

# **Q Clearance Study Guide**

## **Q Clearance by Peter Benchley**

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# Plot Summary

Mild mannered Timothy Burnham is a low-level speechwriter for the President of the United States. A string of coincidences lead to his promotion as the President's most trusted advisor. His marriage falls apart at the same time, leaving him open to the charms of Eva and her father, a Soviet spy. When Eva reveals her true identity, Burnham launches a last minute effort to save his good name and disappear from politics forever. The novel provides a humorous glimpse into the nature of American politics and the random chances that direct the future of the free world.

Timothy Burnham works as a low-level speechwriter for the President of the United States. Technically, he works for the Department of Energy, which makes him eligible for Q Clearance. Q Clearance means that Burnham has access to top-secret atomic energy documents. Burnham has no technical knowledge about the subject and thinks that Q Clearance is a joke. He does not take care to protect the important documents that come across his desk, leaving them available for those who would like to share them with the Soviet Union.

Ivy Peniston cleans offices at the Executive Office Building where Burnham works. Her son has failed to get his high school diploma and Ivy hopes to be able to get one for him on the black market. She knows Foster Pym, a local caterer, has connections that might help her. She takes documents from Burnham's office to trade with Pym for a forged high school diploma. What she does not know is that Pym is a Soviet spy.

Burnham is called into the Oval Office to be fired by the President for a mistake in a speech he wrote for the President. Burnham's secretary pins a paper with fake telephone messages to the front of Burnham's folder. This paper includes a fake phone message from a high Soviet official. When the President sees the fake phone message, he decides not to fire Burnham, thinking that Burnham has contacts in the Soviet government. Instead, the President promotes Burnham as his highest advisor and gives him a new office right next to the Oval Office.

Meanwhile, Burnham's marriage is collapsing. When his wife kicks him out, he meets Eva Pym, the daughter of the Soviet spy, Foster Pym. They begin a sexual relationship that gives Eva access to his office at the White House. Eva takes pictures of important documents with a pair of spyglasses and her father sends the pictures on to the Soviets. Eva eventually confesses to Burnham that she is a spy. The two of them hide out at the YMCA while Burnham puts together a plan to clear his good name.

Burnham enters the White House late at night and goes into the office of the Special Assistant to the President, Mario Epstein. He finds some micro cassette tapes that Epstein has used to record private conversations between himself and the President without the President's knowledge. Burnham takes the tapes in order to blackmail Epstein and get his name cleared by the President. A few days later, the President holds a press conference and announces that there is not a spy in the White House and that

Burnham had been part of a top secret mission designed to give false information to the Soviets. Burnham disappears and the President regrets the loss of his closest advisor.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Mild mannered Timothy Burnham is a low-level speechwriter for the President of the United States. A string of coincidences lead to his promotion as the President's most trusted advisor. His marriage falls apart at the same time, leaving him open to the charms of Eva and her father, a Soviet Spy. When Eva reveals her true identity, Burnham launches on a last minute effort to save his good name and disappear from politics forever. The novel provides a humorous glimpse into the nature of American politics and the random chances that direct the future of the free world.

Timothy Burnham is a speechwriter for the President of the United States. Because of White House budget problems, Burnham's job is technically in the Department of Energy, although Burnham has nothing to do with the Department of Energy and has never been personally involved with the Department of Energy. One day, while Burnham is working on a speech for National Prayer Day, a Department of Energy official, Preston Renfro, arrives to inform him that, because Burnham has reached a certain length of service in the Department of Energy, he has been given an additional security clearance. With Q clearance, Burnham now has access to important documents about atomic energy. Burnham tries to explain that he is neither a scientist nor a Department of Energy official, but Renfro insists that the Q clearance is real and that Burnham must accept the responsibility.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Q Clearance is supposed to be a very important and special classification. It is ironic that it is given to an employee such as Burnham, who has no real training or knowledge about atomic energy. Everyone knows that Burnham is employed at the Department of Energy simply because there is not enough money to put him on the White House staff. Yet, he receives Q Clearance as part of a bureaucratic system that cares more about proper paperwork than it does about being logical. Burnham finds Q Clearance to be a silly joke and does not understand any of the documents that he is given by the Department of Energy. Q Clearance is established as a symbol of the mindless nature of bureaucracy that puts important information at risk. Burnham's Q Clearance foreshadows the many roles he will play in the novel that he is neither trained nor prepared to play.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Burnham lives with his wife, Sarah, and his two children, Chris and Derry. Derry and Sarah both criticize Burnham for his role in the White House. They both have strong liberal political views. Derry, in particular, has a strong affection for communism, which frustrates and angers her father. Sarah works for Senator Ted Kennedy. During breakfast, Burnham and his wife have another fight. Their son, Chris, declares that they are headed for divorce. Burnham leaves the house to avoid further confrontation and takes the bus to the White House.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Burnham's home life is presented in the same way as his work life. He considers his family to have very little connection to him personally and does not know how to become more involved or influential in the lives of his children and his wife. Burnham's character takes on a very passive role, both domestically and professionally, and shows his inability and unwillingness to take on more responsibility for his life choices. Burnham's interaction with his family shows his lack of commitment to any goal. He defends his job as a speechwriter for a President that his wife and children hate, but he expresses no real enthusiasm for his job. Instead, his job is meaningless and uninteresting to him and he cannot understand why others would think it was important or would attach much meaning to the position.

The argument that Burnham has with his wife foreshadows the problems he will have with her in the future. While Burnham sees the incident as a one-time argument that has no real significance, his wife and family see it as part of a pattern of neglect toward the opinions and values of his family. Burnham's long path to recognizing the true state of his marriage does not begin until after it essentially is over. Burnham's relationship to his wife and the confusion between their domestic life and their political values foreshadow Burnham's inability to take a stand in either arena, which leaves him vulnerable to the random chance of fate.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Ivy Peniston is worried that her son, Jerome, will not graduate from high school because he has failed his typing class. She goes to the school to try to convince the principal to pass her son, but she is unsuccessful. She remembers her acquaintance, Mr. Pym, who has helped her with legal issues in the past. Mr. Pym is always interested in learning more about Ivy's job and the people she works for. Ivy considers finding out something interesting to pass on to Mr. Pym in exchange for help with Jerome. Ivy works for the cleaning crew at the Executive Office Building.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Ivy Peniston is a simple woman with clear goals for her son, Jerome. When Jerome's future is threatened, Ivy is forced to go outside the normal bureaucratic structure in order to get what she needs. Her experience at the high school is a small reflection of the bureaucracy that directs much of the action of the novel. In her case, one typing class makes it impossible for Jerome to graduate from high school. It seems unreasonable that such a small thing would outweigh all the other parts of Jerome's academic record, but the bureaucracy insists that the typing class must be passed or all of Jerome's hard work will be forfeited. For this reason, Ivy realizes that she needs to find someone outside the system to help her.

Foster Pym seems an unlikely candidate for this kind of help, but he has proven himself in the past when he helped Ivy bypass the bureaucracy at the Customs office that wanted to demand the cost of professional video games for the ones her son had made by hand. In this way, Ivy remembers that Pym has circumvented unreasonable bureaucracy in the past.





# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Foster Pym, the man Ivy has turned to for help, is actually a Soviet spy, one cultivated since childhood. He enters the U.S. after World War II as an injured American soldier. During his youth, he cultivates a career in food service. In Washington, D. C., he takes a job with a catering firm. After exposing his boss as Himmler's personal chef, he gains control of the company. He gets involved with the American Nazi Party, where he meets Louise. They marry, divorce, and have a daughter, Eva, who he raises alone. Eva becomes an environmental activist, but returns home after an arrest for planning to blow up a dam. Pym hopes to use his influence on her to attain a higher status for his otherwise disappointing career as a Soviet spy.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Foster Pym's life story takes the element of random chance to a new level. His elaborate training as a Soviet spy has given him no real leads or direction in the United States. The odd coincidence of working for Himmler's chef joins the many strange links between characters that fuel the plot of the story. For the most part, Pym's personal life is a symbol for an ongoing theme: that random chance has a profound effect on the events of the world, even in such high-stakes professions such as international espionage. Pym's life and Burnham's life both owe more to chance occurrences and coincidence than to any amount of hard work or dedication on their own behalf. Just as Burnham is an indifferent political player, Pym is an indifferent Soviet spy. Both men put much more emphasis on having a comfortable and uninteresting life than on any bold ambition, such as one might assume would motivate two people who work in such demanding fields.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Burnham arrives at the White House for work. When bending down to pick something up, he rips his pants. He enters his office intending to sew them with the assistance of his secretary, Dyanna. He is unable to do this because the President suddenly calls and demands an immediate meeting. Burnham staples his pants to hide the rip. At first, the President seems to be on the point of firing Burnham, but then lets him leave with compliments. Burnham leaves the meeting and almost collapses from low blood sugar.

Burnham goes to his immediate boss, Cobb, for an explanation. Cobb says the President has praised him but that the original problem was a mistake the President made while presenting a speech written by Burnham. Returning to his office, Burnham sees Renfro from the Department of Energy. Renfro gives him a shredder to shred important documents. Burnham thinks that whole thing is a joke. He shows Renfro all the documents that he has, including an old prescription, and asks if he needs to shred them.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The ripping of Burnham's pants before an important meeting shows the comical side of the theme of random chance. Burnham's workday is shown to be full of random actions and events that he does not personally understand, but which combine for his benefit. His meeting with the President makes no sense on the surface, but the random accident of dropping his papers in the Oval Office, combined with his secretary's silly attempt to make him look important, save Burnham's job and lead to his future promotion. Similarly, when he returns to his office and meets Renfro for the second time, the whole charade of the shredder and the important documents again puts his serious and high-level Q Clearance in a humorous light. Burnham makes light of his Q Clearance responsibilities and teases Renfro about all the documents that need to be shredded. Ironically, the one document that Renfro decides is not important, Burnham's prescription, is the one that provides the Soviet spies with the most information about him.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Ivy looks for something to bring to Mr. Pym but does not find anything until the end of the day when she goes in to clean Timothy Burnham's office. She sees the shredder and takes the shredded paper to give to Mr. Pym, assuming that it must be important. Mr. Pym learns two things from the wastepaper. He learns that Burnham works for the Department of Energy and probably has access to atomic energy documents. His daughter, Eva reads the discarded prescription and determines that Burnham has very delicate health and many allergic reactions that might make him vulnerable.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

While Burnham himself found the shredder to be a joke, Ivy Peniston recognizes it as something that implies important documents are present in this office. Although Burnham does not take the Q Clearance responsibility seriously because he does not understand the documents, Ivy sees an opportunity to find in them something important enough to pass on to Mr. Pym. Unlike Burnham, Ivy goes to great lengths to hide her activities and treats the shredded documents with great importance. She imagines a high level of security, including hidden cameras and microphones, in Burnham's office. The irony is that the real security team from the Department of Energy has allowed such important documents to be released to such an unqualified person such as Burnham and then does nothing more than provide a shredder in an attempt to guarantee that the documents do not fall into the wrong hands.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Burnham comes home from his squash game to find his wife waiting for him in the living room. She explains that she found a microphone in the car and accuses the White House of planting it to spy on her. She tells Burnham that he has to choose between his job and his family. She packs his suitcase and sends him to live at the YMCA.

The next morning, Burnham is given a special assignment to rewrite a toast to Banda, the dictator of an oil-rich nation. Burnham calls the CIA for information about the man and learns that he is a violent, insane man. He rewrites the toast to eliminate the praise and to emphasize the relationship between the peoples of both countries. Burnham shreds some complicated technical documents for the Department of Energy.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Burnham's marriage collapses. This comes as a surprise to Burnham because he assumed that his family life, like his job, was something he could coast through without providing a real effort. Burnham is shocked and disturbed by the sudden turn of events and does not allow himself to accept the reality of the situation. His first reaction is to blame his wife's friend instead of recognizing that his marriage had been in serious jeopardy for a long time. The final insult is that Burnham is sent to stay at the YMCA, a place he previously went to only for pleasure and leisure.

Ironically, when Burnham returns to work, he finds an assignment that he is actually passionate about. His rewrite of the Banda address requires him to take his job seriously, including contacting the CIA for the first time. His work on this address makes him feel proud of his work for the first time in a long time. A great deal of Burnham's pride is because he takes a risk and puts his own personal feelings into his work, something that he has avoided throughout his speech-writing career.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Burnham goes to play squash and is paired with Eva Pym. After a very physical game, she invites him to lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. The President calls him for a sudden meeting. At the meeting, the President praises Burnham's writing and lets him sit in on an emergency security crisis briefing held by Epstein. The emergency situation is that an American yacht called the Bilitis that has entered Cuban waters and is threatening to blow up a Russian tanker. Burnham recognizes the names of the yacht as the same as the one that is owned by his wife's transsexual relative, Teresa.

Burnham tells the President to let him figure out the situation. He consults with Teresa and finds out that the whole emergency is just a misunderstanding. He takes care of the crisis and writes a recommendation letter for the President's nephew. He calls his wife, Sarah, to tell her about the events of the day. She tells him that she does not believe him and that she has changed the locks on their house. Burnham then calls Eva. Because he has had such a busy day, Burnham leaves all the important documents lying around his office. Ivy enters to clean the office.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

It is ironic that the meeting between Eva and Burnham is the only random chance encounter that is not truly random. This meeting is planned out by Eva to get to know Burnham and make him attracted to her. The trip to the Vietnamese restaurant also allows Eva to test out her nutritional theories about Burnham under the guise of a random choice of restaurant. The call from the President, although a very unique event for Burnham, gives Eva the impression that Burnham really is important. Burnham does not suspect anything about Eva, although she gives him a great deal of information to consider. Her familiarity with the Vietnamese restaurant and her confessions about political sympathies to the Communist cause of Vietnam should give Burnham some clues about her background and intentions. However, he is more affected by her physical appearance than in anything else.

The random chance comes back into play when Burnham returns to the office. Random chance combines with another comical spin on political life when Burnham becomes involved in the Bilitis incident. Coincidence is the single factor that allows the events to unfold in the way that they do. Burnham's personal connection to the captain of the Bilitis, a transsexual relative no less, seems highly unlikely and adds to the circus-like feel that occurs every time that Burnham interacts with the President. The success of Burnham's handling of the Bilitis crisis shows that he is capable and effective when in reality he is extremely lucky to be personally connected to the captain.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Ivy, high on Percodan, gathers up the papers that are lying around Burnham's office. She takes them to Mr. Pym. Pym arranges a meeting with one of his Russian contacts, known as Teal. They meet at a crowded bar. Teal is skeptical at first, but he later calls Pym to confirm the value of the documents. Pym agrees to continue finding new documents to send to him. Teal sends Pym many new secret spy tools, including a pair of eyeglasses that contain a secret camera. Pym tells Teal to arrange for Jerome's high school diploma.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The real espionage of the novel begins. Pym shows that he has a complicated system of international espionage that he has simply been unable to use. Beginning with his use of the Percodan to make Ivy more loyal to him, Pym shows how his plans for spying are well laid but simply do not have an outlet in his regular life. The irony is that despite all of this preparation and decades as a spy in the United States, Pym shows himself to be out of touch with American culture.

His confusion about popular magazines and movie stars shows that he does not know very much about his adopted country even though he is supposed to be an international spy providing information on America to the Soviet Union. This irony becomes increasingly comical during Pym's meeting with his contact, Teal. Pym judges Teal according to popular stories about spies and espionage, showing his personal inexperience in the field.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Burnham and Eva awake the next morning in Burnham's room at the YMCA. They have sex again that morning and then agree to meet for lunch. Burnham arrives at his office and finds out that his office has been moved into the White House. His new office is right next to the President's. The President brings Burnham to a Cabinet meeting and asks his opinion on important issues.

Eva arrives for lunch and takes pictures of the classified documents with her new spyglasses. The President meets her and tells Burnham to take care of his personal problems, including legally separating or divorcing his wife. Burnham's secretary learns that the bug planted in Burnham's car was put there by a pair of spies disguised as homeless people who work for Epstein.

Eva gives the photographs to her father. She does not want to be involved in spying. Her father warns her that she must continue or else he will expose her previous participation in an environmental activist group that blew up a dam.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Burnham's political career takes off quickly. The random chance of the fake telephone message puts Burnham at the highest levels of power. The change takes place so fast that Burnham himself is unaware of it until it happens. Burnham's presence in the Cabinet meeting is comical as the President turns to him for advice instead to his highly qualified Secretaries. Just like Q Clearance, Burnham's presence in the Cabinet meeting shows how random chance has promoted an unqualified man to the level where he makes decisions that affect the whole country, and often the whole world. The meeting takes on an even greater irony in that Burnham takes the meeting much more seriously than the President does. When the President leaves the room, Burnham looks at the buttons under the table and discovers that they are just drink orders instead of important nuclear commands.

Burnham's new role has earned him the displeasure of Epstein, the man who is qualified to do his job but is instead being ignored by the President. The story continues in a comical style in the way that Burnham learns about Epstein's espionage techniques. His secretary's gossip provides Burnham with the information that he needs to repair his marriage. The irony is that while the President trusts Burnham with the most important decisions in the country, Burnham's wife, Sarah, refuses to believe him about the Epstein story. The other important information that Burnham learns from his secretary is the use of a homeless couple to collect information. This information will come in handy at a later point in the story.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Burnham continues his relationship with Eva and his wife files for divorce. Because of his high position, the FBI has to do a full background check on Eva, which he tells Eva. She goes back to her father and tells him that she wants to stop spying. He convinces her that they cannot. The current crisis at the White House is the Communist takeover of Honduras. Burnham's secretary gets a hold of a taped telephone conversation in which the real reason for Burnham's promotion is revealed. The President sees the fake telephone messages that Dyanna had written about calls from Andrei Gromyko. The President thinks that Burnham and Gromyko really know each other and that this might be useful in negotiations with the Russians.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Burnham learns of the random chance that led to his promotion. In doing so, he confirms that the President has developed such strong trust in him based on a silly lie. Burnham also learns about the secret tapes that Epstein makes of his telephone conversations with the President. This information proves to be more valuable than the information about the President's real reason for promoting him.

Burnham's relationship with his wife follows the same pattern as his professional life. She takes actions that settle his position quickly and without any input on his part. In the same way, Burnham's professional life has been taken out of his control and decided without any effort of his own. The two halves of his life combine to show that Burnham's life is controlled by random chance much more than by his own inclination or action.





# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

The Nazi doctor, Mengele, is captured in Paraguay. Ivy is interviewed on the street as an observer of the celebration of the Jewish population of Washington, D.C. The news coverage shows Mengele's partner in Paraguay, who happens to be Pym's ex-wife, Louise. The high profile case causes Pym and Eva to worry that they will be exposed through their connection to Louise.

Pym is pulled aside by Teal and warned that the documents that he has been getting from Burnham are fakes. Teal tells Pym that Pym has to expose Burnham or risk death. Pym goes to ABC to give part of the story to Peter Jennings. When he exits the building, Teal confronts him. Pym manages to escape, leaving his assumed identity behind. Eva and Burnham have a shared apartment that they use at night. Burnham helps the President determine rational policy on Honduras. He returns home to the apartment and sees a pair of potential spies watching his apartment.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

The connection between Pym and the Mengele case is assumed to be the connection that will destroy Pym's mission as a spy and will expose Eva through the FBI background check. The irony is that this is not the case and the personal lives of both Pym and Eva are not a cause for concern. Instead, the problem comes from the established espionage circles of Pym's contact, Teal. Pym knows that their operation is finished, not because of the American side, but because of the Soviet side.

Pym is again confronted by bureaucracy both in the form of his Soviet spy connections and in his attempts to give ABC the information about his story. He is unable to explain his situation to his contacts and instead has to disappear. At ABC, he has to convince several low level bureaucrats to take his story seriously in order to get the television network to hear his information about international spies in the White House. The irony is that the American bureaucracy that should have uncovered all of this information has not done anything but put through the bureaucratic forms to do a low-level background check on Eva.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Eva confesses that she has been spying on Burnham. They narrowly escape from the apartment when two agents posing as gas inspectors try to arrest them. They go to the YMCA, where the squash organizer, Hal, hides them in his secret room in the basement. Eva stays there while Burnham goes to the White House. He steals the tapes that Epstein has secretly been making of telephone conversations. When he returns to the YMCA, he sends Hal to give Epstein one of the tapes as proof that Burnham has the other tapes.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Burnham's experience in espionage is very limited, yet he is more successful than Pym. His raid on Epstein's office is well planned, which is in stark contrast to the manner in which he has lived his life up to this point. Burnham's long-standing indifference to his own fate has changed during the days when he feels most in danger. At the same time, his relationship to Eva becomes increasingly domestic as she waits for him to save them both from danger.

Hal, the mysterious man who lives at the YMCA, takes on an interesting role in the proceedings. He has even less qualifications than Burnham, and yet he is instrumental in averting a national espionage crisis. His own secret life in the basement of the YMCA provides an interesting symbolism for Pym's past life and Burnham and Eva's future one.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

The President gives a press conference to announce the story that Burnham has passed to him through Hal and Epstein. The president explains that there is no White House spy. Instead, a man was planted in the top levels to send fake documents to the Soviets. The President shows strong emotion about the loss of this person from his staff.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The President's press conference is brief. From it, the reader learns that the President believes the story that Burnham has passed to him through Hal and Epstein. Burnham is cleared from suspicion but his career in the White House is officially over. The irony is that Burnham's reputation as a Washington insider remains intact despite his lack of qualifications or experience.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Burnham writes a final letter to the President, thanking him for the opportunity to serve. He tells him that he cannot reveal where he is or what he is doing. The President regrets that Burnham is no longer around the advise him.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Like in the previous chapter, this chapter ties up some of the loose ends at the White House while leaving the reader in the dark about what happens to Burnham and Eva. The final thought offered by this chapter is that the President remains confident that Burnham did have the high level links that the President assumed he had. The White House continues to live under the impression that Burnham was important and connected when he never really was.



# Characters

## Timothy Burnham

Timothy Burnham is a low-level speechwriter for the President of the United States. His home life is difficult because his wife and children have strong political views that conflict with those of the President. His wife kicks him out and divorces him when she discovers that his boss has bugged their car. Burnham goes to live at the YMCA and eventually forms a relationship with Eva, whose father is a Soviet spy.

Burnham's professional life has many complicated issues. He is given Q Clearance, which allows important technical documents related to atomic energy to come to his office. Burnham has no training in these issues and does not treat the security clearance seriously. At many points, he leaves documents lying around or shows them to his girlfriend Eva, who passes them on to the Soviets. Burnham gets a huge promotion based on a silly lie that his secretary used to make him look important. He becomes the closest advisor of the President of the United States based on the President's assumption that Burnham has high-level contacts in the Soviet Union.

After Eva reveals her real identity, she and Burnham have to disappear from public life. Burnham uses secret tapings of White House conversations to blackmail Epstein into telling the President that Burnham was planted in the White House to pass on fake documents to the Soviets.

## Sarah Burnham

Sarah Burnham is married to Timothy Burnham. They have two children together. Sarah works for Senator Ted Kennedy and has a strong dislike for the current President, who is of the other party. Sarah finds a hidden microphone in her car and thinks that her husband's boss is spying on her. She kicks her husband out of the house and files for divorce.

## Dyanna Butler

Dyanna Butler is Timothy Burnham's secretary. She comes from a very prestigious family and hopes to use her position to find a suitable husband and make herself seem important. She is inadvertently responsible for Burnham's promotion to the White House because she writes a fake telephone message from Andrei Gromyko on his folder. She also uses the gossip that she learns from the other White House secretaries to help Burnham find out information about Mario Epstein.



## Ivy Peniston

Ivy Peniston cleans the offices in the Executive Office Building. Her son, Jerome, needs a forged high school diploma and Ivy looks for important information she can steal from the offices to trade for this diploma. Ivy cleans Timothy Burnham's office and brings back many important documents that Burnham leaves lying around the room. She takes them to Mr. Pym, who has expressed an interest in such documents and has the black market connections to get the diploma for her.

## Foster Pym

Foster Pym is raised in the Soviet Union to be a spy in the United States. He enters America after World War II, pretending to be a wounded soldier. He makes his way to Washington, D.C. where he becomes a caterer. His brief marriage to a member of the American Nazi party, Louise, results in the birth of his daughter, Eva. The documents that Ivy Peniston brings to him help him to recover his reputation within the Soviet intelligence community. He convinces Eva to spy on Burnham. When the documents that they receive turn out to be false, Pym takes the story to ABC. He disappears shortly thereafter.

## Eva Pym

Eva Pym is the daughter of Soviet spy, Foster Pym, and his Nazi wife, Louise. She gets involved in an environmental activist group and participates in a plot to blow up a dam in the western United States. When she returns to her father, he has information about her activist activities and uses them to blackmail her into helping him spy on Burnham. Eva meets Burnham at a squash game and uses her knowledge of nutrition to control his emotions. Finally, she reveals that she is a Soviet spy and she and Burnham flee from the authorities.

## Warner Cobb

Warner Cobb is the leader of the White House speechwriters. Burnham reports to him and gets his assignments from him. When the President takes an interest in Burnham, Burnham turns to Cobb for more information. Cobb is unable to explain why Burnham has been promoted so quickly.

## Mario Epstein

Mario Epstein is the Special Assistant to the President. He controls every aspect of the White House staff. When Burnham is unexpectedly promoted to be the President's most trusted advisor, Epstein is offended and seeks to bring down Burnham. His investigation into Burnham leads him to believe that Burnham is a Soviet spy. Burnham uses the



secret microphone tapes that Epstein has made of private telephone conversations with the President to blackmail Epstein into clearing Burnham's name.

## **President Benjamin Winslow**

President Benjamin Winslow is a Senator from Ohio who has been elected President. Burnham comes to work for him during his second term. Winslow is swayed by his personal feelings about everything and thinks that Burnham is well connected because of a fake telephone message to Andrei Gromyko that he sees on Burnham's folder. Burnham becomes the President's most trusted advisor because he provides the President with straightforward commentary on the issues of national importance. When Burnham disappears, the President believes that this is all part of the overall plan that Burnham knew about.

## **Teal**

Teal is the code name of Pym's Soviet contact. Pym gives him the documents that he steals from Burnham. When the documents turn out to be false, Teal goes after Pym, forcing him to give information to the American media.

## **Hal**

Hal is a very well dressed homosexual man who creates a career for himself at the YMCA. He provides toiletries and padlocks to members of the YMCA and arranges squash matches. When Burnham gets in trouble, he turns to Hal. Hal lets Burnham and Eva stay at his secret basement room at the YMCA. He also acts as the messenger for Burnham's demands of Epstein.

## **Teresa**

Teresa is the name chosen by Sarah Burnham's relative, Todd, when he decides to change to a woman. Teresa is serving as the captain of the Bilitis, a lesbian cruise line, when the boat accidentally floats into Cuban waters. Burnham helps her negotiate a peaceful rescue from Cuban waters and impresses the President with the speed and skill with which he was able to handle the crisis.



# Objects/Places

## White House

The White House is both the residence and the office for the President of the United States. The office space in the building is very crowded so many White House staffers work in nearby buildings. When Burnham is promoted, he gets an office right next to the President's Oval Office.

## Executive Office Building

The Executive Office Building houses many of the White House staff members. Timothy Burnham's office is originally located here. Ivy Peniston cleans the office building. This enables her to gain access to the sensitive documents that Burnham leaves lying around.

## Georgetown

Georgetown is the neighborhood where the Burnham family lives. It is described as a traditionally low-income area that has recently become very expensive.

## Apartment

Though Burnham lives at the YMCA while he is going through his divorce, he and Eva take a small apartment where they meet together at the end of the day. This apartment is the place where Epstein's agents try to arrest them.

## YMCA

Burnham spends a lot of time at the YMCA playing squash. This is how Eva arranges to meet him. After his wife kicks him out, Burnham lives at a room at the YMCA. The YMCA is also the place of refuge for Burnham and Eva when they flee from arrest.

## Q Clearance

Q Clearance is the title given to the Department of Energy security clearance that gives access to classified documents relating to atomic energy. Burnham earns this clearance because, on paper, he has worked for the Department of Energy for over three years.





## Department of Energy

The Department of Energy controls the information related to all forms of energy in the United States, including atomic energy. Officially, Timothy Burnham works for the Department of Energy but this is only a formality because the White House budget is not big enough to pay all of the White House staff.

## Shredder

The Department of Energy sends Burnham a shredder to shred important documents. The presence of the shredder in Burnham's office leads Ivy to believe that he has an important job and that his documents might be worth something to Mr. Pym.

## Bilitis

The Bilitis is the name of a yacht that accidentally enters Cuban waters. The captain is Teresa, one of Burnham's wife's relatives, and someone who is a transsexual and runs lesbian cruises in the Caribbean.

## ABC

The ABC television network is the network that Pym approaches with his international espionage story.

## Honduras

Honduras is a Central American country. In the novel, Communist agents in the region are taking over the country and the President must decide whether or not to send troops there. Burnham convinces the President not to send troops and to let Honduras decide its own future.

## Micro tapes

Mario Epstein uses micro cassettes to record the telephone messages that he has with the President. Burnham discovers these tapes and uses them to blackmail Epstein in order to clear Burnham's name.

## Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson is the eighteenth century British literary figure that Burnham quotes throughout the novel. Samuel Johnson appears to be a personal hero for Burnham. The

ending of the novel uses Samuel Johnson for a final humorous twist when the President asks to see him, not knowing that he is an historical figure, not a current political one.

## Social Sensitivity

Peter Benchley worked as a speech writer from March 1967 to January 1969 for President Lyndon Johnson, one of our most flamboyant national leaders, giving him the opportunity to observe the workings of national bureaucracies at first hand. Even after an absence of seventeen years, the scene and the characters vying for power and influence remained fresh in his mind. Distrust of public officials — the attitude of most Americans — may be justified for the most part, but much that happens in the capital is a source of comedy for the detached observer. Regardless of the administration, Washington always presents inexhaustible material for the satirist. Most Americans welcome a chance to know what working in the government complex is like and to have a few laughs at its expense. To what extent is official Washington really working in the interests of the people? The quest for power may not always corrupt character, but it is guaranteed to distort it, sometimes with hilarious results.

## Techniques

Like the works of his grandfather and father, Benchley's plot features an insignificant individual who in his fashion tries to be true to his principles and to survive in an organization inimical to ideals. Grandfather Robert Benchley wrote comic skits featuring this type of little man and acted in motion pictures in the roles of such persons. The character Timothy Burnham varies from Robert Benchley's "little man" in that he is intelligent, and his intelligence has helped him do what his job requires while avoiding any deep involvement in the systems around him. An arbitrary decision by some unknown superior ends this. By accident he is the only speech writer available on a certain evening when President Winslow, infuriated by what he thinks is an incompetent speech, calls Timothy's office. He comes to the attention of the President about the same time he becomes interesting to the unsuccessful Soviet spy Foster Pym, who has learned of his Q Clearance. The story is a situation comedy.

Nothing happens that makes any real sense, but Benchley, during his brief stay in the Johnson White House, seems to have concluded that there is little that is logical about government departments.

The novel owes its strength to Benchley's powers of observation and his ability to vividly describe what he sees. His comic touch may not be quite as subtle as his grandfather's, but Robert Benchley's range of humor was not wide. He would not have attempted to show the absurdities of a government bureaucracy as his grandson does.



# Themes

## Themes

Survival in government is a challenge to the ingenuity of workers at all levels. Peggy Noonan, a speech writer for President Reagan, says in her *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (1990), that Reagan himself was not such an awesome person, but his wife, Nancy, terrified her. She did her best to hide when the First Lady came through her office area.

Timothy Burnham also feels like a small fish swimming in a school of sharks, and he accidentally catches the attention of the President of the United States, who has the reputation of being even more formidable than his hatchet men. And yet this supremely powerful person is so dependent on the little people who write his speeches that he seems almost in a panic when he calls Burnham's office.

American Presidents during this century often give the impression of being peculiarly inarticulate. Franklin Roosevelt never quite believed that Winston Churchill wrote his own speeches. A presidential speech writer, although of minor importance politically, makes it possible for the Chief Executive to seem witty, profound, and sincere when he talks to his people.

Burnham is in this position, but he is dismayed when the President takes a personal interest in him.

## Politics

Because the setting is Washington, D.C., the most obvious theme is related to the political maneuverings that occur in that city. The novel takes a particularly humorous take on the American political system and pokes fun at the ways that important decisions are made. Timothy Burnham's rise to power is based on silly misunderstandings and his fall from grace is equally affected by coincidences that show the haphazard nature of the political system.

Timothy Burnham's Q Clearance is the earliest sign that something is strange in the way that power is allocated in Washington, D.C. Burnham has no training or qualifications to have access to atomic energy documents, but they are made available to him through a bureaucratic procedure. Burnham's rise to power in the White House is also not based on any training or qualifications. Instead, the President assumes that a fake telephone message written on Burnham's folder is genuine and believes that Burnham has real contacts in the Soviet Union. The President's willingness to believe such a flimsy piece of information, combined with the length that the President is willing to go to promote Burnham, show both the humor and the danger of the way that political decisions are made.



Burnham's time in the White House is more reminiscent of a high school social scene than of the activities of the highest levels of power. All the real information he receives comes from the gossiping of his secretary with other secretaries who work for important people. His chance comes when he learns that Epstein secretly records his telephone conversations with the President. This action, in violation of both the President's trust and federal law, gives Burnham the ammunition he needs to save his own political skin.

## Espionage

Cold War espionage is the motivating factor for many of the characters. Both real and imagined spy games are involved. On the one hand, the espionage activities of Pym, Eva, and Teal use standard spy-novel tactics to gather and pass on information. On the other, many non-spies take on the role of spy, often with more success than the real spies. Ivy Peniston, Dyanna Butler, and even Burnham himself perform complicated acts of espionage in order to further their own aims.

Pym's Soviet contact, Teal, provides the most organized espionage ring in the novel. Pym himself has been trained since childhood to be a spy, and yet most of his knowledge about spying seems to come from popular culture. He is unsure of most of his espionage instincts and gets by on sheer luck more than by using any planned spy techniques. He passes his spy tools on to Eva who uses them to steal documents from Burnham. The irony is that Burnham actually gives the documents to Eva, assuming that they will not mean anything more to her than they do to him. Burnham is an easy target because he does not take his Q Clearance or his political position seriously.

The amateur spies go to greater lengths to undertake their personal missions than the professional spies do. When Ivy Peniston examines Burnham's office, she thinks that hidden cameras and microphones might record her activities. She takes extra precautions to make sure that her behavior in the room is not suspicious. Burnham makes it very easy for her to steal documents from his office. He does not really consider her presence and tells her that she can dispose of the documents for him. Dyanna Butler also turns spy very easily. She uses her connections with the other White House secretaries to learn more about the practices of Burnham's enemy, Epstein. She is able to gather both information and evidence for Burnham to help him fight against Epstein.

## Random Chance

Throughout the novel, the actions and events are direct by random chance more than the plans of any group of characters or individual. Random chance allows a wide range of coincidence to lead to important and often world changing occurrences. The rise and fall of Timothy Burnham is all accomplished by chance rather than any personal ambition. Similarly, the Soviet spy plotline could not take place without a series of coincidences that are not initiated by the spy himself and rely on random chance to continue.



Timothy Burnham's life is based on random chance. His initial meeting with the President is based on a mistake that the President made in his speech that has nothing to do with what Burnham wrote. This meeting leads to the President's chance glimpse at a fake phone message that leads him to promote Burnham to a significant government advisory position.

Another series of coincidences makes Burnham seem like he knows what he is doing. The incident with the Bilitis takes the concept of random chance to a whole new level. The personal connection between Burnham and Teresa is quite coincidental. The series of events that lead the Bilitis into trouble are similarly extremely coincidental to the point of appearing ridiculous. The situation seems created to show Burnham in a good light to his superiors in a way that shows the completely random nature of world events as well as the ability to solve them.

Foster Pym's life follows the same pattern as Burnham's. The coincidence that gained him his catering business rests on his good luck to both work for Himmler's personal chef and then to have the means of getting rid of Himmler's personal chef. Similarly, Pym's encounters with the American Nazi party are also rather random, leading to the birth of his daughter, Eva, who is necessary for the later plot. Pym's choice to befriend Ivy, the office cleaner of the Executive Office Building, is also a long shot that happens to pay off. Ivy is able to complete her role in the spy plot only by a series of coincidences and the random luck of Timothy Burnham.

# Style

## Points of View

The novel is told in the third person omniscient point of view. The narrator provides information about the various characters, including their backgrounds as well as their inner thoughts. Many of the characters are covered more in depth than others. Timothy Burnham, for example, has the largest role in the narrative and his inner thoughts are explored the most deeply. However, very little information is given about his background before coming to Washington, D.C.

Foster Pym and Ivy Peniston, on the other hand, have a large amount of background information for relatively smaller roles in the novel. Foster Pym's life story from childhood to the present is given in greater detail than the background information about the main character, Timothy Burnham. Ivy Peniston, who plays a much smaller role, also has a great deal more attention paid to her background and her motivations than many of the more significant characters.

## Setting

The novel is set in Washington, D.C. and incorporates both the political offices of the city with the residential districts. Most of the significant action takes place in either the White House or the Executive Office Building. Here, Timothy Burnham attends high-level meetings, including those of the Cabinet. He also spends significant time in both his offices. His office in the Executive Office Building is the scene of Ivy Peniston's spying. When he moves to the White House, his office is located right next to the Oval Office and shows both the huge change in his position and the proximity he, and those spying on him, now have to the President.

The residential areas of Washington, D.C. also provide some of the key settings for the novel. Timothy Burnham's home in Georgetown, as well the apartment that he shares with Eva, both play significant roles in the plot. Similarly, Mr. Pym's home and the YMCA are both settings for various transactions and meetings that take place among characters that keep the series of coincidences going.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in very simple language that is easily understood by the average reader. There are some times when political terminology is used in the narrative but none of it is unusual in normal English usage. Most readers will be able to navigate through the political language without many problems. Some of the political terms relating to the Cold War might be unfamiliar to some modern day readers, but most are either explained in the narrative or can be figured out by their context.





One significant language issue in the novel concerns the game of squash, which might be unfamiliar to some readers. Squash and various games of squash occur throughout the novel, but none of the squash terminology is necessary for the reader to understand the overall plot. Knowledge of squash would be helpful during these parts of the novel, but the reader can get through these parts without losing any significant information.

## Structure

The novel is written in fifteen chapters. When a new character is introduced, there is usually significant information about the character in the chapter. Some of the chapters cover only a few hours or minutes of time while others cover the events of a whole day. The novel is written in chronological order and it is easy for the reader to keep ahead of the plot. At some points, the plot does split into several different stories, as the spy plot line and the political plot line diverge and then recombine at various occasions.

For a political and spy novel, there are very few suspenseful moments so the reader does not need to worry about missing many clues or losing important information. Most of the important elements of the plot are repeated throughout the novel so that the reader has several opportunities to gather the important information. Because the novel takes place over only a couple of weeks, few major events need to be kept track of.



## Quotes

"McGregor wrote the President's remarks for the new Secretary's swearing-in ceremony and was, according to custom, invited to attend the ceremony. He went through the receiving line, and when he came to the new Secretary, he shook hands and said, 'How do you do, sir? I wrote the President's remarks swearing you in. I hope you liked them. I'm your special assistant. You will never see me again. Goodbye.'" (Chapter 1)

"There arrayed above him like a phalanx, labels facing front, were his bottles of vitamin pills. On the shelf below the bottles were seven clean Pyrex bowls, custard size, enough for a week. He took down the first bottle, the largest - vitamin C, ascorbic acid, 500 milligrams - and counted out the pills. Sarah stood across the room and watched, wishing she wouldn't, incapable of not, mesmerized as thoroughly as when she saw the frog on the dissecting table in biology class." (Chapter 2)

"If she was going to call Mr. Pym and ask for help with the high-school diploma problem, she wanted to be able to bring him a present, and if she had any hope of rooting out a tidbit that might brighten his day, it would have to concern the people she worked *for*. Coincidentally, today might be a good day for such a discovery. Normally, all the offices had been dusted, swept, scoured and waved, had had all loose papers removed, bagged and burned by the time she set to work on the hallway floors. But when she worked the early shift, it was she who cleaned some of the offices and removed the papers during the last couple of hours of her work day, and because of the high-level goings-on that always crackled around the building it was common for several people to work late." (Chapter 3)

"With research help from associates with whom he was in contact mostly through dead-letter drops, Pym discovered that Dickinson had been Heinrich Himmler's personal chef. He had cut a deal with the American OSS, whereby he ratted on several former colleagues, now eager to deny ever having heard of the SS, in return for which he was guaranteed immunity from prosecution and provided with a new identity." (Chapter 4)

"He picked up his big desk stapler, fit it over the top of the trousers and, working from the top downward, slammed the staples into the fabric - bam! bam! bam! bam! He flung the stapler aside and examined the pants: They would hold, unless the President intended to grapple with him. (Chapter 5)

"She began to dust the glass top of the desk and notices on the far corner an appointment calendar. Maybe it would tell her more about who this Mr. Burnham was. But she didn't dare flip through it in view of the chandelier (which, by now, she *knew* to contain a camera; guilt was already creating phantasms in her head), so, as she rounded the desk, she hit the calendar with her hip and knocked it onto the floor. She grumbled aloud (for the benefit of the microphones that might be behind the paintings or in the electrical outlets or even in the dingle-dangles on the chandelier) and knelt - slowly and carefully, supporting herself on the edge of the desk so as not to insult the ligaments of her knee - behind the desk, out of sight from the chandelier, and said,



'Where'd you get to? Come back here. Way over there? Damn!' talking a torrent of nonsense to cover the sound as she flipped through the pages of the calendar in search of tidbits about its owner." (Chapter 6)

"Quietly, Hal began to spend his days in the cellar of the Y, dressed in white-duck trousers, white tennis shoes and a polo shirt from the Malibu Beach Club. He bought two dozen cheap towels and rented them for fifty cents apiece to people who had forgotten their own. Then he provided padlocks for rent, and sold soap. Finally, as he saw the frustration of players whose opponents failed to appear or who couldn't get court time, he began to book games. Knowing that people tended to obey any sign that looked official, he bought a snappy placard that said RESERVED and pasted it on one of the four squash courts." (Chapter 7)

"Like Jimmy Carter, he would be committing adultery in his heart. He had so far been trying to maintain a conviction that the sorry state of his marriage was no one's fault. The misunderstandings would eventually sort themselves out. But if he added adultery to the mix - even mental adultery, spiritual self-abuse - the balance would tip against him; he would become the villain." (Chapter 8)

"How had this creature been recruited? He was a stereotype of the American go-getter: slick, hip, rich. What could the Soviet Union possibly offer him that he would value? Money? Maybe he was being blackmailed. Maybe he had relatives in the USSR. Maybe he was a restless failure in search of cheap thrills. Pym had read newspaper accounts about all intelligence services being plagued these days by such volatile romantics." (Chapter 9)

"As he stepped out of the President's way, he purposely dropped his yellow pad on the floor and, bending to retrieve it, stole a glance at the panel of buttons beneath the table. They had to be connected to crisis centers around the nation - like NORAD, SAC, NSA - for even within the womb of the White House the President could never be more than a fingertip away from the instruments of Doomsday. The labels beside the buttons read: Coke, Tab, Fresca, Pepsi, Coffee, Tea." (Chapter 10)

"After the second time the President met Eva, Burnham had gone to the President and consented to a full-field FBI investigation of Eva. He said he could not imagine that the FBI would find any skeletons in her cupboard, but he agreed with the President that it was best for all concerned that she be certified officially safe." (Chapter 11)

"The network news came on at seven, and of course the capture of Mengele was the lead story. Eva drew a chair close to the television and sat riveted to the screen, absorbing Louise's every move and utterance, as if hoping in a few seconds to assimilate a lifetime of knowledge of the mother she had never known." (Chapter 12)

"On the floor of the closet was a plastic bin about the size of a liquor carton, half full of used audio cassettes and micro cassettes. He knelt down and opened the Gucci bag and culled the bin for all the micro cassettes. There were three or four dozen. Then,



because room remained in the Gucci bag, he filled it with regular cassettes." (Chapter 13)

"Burnham supposed that he could have forced the news conference for last night, but the risk was that only one network would broadcast it, which would have meant that seven-eighths of America wouldn't have watched it." (Chapter 14)

"He had been right about Tim all along, and he accepted Tim's sudden departure as part of the price he (and all Americans) had to pay for maintaining the nation's security. It had been worth it just for the pleasure of watching Mario eat crow, sit there looking all splotchy and nervous and having to admit that Tim was better wired than he was." (Chapter 15)



# Key Questions

Q Clearance can be used as the basis of discussions on humor in American politics and on the nature of humor generally. What makes a given work a comedy? There has to be more to American politics than laughable antics from those elected to serve their constituents. Does the political process still attract those who believe that democracy is more than mere rhetoric?

It can be argued that Lyndon Johnson, whatever his weaknesses, was genuinely concerned with the problems of poverty and education. Few presidents were more successful than he in getting bills passed that addressed these issues.

1. From what you know of Johnson's years in the White House, does Benchley give an accurate account of his personality?
2. Some reviewers complained that Benchley gives the impression that he is working too hard to produce comic effects in this novel. Do you agree?
3. Is Mario Epstein a character you recognize? Can the desire for power become the only driving force in some people?
4. The real Lyndon Johnson had a personality that one observer said resembled that of the captain of a chain gang. Does Benchley allow this unpleasantness anywhere in his novel?
5. In what parts of the book is Benchley most successful and least successful as a comic writer?
6. Robert Benchley, Peter's grandfather, became famous as a writer of humorous sketches in the 1930s and 1940s. Find some of his sketches and compare them to the humor in Q Clearance. Which Benchley is the better comic writer? Are any of their techniques similar?
7. Robert Benchley acted in several motion pictures and won an Academy Award for the skit "How to Sleep."

Nathaniel Benchley, Peter's father, wrote the novel *The Off-Islanders*, which was the basis of the motion picture *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming*. Do you think Peter wrote Q Clearance with a movie script in mind?

Why or why not?

8. Benchley has been accused of muddled plotting in his novels. Does this describe situations in Q Clearance?
9. Does the relationship of Eva Pym and Timothy Burnham show Benchley as an effective writer of romantic love stories?



## Topics for Discussion

How does the novel provide a commentary on the American political system?

Compare and contrast Burnham's relationship with his wife, Sarah and his relationship with his girlfriend, Eva.

Consider Ivy Peniston's role in the novel. What perspective does she give to the plot?

How does Burnham's relationship with the president change over time? How does Burnham's opinion of himself change alongside this relationship?

How is Foster Pym's training as a spy shown in his relationship with his contact, Teal? With Ivy? With his daughter, Eva?

What is the significance of Q Clearance?

What role does the YMCA play in the novel? How does it join different elements of the plot?



## Related Titles

Q Clearance is not one of Benchley's sea adventures, but like his previous works does present people in danger.

Comic Soviet agents have replaced sharks, and Benchley again shows his skill in creating suspense. His next book, *Rummies* (1989), also contains much humor. It is a study of alcoholism and rehabilitation. Alcoholism is not treated humorously. It is far too serious a problem for that. Scott Preston, the book's hero, is a humorous man who jokes constantly, but who is not aware of how ill he has become. He believes he is fine but has to have at least two belts of Stolichnaya vodka before beginning work each day. He is finally compelled to go to a detoxification clinic in New Mexico founded by Stone Banner, a onetime actor in Westerns who has become a sort of saint in the struggle against alcohol and drugs, addictions he supposedly has overcome. Preston is cured by the standard Alcoholics Anonymous program, but Banner is revealed as an arch hypocrite who still practices both of the vices he allegedly had overcome. The book provides a description of how a patient can get the better of an addiction which has ruled his life. The book becomes a mystery after the body of a female patient is found at the foot of the mountain where Banner lives. As the novel ends, the mystery is solved, and in its most hilarious incident, Banner is exposed when he appears stoned out of his mind before an audience gathered to pay tribute to him. Since writing *Q Clearance* and *Rummies*, Benchley has returned to writing sea adventure stories, including *Beast* (1991), and *White Shark* (1994), using *Jaws* (1974) as a pattern.



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