at the hands of the being who created it.

Ultimately, it could be argued that Federico's entire war against Saturn is in part grounded in an unconscious sense that his own life is fragile – more specifically, that his existence, as a created character, is solely at the whim of someone else, meaning that he could be destroyed on just about any level should that someone else so choose. In this sense, his existence – and those of the other characters – are perhaps more fragile (potentially meaningless) in this way than in any other.

Addiction

The novel portrays several variations on reactions to sadness and loss; to the sense of frailty / fragility in human life; and the need for freedom. One reaction that appears in a couple of fairly overt ways is that of addiction: to substances, to pain, to feeling.

The first point to note is that the term and/or concept of addiction is never once explicitly named or identified in the novel. Nevertheless, the behavior of characters like Little Merced (unable to manage her craving for limes), Cameroon (unable to deal with some kind of pain in any way other than poisoning herself with bee stings) and Federico (initially unable to deal with his sadness in any way other than cutting / burning himself) has clear, very apparent characteristics of addiction. All three characters seem unable to cope with life in any way without their substance and/or coping mechanism of choice: again, a hallmark of an addictive experience. All three experience damaging physical consequences as a result of their obsessive use of their respective substances and/or coping mechanisms, and appear unable to stop in spite of that damage: again, a hallmark of an addictive experience. Finally, all three pursue their substance / activities of choice without regard for how their “using” affects the people around them: once again, an aspect of addiction.

In the case of Little Merced, her addiction eventually leads to her death. Granted, the addictive, or dangerous, nature of her substance of choice (limes) is perhaps over-developed here, possibly as a component of the novel's stylistic emphasis on magic realism, which also clearly plays a role in her eventual resurrection. Nevertheless, possible exaggeration aside, her situation has clear and unavoidable echoes of the life trajectory of the addict. So too does Cameroon's (although the book suggests her ending is more the result of an author's willfulness than anything else). Federico is the only one of the three characters whose experience of addiction is relatively overt and who seems to emerge from his addiction with his life and identity intact. Ultimately, in all three characters, their experiences of addiction (again, undefined as such but clearly



perceivable as such) interact with the book's other themes in a way that, itself, is of thematic significance.

Interconnectedness

Interconnectedness is perhaps the most significant and multi-faceted, multi-layered of all the book's themes, in that it manifests in both style and substance – style, in the sense of how the words are presented on the page (i.e. frequently in a visual relationship that suggests interconnection as much as it suggests sequence); substance, in the sense of the story elements, character elements, and emotional elements presented by those words. The same event is described from the different points of view of different characters, creating a sense of connection and relationship between those characters; the same events in the past are recalled by different characters with different reactions and interpretations, again creating a sense of interconnection; and, perhaps most intriguingly, the meanings of disparate events, in the lives of different characters, portray and/or reveal unexpected commonalities. This is perhaps most true of the common experiences shared by Cameroon and Little Merced: they never meet, they exist in different realities, and their central relationships are with very different people, but they nevertheless share common situations ... as noted above, they are both addicts and react to their addictions in similar ways.

Meanwhile, it's important to note that in the same way as the characters and their experiences are portrayed as being connected across time, space, and individuality, and in the same way as events are portrayed as having a sense of relationship that may not always be immediately apparent, the narrative's themes are also, and simultaneously, interconnected. The need for freedom arises from sadness and loss as well as from addiction; addiction arises from sadness and loss and manifests the fragility of the addicted life; instances in which that fragility becomes evident (i.e. incidents in which a character, or a relationship, dies lead to sadness and grief), and so on.

Ultimately, in spite of the more apparent, and more vivid, manifestations in the work of most of its other themes, its focus on interconnectedness is arguably the central, and therefore most important, theme of the entire work.

Styles

Point of View

The novel's constantly shifting point of view is one of its most apparent, noteworthy, and intriguing stylistic elements. The writing constantly shifts back and forth between the perspectives of the various characters, at times recounted in first person and at other times recounted in third person. There is the very clear sense that there is both a thematic and a narrative reason for this: to look at the latter first, it very much sets up an unpredictability, a fluidity of perspective that keeps the reader both interested and on his/her toes. The reader never really knows whose perspective is going to appear next, what that perspective is going to be, and what it might mean for the overall work. It's a constant layering of information, one idea or intuition or feeling on top of another, that serves to illuminate the novel's narrative interest in at least looking at, if not defining, what it sees as the interrelated nature of life. This, in turn, leads to consideration of the former thought: the idea that this stylistic choice has a particular thematic point.

The novel's overall interest in interconnection, its nature, value, and repercussions, is very much actively explored by this constantly shifting point of view. New and unexpected relationships, and perspectives on relationships, emerge from chapter to chapter, paragraph by paragraph, column by column. With each shift in point of view, there is a different angle on character and situation, with the result that the novel offers a wide, wide range of insights to the reader, many of which can be seen as having a connection, in one way or another and to one extent or another, to many (most?) of the book's OTHER, further insights. What's particularly interesting here is how the same event can have different types and/or intensities of meaning depending on which character is receiving narrative focus at a given moment. So, in addition to this being a thematic exploration of interconnectedness, it could be argued that it is, simultaneously, an exploration of separateness, given that all these shifts in narrative perspective seem to be suggesting that no two people, interconnected or not, can / will view the same incident in exactly the same way.

Language and Meaning

There are several important elements to note about the piece's use of language. The first is its frequent use of Spanish terms, phrases, or ideas. While the language of the novel's composition and publication is English, the author is originally from Mexico, and sets much of the action in either his home country or a part of America (California) which has close ties to Mexico. Meanwhile, the style of writing (magic realism, a style in which magical events and/or experiences are accepted as commonplace elements of both reality and narrative) is also very Mexican / Spanish, meaning that on a couple of levels, the meaning of the book, and the language with which that meaning is communicated, are both tied thoroughly and effectively to Latino culture and heritage.



Another key aspect of language has to do with its fragmented point of view (as outlined above) and structure (as outlined below). There is a sense that with each shift, language usage shifts as well, at least to some degree. The language for Federico is different for that of Saturn; that for the Mechanic is notably different from that of, say, Little Merced; and that for less narratively significant characters like the Landins, the Cardinal, and the Beekeeper are clearly differentiated both from each other and from the major characters.

But perhaps the most significant of the book's various elements of language and meaning has to do with the places where it's absent, or minimized. There are a couple of related points here: first, the way in which these moments of relative "silence" stand out in a text that is in many ways about language, how it's used, and what it means. In any narrative circumstance, what is unusual attracts attention: the silences here, whether imposed by choice (i.e. Little Merced's concealing of her thoughts) or by circumstance (i.e. Saturn's lapses into blank, silent columns), suggests that on some level, silence is intended to have significant meaning. The second related point to this idea of the absence of language has thematic resonance: the silences of text, for the most part, are evocative of / related to the silence that exists, and/or develops, between the characters and Saturn: a silence that is resonant of the book's thematic interest in the power of freedom, given that silence between Saturn and the characters is, in fact, a symbol of the latter's freedom from the former.

Structure

Like the novel's constantly shifting point of view, its inventive shaping of structure is apparent, engaging, and thematically relevant. There are two types of structure to be considered here. The first is the way the story is actually, physically placed on the page: specifically, the places in which the narrative is broken down into columns as opposed to the more (traditional?) paragraphs. This has thematic as well as narrative implications.

In the same way as the novel's frequently fragmented point of view suggests both interconnection and separation, its sense of structure also evokes the sense that while people are connected to one another, they are simultaneously (perhaps paradoxically) separate from one another. This is particularly apparent in the chapters where the narrative is broken down into columns and/or paragraphs, each one exploring events and/or circumstances from different points of view.

More specifically, the placing of the narrative into columns tends to suggest perceptions and experiences unfolding in parallel (although there are exceptions), the focus being on the same experience, circumstance, or event. The breaking down of the narrative into paragraphs, on the other hand, tends to focus more on different experiences / events taking place at different times and/or in different places. These are not unfolding and/or being explored in parallel, but alternately ... a more linear structure, whereas the columnar structure tends to focus on a more concurrent sensibility.



All that said, the second noteworthy aspect of the piece's structure has to do with its overall sense of narrative. With the exception of the prologue, there is a sense of a linear, beginning to end sort of structure underpinning the work – specifically, an A-to-B, Cause-to-Effect, Event-Causes-Event kind of formatting that follows the journey of Federico and Little Merced from beginning to end – or, perhaps more appropriately, from end (i.e. the end of Federico's relationship with Merced) to beginning (i.e. the beginning of Federico's new life free from both sadness and the influence of Saturn). With some internal exceptions (i.e. chapters in which the storytelling, in either paragraph or column form, sometimes diverts into the present or the future), this overall / underlying sense of linear structure serves as an effective through-line, a string upon which the various beads of event, perspective, and theme are strung in order to create a necklace-like whole.



Quotes

So he unfolded the hearts into turtles and the kidneys into swans, and he tied the braided capillaries around the necks of the tiny paper animals like leashes. And soon a crowd like the one that gathered around the wicker basket of corn ... began to encircle Antonio's table."

-- Narration (Prologue)

Importance: This quote metaphorically introduces one of the novel's central actions, recurring through the lives and experiences of many of its characters: the idea of transformation. Antonio, the "origami surgeon" (who creates organs and saves lives as the result of his manipulation of folded paper) transforms his magical skills into entertainment, and gains more popularity and success than he had ever had.

Antonio split the spines of books, spilling leaves of Austen and Cervantes, sheets from Leviticus and Judges, all mixing with the pages of 'The Book of Incandescent Light' ... she was the first to be created: cardboard legs, cellophane appendix, and paper breasts. Created not from the rib of a man but from paper scraps. There was no all-powerful god who could part the rivers of Pison and Gihon, but instead a twice-retired old man with cuts across his fingers.

-- Narration (Prologue)

Importance: This quote describes the process used by the magical Antonio to create the character referred to in the Prologue as "she" but later in the narrative given the name "Merced de Papel" (Merced of Paper). Antonio is here described as using the works of renowned real-world authors like Cervantes and Austen, as well as a work belonging solely to the world of this work ("The Book of Incandescent Light") to create life, as all authors (including the author of this book) do, different from the way life was / is created according to various creation stories.

For years [Federico] had sensed something in the sky mocking him as he peed in his bed and dreamed of dress factories and of his lost Merced. And today, as he stood outside a junkyard hundreds of miles from his home, the force upon him felt heavier than ever before.

-- Narration (Saturn) (Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 2)

Importance: This is one of the earliest references in the novel to a circumstance in Federico's life that defines both his character and his actions: his sense of a watching, controlling presence that he at first wants to escape and eventually wants to force out of his life and story.

As [Maricela] traced my lifeline, the blister on the tip of her index finger ruptured, and the fluid channeled into the ruts of my hand. The outer lines of my palm became tributaries feeding into the main river. I lifted my hand toward my face and I saw that I was holding the river of Las Tortugas. As I looked closer I saw our old adobe house and the orchard that lined the river, the trees heavy with limes. A family with goats and



dinner doves had moved in and planted maize on the dirt roof.

-- Narration (Little Merced) (Part 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: The psychic / palm reader Maricela reveals a vision to Little Merced: an image of what the place where she used to live - in other words, the life she used to live - has become since she left. That life, according to the image, has been both abandoned and transformed.

Federico de la Fe understood that when a woman leaves a house there are many things to resolve. Some are simple things, like figuring out how to fold the linens, learning to cook smaller portions, and discovering where the manzanilla tea is kept. And then there are other adjustments ... Federico de la Fe said that it was never the cleanliness of women that we missed, but the signs of their fallibility and oversights in hygiene."

-- Narration (Froggy) (Part 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: In this quote, Froggy describes how / why he and Federico have so much in common: they both have had to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the departure of the women they each loved.

The Vatican official waited for Juan Meza for two weeks before deciding that perhaps the word of a saint was not always to be trusted."

-- Narration (Santos) (Part 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: In a narrative where the actions of saints figure frequently, if not prominently; and in that same narrative, in which none of the saints referred to is even close to perfect, this quote can be seen as another illustration of how, before people were saints, they were actually just people.

...there are forces that don't let you turn back and undo things, because to do so would be to deny what is already in motion, to unwrite and erase passages, to shorten the arc of a story you don't own.

-- Narration (Sandra) (Part 1, Chapter 7)

Importance: This quote, from El Monte rebel Sandra, sums up the experience and opinion of everyone in the town, as led inspired by Federico, as they prepare to fight against Saturn, whom they all see as exactly the kind of controlling, manipulative force to which Sandra refers.

Someone has to watch over us. I don't want to look up at the sky and think that nothing is up there. I want to know that something is watching me.

-- Narration (Smiley) (Part 1, Chapter 7)

Importance: After taking a trip through the sky and into the reality inhabited by Saturn / Plascencio (an avatar of the book's author), Smiley reveals to the reader (but not to rebel leader Federico) his own perspectives on the relationship between the characters and Saturn / Plascencio, a perspective that entirely contradicts that of Federico and almost everyone else in El Monte.



It should have been the moment when the creator acknowledges both the necessity of my existence and the reader's role as witness. But it was not the dignified meeting one might expect: the author sitting in his chair, wearing a starched dress shirt with a double-stitched collar, smoking hand-rolled tobacco, awaiting the visit because, after all, he is omniscient, foreseeing all surprises ... I found him asleep, sprawled and naked, laying on his stomach ... despite the order he had provided in the form of columns and chapters, he applied none of that logic to his sleeping quarters ...

-- Narration (Smiley) (Part 2, Chapter 8)

Importance: This is a key moment in the book: the point at which one of the characters (Smiley) encounters the person / entity / god who created him (Saturn / Plascencia). It is the discovery that the latter is just a human being that sends the former into his personal act of rebellion against rebel leader Federico.

You cannot kill or steal from a man while he is asleep and heartbroken. While it is said that everything is fair in love and war, the dictum is nullified when both love and war occur simultaneously; then, the rules of battle become more stringent. The politics that lead to war can always be argued, but there is an undeniable sympathy that must be extended when a woman leaves a man."

-- Narration (Smiley) (Part 2, Chapter 8)

Importance: In this quote, Smiley reveals himself to be perhaps the most compassionate, and least self-centered, of all the characters, as he describes the principle of compassion at work in his reaction to seeing the vulnerable Saturn / Plascencio.

...I thought of cups of water and bathtubs, of water towers and reservoir tahoes, lakes and rivers. Rivers that we may hold in our hands, rivers that we palm and toss. The rivers where my mother may be. The river that ran from my father, meandering across the plastic sheets, the flow dammed along the side of my mother ... and rivers in suspension, the ones that we carried in cubes and blocks of ice."

-- Narration (Little Merced) (Part 3, Chapter 15)

Importance: Little Merced's description / imagination of various forms of water can be seen as metaphorically representing an idea introduced in the prologue, and enacted in several ways throughout the book: the inevitability and constancy of change, transformation, and flow (as represented by water) and how sometimes, as is the case with her father Federico, that change becomes frozen, cold and unmovable.

They passed the bundled Nostradamus from house to house until he reached Apolonio, outside his shop, trying to repair the broken hands of a porcelain Mary Magdalen.

-- Narration (Part 3, Chapter 16)

Importance: In this quote, written in the third person and focusing on the experiences of the Baby Nostradamus, the noteworthy element is the connection between the compassionate, welcoming Apolonio and the image that he is repairing: that of Mary Magdalene who, according to traditional interpretations of the Bible was, in one way or



another, a fallen woman treated compassionately by Jesus. In other words, there is a clear connection drawn here between Apolonio and Christ.

And it was those days that were heavy with memory and longing for the touch of my mother that were the hardest, because he would not go and look for her. Instead he opened his box and heated his blade, preferring infection and the stench of burnt flesh to the possibility of finding my mother walking down the street holding the hand of another man.

-- Narration (Little Merced) (Part 3, Chapter 20)

Importance: In this quote, Little Merced observes and comments on what is frequently implied in the action and narration of the book: that Federico, and by extension other characters / other people, become so absorbed in grief and sadness that they are unable to see the possibility of moving on from loss.

She began to feel her own resentment, not only toward Saturn, but also against those who stared down at the page, against those who followed sentences into her father's room and into his bed, watching as he pressed matches into his skin, perhaps even laughing ... Little Merced wanted to protect her father, hide him from mockery, from the pity of strangers, and to conceal her own rage."

-- Narration (Saturn) (Part 3, Chapter 20)

Importance: In this quote, the roles taken by the two characters at the beginning of the book (Federico / protector; Little Merced / protectee) become reversed: the increasingly vulnerable Federico becomes protected by the increasingly fierce Little Merced.

...there was no time to think of [Cameroon]. Saturn heard them approaching, crowding onto the page, pushing and trying to press Saturn further and further to the margin.

-- Narration (Saturn) (Part 3, Chapter 24)

Importance: In the middle of trying to work out what to do in his troubled relationship with Cameroon, author/character Plascencia/Saturn feels the pressure of characters who want to define their own lives and story.

Emancipation has many paths, some with more ruckus than others, but the quiet mediation of monks had failed us. We surrendered silence and opened our mouths, saying whatever we wished under open air. After all these pages, as Saturn faded, it was our voices that directed the story, our collective might pressing Saturn into a corner.

-- Narration (Sandra) (Part 3, Chapter 24)

Importance: In contrast to the previous quote, which seems infused with a sense of panic and/or concern from Saturn that he is being displaced, this quote (from the fiercely self-determined Sandra) portrays her and the other characters as being glad about their impending freedom.

The Foundation and its endowment are not liable for any loss or damage, whether it be incidental, direct, punitive, exemplary, or special, resulting from "The People of Paper",



the war on omniscient narration (a.k.a. the war against the commodification of sadness), or any involvement with this book. This is inclusive of all paper cuts, whether incurred on fingers or tongues.

-- Narration (the Landin Foundation) (Part 3, Chapter 24)

Importance: This is the disclaimer (i.e. distancing from responsibility) that those who are funding the writing of "The People of Paper" (that is, the book within the book) insist upon publishing. In a metaphoric / representational way, there is the sense that these words are intended to be seen as the money's attempt to keep a distance from any meaning that might be seen / experienced as controversial.

This was the fate of women who know too much, women who can upset the pride of Saturn. Because ultimately Saturn is a tyrant, commanding the story where he wants it to go. That is why they fight against him, why they hide under lead and try to push him to the margins. But Cameroon was just one, not a gang or an army – easily flicked from an African cliff."

-- Narration (Cameroon) (Part 3, Chapter 25)

Importance: In its ongoing investigation of the relationships between characters and the author who creates and writes about them, this quote sums up one aspect of the feelings of characters at the manipulations of those who put the lives of these people onto paper.

Saturn would end the war, tumble all the columns, even if it meant his own destruction. He was tired of the martial life, tired of wars spurred by lost love. Saturn was a giant, a titan among planets, but he was also a little man who stepped on a stool to open the top kitchen cupboards. Who stood on crates and imagined kissing her. But that is all war commanders are: little men with broken hearts."

-- Narration (Saturn) (Part 3, Chapter 27, Section 2)

Importance: There are several important references in this quote: to Samson (the Biblical hero who destroyed his oppressors by pushing down the columns of the temple in which he was imprisoned, a figure to which Saturn compares himself); to the characters in the novel (particularly Federico and Froggy, fighting wars with themselves and with him because of their grief at lost love); and to "a little man", a reference to both himself and to the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, famously short and just as famously determined to make a big impression. All of these references ultimately can be seen as relating to the comment in the last line: they are all "little men" struggling with grief and loss, one of the central themes of the novel as a whole.