

# **Rats Saw God Study Guide**

## **Rats Saw God by Rob Thomas**

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## Overview

Rats Saw God tells the story of Steve York, a National Merit finalist who is also a habitual dope smoker ("stoner"). He is failing senior English and has a rash of run-ins with school authorities. His guidance counselor Mr. DeMouy gives him the opportunity to avoid summer school by writing one hundred pages about any subject. After several false starts, the writing project (which consumes half of the novel) takes off as a diary. Steve writes about his early highschool years mainly spent near Houston, Texas living with his father. Steve always refers to his father as "the astronaut." Their relationship is strained, at best. The process of writing his story for Mr. DeMouy provides Steve with the maturity to tackle college life. Steve is floating on the outside of the school when he decides to form his own club for other outsiders. Around the same time, he falls deeply in love with a young woman named Dub and the club falls under the guidance of an English teacher, Mr. Waters. Dub and Mr. Waters betray Steve and this serves as the catalyst transforming Steve from a potential college scholarship recipient to full-time stoner.



## About the Author

Rob Thomas was born August 15, 1965, in Sunnyside, Washington, but moved to San Marcos, Texas, at age ten. Growing up, Thomas always knew he wanted to be a writer. He told librarian Joel Shoemaker that "[what] I wanted to write changed frequently, but never the notion that I'd be putting words down for other people to read. As a little kid I imagined myself writing books." During high school, Thomas served as the editor for his high school newspaper. After graduating from high school he attended the University of Texas at Austin. He graduated with a degree in history and earned a teaching certificate.

While in college he also played football, but he quit when he was offered a full scholarship to edit the University of Texas student magazine. Thomas always dreamed of becoming a writer for magazines like Rolling Stone or Sports Illustrated since, other than writing, music and sports were his passions. During and after college, he spent his free time playing in various Austin bar bands. His primary band started out covering Clash and U2 songs, but after a while started performing their own material with Thomas writing most of the lyrics. He told Shoemaker "I always got a thrill from the writing aspect of being in a band." During the day, he worked as a journalism teacher at Reagan High School in Austin. The combination of the band and teaching left him little time, or energy, to write fiction. After three years of teaching, he left Austin in 1994 to work in Los Angeles as a producer for Channel One, the teen news network.

It was there he started work on *Rats Saw God*. Thomas commented to Shoemaker that at Channel One "my job was boring, so if I was going to waste creative energy, it was going to be at home." He started working on *Rats Saw God* the summer he turned twentyeight. The idea for the novel stemmed from a newspaper story in the Austin newspaper about a high-school teacher accused of having a consensual sexual relationship with a student. He wrote from five to nine in the morning every day, finishing the book in nine months. One year before, however, he wrote a short story called "Irresistible" as part of an application to the film school at New York University. While there are significant differences between the story and the novel, the essential characters are the same: Dub, Steve, Doug, and Mr. Waters.

Like many authors who publish their first book as a young adult novel, Thomas was not really aware such a market existed.

The few young adult novels he had read did not impress him. Thirty years earlier S. E. Hinton wrote *The Outsiders* because her voice, her vision, and her life were not to be found in the young adult novels of her time; Thomas did the same. He told Shoemaker, "I wanted the book to appeal to my peers.... I had read a few young adult books when I was in teacher training at [the University of Texas], but *Rats* didn't sound much like the ones I'd read there." To get the book in print, Thomas sent out thirtythree letters to various literary agents. Simon and Schuster won a mini bidding war among publishers and offered Thomas a five thousand dollar advance. After *Rats Saw God* sold twenty thousand copies and received mostly positive reviews, Thomas landed a multi-book deal.



His next novel, *Slave Day*, was set in a Texas high school and was told from eight different points of view. Focusing on the school's traditional fundraising activity of "selling" students and teachers as slaves for a day, the book deals with big issues such as racism. *Doing Time* followed *Slave Day*. It is a collection of short stories about teens doing community service. In both books, some of the characters follow the pattern of traditional young adult novels, changing and growing throughout the story, while other characters break that mold. They make the wrong choices or do not grow at all. Thomas's final book for older students, *Satellite Down*, is his most autobiographical, focusing on a character working for a Channel One-type station. This book mirrors *Rats Saw God* in many ways—the main character is transplanted from Texas to California, his life is changed when he learns about a secret, and both books share a common theme of a character trying to run away from reality as his search for "truth" gets upended by lies. Thomas has also written a book for middle-school students called *Green Thumb*, which covers many of the same issues as his other novels, but with more humor and less drama. Thomas has also confessed to ghostwriting teen romance paperbacks and science fiction novelizations (in the "X-Files" series).

348 *Rats Saw God* Thomas's ability to combine engaging, dramatic events with humor served him well in making the transition from writing novels to authoring scripts for film and television. Thomas wrote a movie script called *Fortune Cookie* about three couples who spend their first date at an unusual Chinese restaurant. An executive at Sony Pictures bought the script. The film was produced and released to strong reviews in 1999. The script also caught the attention of the creators of the new teen television drama *Dawson's Creek*. Thomas was quickly hired as a staff writer for *Dawson's Creek*. He left within a year, after writing episodes such as "Prelude to a Kiss" and "In the Company of Men," choosing to work on his own projects, first and foremost adapting *Fortune Cookie* as a romantic comedy /drama for television. The show that resulted, *Cupid*, was picked up by ABC during the 1998 fall season. Thomas was billed as creator, executive producer, and writer. Although praised by the critics, the show was placed in a terrible time slot (on Thursday nights against NBC's strong line-up of shows) and never caught on. It was cancelled and the last show aired in February of 1999. Thomas has also written a television pilot (*The Sticks*) and an episode of the program *Space Ghost*. Thomas wrote the screenplay for the fall 2000 feature film *Drive Me Crazy*. Rather than an original screenplay, this was an adaptation of Todd Strasser's novel, *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date*. Ironically, Todd Strasser worked on a movie treatment of *Rats Saw God*. Thomas has also completed a screen adaptation of his novel *Slave Day*. Fans of Thomas's work can visit his web page and download copies of television and movie scripts. There are also several *Cupid* fan sites.





# Plot Summary

*Rats Saw God* tells the story of Steve York, a gifted young American boy who comes of age during a difficult time of change. His parents divorce and he moves with his father from Florida to Texas where he tries to pick up the pieces of his life. In Texas, he meets Dub and falls in love with her. Steve and Dub forge a relationship but eventually Dub finds another love interest. Steve is devastated and within just a few months turns to drugs and the dropout culture to ease his emotional pain. Under the guidance of a dedicated school counselor, Steve finally realizes that the way to success is not through self-destruction and the novel ends with Steve entering college and looking forward to the future with a confident optimism.

Steve York, son of the famous astronaut Alan York, excels at academia and lives a typical teenage life in Florida until his parents divorce. Steve subsequently moves with his father to Houston, Texas, while his younger sister Sarah lives with their mother in San Diego. In Houston, Steve enjoys being an anonymous student at a large high school even as he maintains his standard of academic excellence and makes new friends. During his sophomore year, Steve meets Wanda Varner, generally known as Dub, and the two become acquaintances and then friends. Steve is infatuated with Dub and eventually the two characters become a couple. After several months of dating they begin to have sex and spend so much time exclusively together that some of their other friends become somewhat alienated.

During their junior year, Steve and Dub enroll in a creative writing class taught by Mr. Waters, a nonconformist instructor who encourages his students to be iconoclastic and think outside the box. Steve excels in the class and wins a local writing award while Dub becomes attracted to Waters. Steve spends Christmas break with his mother in San Diego and returns to discover that Dub and Waters have begun a sexual relationship. Steve stops attending the creative writing class and studiously avoids Dub. His scholastic work is pushed aside as he begins to smoke marijuana and his old friends are discarded and replaced with a group of drug-using associates. Steve completes his junior year with poor grades and one failing English credit and then moves to San Diego to live with his mother.

Steve spends most of his senior year at a new high school where he earns poor grades and continues to use drugs. He develops a sarcastic and cynical viewpoint and seeks to purposefully alienate anyone who shows an interest in him. He is particularly distant from his father and begins to blame him for many of his life's problems. Steve's younger sister, Sarah, remains supportive and tries to help Steve where she can.

At about mid-year, DeMouy, a student counselor, reviews Steve's record and notes that he will not graduate unless he makes up his failed English credit. DeMouy offers to change the credit to a passing grade if Steve will write a 100-page report on any subject. Steve thinks the offer absurd, but does want to graduate from high school. He therefore begins to write about his previous years in high school, telling his own story

from his own point of view. Steve submits the report to DeMouy a few pages at a time over the course of several months.

As Steve writes the report and reviews his past experiences, he becomes enlightened about his behavior and realizes that he has unfairly judged other people in his life, particularly his father. As he evaluates his life, he becomes more productive, stops using drugs, and once again begins to excel at school. He meets another student, Allison Kimble, and begins to date her. As the narrative completes, Steve finishes his report, graduates from high school, forms a strong relationship with Allison, and resolves his relationship with his father. The novel concludes with Steve arriving at college, looking forward to the future.



# San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 1-11)

## San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 1-11) Summary

*Rats Saw God* tells the story of Steve York, a gifted young American boy who comes of age during a difficult time of change. His parents divorce and he moves with his father from Florida to Texas where he tries to pick up the pieces of his life. In Texas, he meets Dub and falls in love with her. Steve and Dub forge a relationship but eventually Dub finds another love interest. Steve is devastated and within just a few months turns to drugs and the dropout culture to ease his emotional pain. Under the guidance of a dedicated school counselor, Steve finally realizes that the way to success is not through self-destruction and the novel ends with Steve entering college and looking forward to the future with a confident optimism.

Steven York is a senior student, class of 1994, at Wakefield High School in San Diego, California. He has been reported as being under the influence of marijuana and has been sent to the office of Jeff DeMouy, a student counselor. Steve is surprised to discover that DeMouy's office is fairly comfortably appointed and does not have many of the gimmicky posters typically associated with high school counselor's offices.

DeMouy briefly reviews Steve's academic record, noting that Steve had attended Grace High School in Houston, Texas, for three years. At Grace High School Steve had excelled at academia, maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA, and scored very highly on his SAT examinations. Steve has recently been identified as a National Merit finalist. DeMouy wonders what could possibly have changed Steve from an over-achieving and successful student into a failing and drug abusing near dropout. Steve declines to discuss his personal life with DeMouy. DeMouy then notes that Steve is ? English Credit short of graduating. DeMouy then offers Steve a solution - if Steve will write a 100-page report on any subject then DeMouy will award the ? credit and Steve will graduate.

Steve then thinks about his options and decides that he will complete the report. While in the school office he sees his little sister, Sarah York. Sarah, two years younger than Steve but already a junior student, is the school class president and has the highest grades in her class. She has been on a recent CNN news story because of her activism. Steve obviously finds her enormous success and popularity intimidating. Steve briefly remembers that after completing his last final in his junior year of high school he had moved from his father's house in Houston to his mother's house in San Diego without gaining his father's permission. He then leaves DeMouy's office and goes home.

Steve arrives at home to find it vacant, as usual. Steven's mom has recently married Chuck, a pilot for Delta Airlines, and the couple enjoys taking numerous extended flying trips away from home. Steve remembers how his father had deliberately held him back one year in school so that he would be older and larger than his fellow students, thus gaining an edge in athletics and sports. Unfortunately, Steven does not enjoy organized sports and is not particularly athletic. Steven considers himself as skinny, bony,



scrawny, and gawky, though quite intelligent. He has pierced ears and wears large hoop earrings.

Steve considers his graduation options and decides writing the paper is the best choice. He ponders what to write and makes several abortive attempts at being creative or funny. Finally, he decides to write a nonfiction narrative about his own personal recent history. Steve believes he will be good at creative writing because his heart has been recently broken - presumably a prerequisite to creativity - by Dub. Steven writes and submits the following section of the novel as the first several pages of his long report.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 1-11) Analysis**

The introductory section of the novel is critical to plot development. The narrator and principle protagonist, Steven York, is introduced and characterized. Steve is an intelligent senior class student who has stopped pursuing academic achievement and instead has taken up illegal drug use. He is nearly flunking out of school and will not graduate unless he performs some extra-curricular make-up activities. His student counselor, Jeff DeMouy, notes that Steve once was a straight-A student but now is nearly a dropout - and he wonders why. Steve is noncommittal in his response, but this initial discussion sets up the central extended plot structure of the novel. The novel will hereafter be concerned with explaining why Steve has changed his behavior so completely, and will also explore Steve's future potential.

DeMouy tells Steve he will graduate only if he writes a 100-page report on any topic. Steve accepts, and after some initial difficulty on selecting a topic, he finally decides he will explain to DeMouy, through the 100-page report, what previously has happened to cause him to change his behavior. The character of Steve is therefore interesting in several ways - he is simultaneously the narrator, the principle protagonist, and the meta-fictional author of the half of the novel that he does not purportedly narrate.

The basic structure of the novel hinges upon an understanding of Steve's report. The novel consists of two types of sections, namely, present-tense sections in which Steve relates as narrator, and past-tense sections in which Steve relates as author. The present-tense sections constitute the novel's present and are printed in a serif font. The past-tense sections constitute Steve's 100-page report and are printed in a bold-face sans-serif font. The two types of sections are interspersed throughout the novel and are separated by whitespace and headings that indicate the relative time of the events described. In general, the present-tense sections are arranged in chronological order, begin toward the end of Steve's senior year in high school, and end a few weeks after Steve's graduation. The past-tense sections (that is, Steve's report) are also arranged in chronological order but they span a period from Steve's freshman year through his junior year. The two types of sections are intermingled such that the plot develops in two parallel timelines, one in the present, and one in the past.



# Houston, Freshman Year (pp. 11-17)

## Houston, Freshman Year (pp. 11-17) Summary

Steven York was raised in Cocoa Beach, Florida. His parents were normal in most respects although their marriage was not particularly happy. Steve remembers they argued frequently, though always in private. Steve's father, Alan York, is a famous astronaut and is very emotionally distant from his family. In 1989, Steve's parents were divorced. Sarah, Steve's little sister, went with her mother and Steve remained with his father who quickly moved them to Houston. Alan York continued to try and dominate Steve's life, insisting that he excel not only at academia but also at sports. Steve remembers his father with resentment and feels little positive emotion for him.

Steven attended Grace High School in Houston and completed a nondescript freshman year, relieved to attend normal courses instead of courses for gifted students. During his registration process, he meets Doug Chappell who is organizing a skateboarding student association. Although Steven never joins the "Skate or Die" club, he does become good friends with Doug. Steven also gets a job as a concessions attendant at a local movie theater.

Steven relates how Alan York, his father, was born in Yakima, Washington, where he was a scrawny kid who worked difficult jobs without particularly excelling. One day, however, he rescued a drowning girl whose father was somewhat influential. The girl's father arranged for Alan to attend the Air Force Academy where Alan blossomed and became athletic, physically fit, and academically distinguished. In 1959, Alan married the girl he had rescued from drowning who eventually became Steven's mother. Alan subsequently served as a captain in the Viet Nam War where he flew over sixty combat missions. After he returned from the war, he became a test pilot for the Air Force and later entered the space program and traveled to the moon where he performed a moonwalk.

## Houston, Freshman Year (pp. 11-17) Analysis

This section of the novel represents the first several pages of Steve York's 100-page report. The section is set apart from the previous text by the use of a bold-face sans-serif font and the designation of a specific time period - in this instance, Steve's freshman year. Throughout the remainder of novel, the bold-face sans-serif font designates that the text is a portion of Steve's written report.

Steve relates his upbringing and establishes himself as an intelligent, insightful, and reliable author. He discusses his early status as a gifted student and notes that being set apart for special treatment was not particularly rewarding. He notes he is happy to be completely anonymous at his new high school in Houston. Steve identifies that his family situation is established; his parents are divorced and he lives with his father in

Houston while his younger sister lives in San Diego with his mother, who has remarried. He also introduces Doug Chappell, who will be a major character in Steve's reports. It is interesting to note that Steve's parents were married in 1959 but had no children for sixteen years, and then had two children in quick succession in 1975 and 1977, and were divorced fourteen years later in 1991 after about three decades of being married.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 17-18)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 17-18) Summary**

Steve stops by DeMouy's office to speak with DeMouy. He offers DeMouy a fern as a gift - DeMouy places the plant on a bookshelf and tells Steve he has read the first few pages of his report. DeMouy produces a sheaf of papers that Steve notes has been marked-up with green ink. Steve then goes off to class, tardy as usual.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 17-18) Analysis**

This brief section of the novel is set apart from the previous text by the use of a serif font and the designation of the present tense. Throughout the remainder of the novel, the serif font designates that the text is narrative. This section demonstrates that Steve has indeed commenced writing his 100-page report. In fact, he has submitted several pages of the report to DeMouy. DeMouy has read the pages and has marked them up in green ink. The green ink is, according to Steve, symbolic of acceptance, as contrasted to red ink, which would have symbolized rejection. The green fern that Steve gives as a gift is also symbolic: it indicates that Steve has accepted DeMouy's interest in him and intends to continue to develop their relationship by writing the report and thereby graduating from high school. The fern also has a humorous side - Steve has planted a marijuana seed in the fern's pot.



## **San Diego, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 18-21)**

### **San Diego, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 18-21) Summary**

Steve spends most of the summer with his mother in San Diego, while Sarah spends most of the summer with her father in Houston. Steve does yard work and saves up a large amount of cash, which he uses to buy a car. At the end of the summer, he drives to Houston, accompanied by his mother. His father refuses to see his ex-wife, and after a few days Sarah and Steve's mother depart for San Diego. As Sarah packs to leave, some of her newly made friends visit and wish her farewell. Steve will later come to realize that one of these friends is Wanda "Dub" Varner.

### **San Diego, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 18-21) Analysis**

This brief section continues to develop the characters of Steve and Sarah. Steve works for money and has no social life in San Diego. Conversely, Sarah makes new friends in Houston and manages to connect with her father - a man Steve refers to as "the human statue" because of his apparent lack of emotion. The section is also significant because it introduces Dub, one of the principle characters of the novel.





## **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 21-23)**

### **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 21-23) Summary**

The York house in Houston is large and nearly completely vacant. Steve and his father rarely see each other and nearly never communicate. Steve gets a job as a projectionist at the local movie theater. His father takes him to an Astros baseball game one night where they meet some other astronauts and their sons. When the announcer introduces the famous astronauts Steve becomes embarrassed and refuses to stand and be recognized.

### **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 21-23) Analysis**

This brief section continues the events of Steve's pre-sophomore summer. The principle event is a baseball game where Alan and Steve are announced as being in attendance. Alan stands up to applause and cheering but Steve remains in his seat, apparently embarrassed and resentful of the public acclaim given to his father.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 23-26)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 23-26) Summary**

During school, an announcement is made declaring Steve and a girl named Allison Kimble to be National Merit finalists. Later in the day, Steve and Allison are interviewed for the school paper. Allison gives mostly credible responses but Steve jokes at every question and provides funny or vapid responses. He looks at Allison, however, and finds her to be quite attractive.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 23-26) Analysis**

Steve continues toward graduation, receiving public acclaim as a National Merit finalist. He notes that the class under-performers applaud him while the teacher is apparently surprised that Steve is capable of intelligence. Steve's brief interview demonstrates him to be flippant and fairly rude, although he also notices that Allison Kimble is attractive. That he finds Allison Kimble attractive will become significant later in the novel.



## **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 26-28)**

### **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 26-28) Summary**

Steve and Doug both obtain their driver's licenses. Even though Doug is a junior and Steve is a sophomore, Steve is a few days older than Doug. Doug has abandoned skateboarding for his car, so Steve and Doug decide to found another school club to replace "Skate or Die." They settle on founding a club based on the principles of Dadaist art.

### **Houston, Summer Before Sophomore Year (pp. 26-28) Analysis**

This brief section continues the events of Steve's pre-sophomore summer. Doug once again wants to form a club so that he will be in a photograph in the school's yearbook. Since he can now drive, skateboarding is a thing of the past. Steve suggests Dadaist art as a potential club theme. Doug finds the idea of meaningless art humorous and decides he will start a student club dedicated to Dadaist expression.



# Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 28-39)

## Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 28-39) Summary

Steve and Doug return to school and found the student club named Grace Order of Dadaists, or GOD. During school orientation, they attempt to recruit other students to their club. They have no success until another student takes offense at their flippant references to GOD, and engages Doug in a shouting match. After the public argument, several students join GOD. One of the newly joined club members is Wanda "Dub" Varner, a girl who befriended Steve's sister Sarah during the summer.

The school year begins and GOD remains completely inactive as a club. Steve goes through the motions at school, performing well, but tries to remain as anonymous as possible. Dub sits in front of him in geometry but he never speaks to her. One day she accosts him in the hallway, tells him she has exchanged letters about him with his sister, and has decided that he is not deliberately rude but just shy. Steve is at a loss for words. Dub then demands that GOD become active and suggests their club should enter a float in the high school parade.

Steve conveys Dub's request to Doug who dismisses it out of hand. Doug then calls the first official GOD club meeting where he intends to announce that there will never be another official club meeting. He is instead derailed by Dub, who essentially takes over the club meeting and demands an activist Dadaist response to the school's social programs. The various club members then discuss their respective ideas for a club float. Doug remains at a loss for words. After the meeting adjourns, Steve and Doug have a private conversation where they begrudgingly admit to a certain admiration for Dub, and they both commit to being active members of GOD.

## Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 28-39) Analysis

Doug's only reason for founding the GOD club was to ensure a yearbook photograph. However, the students who joined the club want it to be an actual functioning club. They therefore agitate for meetings and activities and the club begins to take form as a valid vehicle for Dadaist expression. Doug finds this both alarming and entertaining. Although Steve has not joined the club - or any club - he does attend all of the meetings and is actively involved in the club's activities throughout the novel.

This long section is significant because it introduces Dub as a character and establishes her as a freethinking and independent woman. Steve finds her attractive but notes that she deliberately hides her physical beauty beneath baggy men's clothing and bad hair. Steve's attraction, however, is principally to Dub's charismatic and unconquerable personality. The section also establishes the GOD club as an active student organization. The club will heavily influence Steve's future.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 39-40)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 39-40) Summary**

Steve is called out of chemistry class to visit DeMouy's office. DeMouy gives Steve an obtuse lecture about planting seeds and reaping harvests. Steve suggests DeMouy look out the window and quickly plucks a growing marijuana sprout from the gift fern pot. DeMouy dismisses Steve.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 39-40) Analysis**

DeMouy's speech about reaping the harvest of planted seeds is both context-sensitive and humorous. He allows himself to be distracted while Steve removes the marijuana sprout and discards it. The brief encounter indicates that Steve and DeMouy have developed a certain understanding, if not friendship.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 40-45)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 40-45) Summary**

GOD becomes an active school group and the members, very disparate in background, grow to like each other. The group arranges to manufacture a float for the school parade and discusses ideas for the float. The group finally decides to make a huge claw hammer, which is mechanically automated to hammer against the cab of the truck that will move the float. They use their pooled money to buy supplies and begin to manufacture the float. Steve becomes attracted to Dub even as Dub's best friend Rhonda starts to aggressively flirt with Steve.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 40-45) Analysis**

The unlikely group of friends is described in this summary. Although most of the members of the club remain minor characters in the novel, they are all given a basic introduction. By this point in the narrative, it is obvious that Steve finds Dub very attractive, though his complete inexperience with women prevents him from pursuing her in any fashion. Meanwhile, Dub's friend Rhonda apparently sets her sights on Steve.

# **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 45)**

## **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 45) Summary**

The school newspaper prints an article about Steve and Allison. It states that Steve was involved in a religious club at his former high school and plans to attend a local community college.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 45) Analysis**

This brief section, only a paragraph, indicates that the unimaginative school newspaper reporter has taken all of Steve's interview responses at face value, mistaking Steve's reference to GOD as a reference to religion.



## Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 45-50)

### Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 45-50) Summary

The GOD club works several hours every night to complete the parade float. Although it is more difficult than they had initially imagined, they do complete the float. Dub produces several bottles of champagne on the evening the float is completed, and the several club members who are present drink champagne and begin to play a party game that entails asking personal questions and receiving truthful answers.

Steve has never had champagne and he is surprised at how quickly and thoroughly he becomes intoxicated. After several personal and embarrassing questions are asked, Doug asks Steve if he has ever kissed a woman and Steve, embarrassed, replies truthfully that he has not. He then tries to stand up to leave but falls over intoxicated, bewildered at how drunk he has become. Rhonda then takes his car keys and drives him home while Dub and another friend follow behind. Rhonda pulls into the driveway. She grabs Steve in an embrace and tongue kisses him passionately. Steve is shocked, drunk, and immediately attentive. After a few moments, Rhonda breaks away, drops the car keys on the seat, and walks back to her friends, leaving Steve surprised.

### Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 45-50) Analysis

The GOD club becomes a fairly close group of friends and works in unison to complete their project. Dub becomes the *de facto* leader of the club, which Steve refers to as "Dub's Club," even though Doug is the official president. Dub spontaneously throws a party when the float is completed and the ensuing drinking game is quite humorous. For example, all of the men are forced to acknowledge that they masturbate. Instead of returning the masturbation question to the women, Doug surprises Steve by asking who has never kissed someone of the opposite sex. Steve is the only person present and is immediately ridiculed by Doug. Rhonda takes advantage of Steve's drunkenness to drive him home and then kiss him in his own driveway while Dub watches from a car on the street.





## **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 50)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 50) Summary**

Steve sees Allison in the hallway at school and the two exchange pleasantries. Steve comments on Allison's nice dress and she comments on Steve's earrings.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 50) Analysis**

This brief section, only a paragraph, indicates that Steve continues to find Allison attractive and that she, in turn, apparently finds him likable, which surprises him.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 50-53)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 50-53) Summary**

Steve wakes in the afternoon of the day after GOD's float-completion party with a hangover. Alan hassles Steve about sleeping in, apparently realizing Steve is suffering from a hangover. Later in the day, Steve opens a letter from his sister. Sarah tells him that she has maintained contact with Dub and, furthermore, that Dub finds Steve very attractive. Steve is happy and incredulous with the news.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 50-53) Analysis**

Steve's timing is a little off - the letter from Sarah has arrived earlier and remained unread. Steve assumes, while reading the letter, that Sarah is referring to Rhonda and he receives a pleasant surprise when Sarah concludes by revealing the secret admirer to be Dub. Unfortunately for Steve, Rhonda has already made her move.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 53-54)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 53-54) Summary**

After turning in several more pages, Steve considers what he has been writing about and stops by DeMouy's office to tell him that he refuses to continue writing the story. DeMouy appears nonplussed as Steve says he quits. Steve then goes to the beach and sits alone, smoking marijuana and thinking. After a few hours, he goes home where he begins again to write, continuing his writing project for DeMouy.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 53-54) Analysis**

Although Steve's writing has, to date, not appeared to be troubling, Steve apparently finds it very disturbing. In the very first section Steve revealed that his heart had been broken recently, and as his relationships with Rhonda and Dub begin to take center stage in the narrative it is fairly obvious that Steve is on the verge of developing a serious relationship with one of the girls. Steve's agitation leads him to briefly refuse to continue the writing project. However, after a few hours of getting high and soul-searching, he changes his mind and in fact begins to find the writing somewhat therapeutic.



# Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 54-65)

## Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 54-65) Summary

Steve finds himself falling in love with Dub, even though she appears oblivious to his emotions. All along Steve had assumed that Dub found Doug attractive - he is elated to find out this is not the case. Nevertheless, Dub asks Doug out on a date. Steve is alarmed by this turn of events, but when Dub and Doug arrive at the theater where Steve works he is relieved to discover they are accompanied by several other friends and that the date is very informal. Rhonda is also with Dub and Doug and during the showing of the film, she makes her way to the projection room where she more or less corners Steve, makes small talk, and again attempts to kiss him. He eludes her and then informs her she is not welcome in the booth. Rhonda is angered by Steve's heavy-handed rebuke and leaves the projection room.

Rhonda's anger spreads to Dub, and over the next week, Dub treats Steve with a sense of hostility that gradually fades to indifference. Eventually they become friends again and then with the other members of GOD they watch the parade. As their float moves down the street, the audience falls silent for a prolonged moment, and then begins to cheer wildly.

## Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 54-65) Analysis

The Dub-Doug date is really more of a group get-together than any sort of date, but Steve initially assumes the worst. Steve's inexperience and uncertainty about relationships is evident throughout this and subsequent sections. Nevertheless, when Rhonda attempts again to kiss Steve he avoids her, realizing that his sights are set on Dub and beginning a relationship with Rhonda will surely end the possibility of getting together with Dub. Even though Steve's rebuff of Rhonda is not particularly delicate, it does show him to be an honest character that is not afraid of at least trying to get what he wants.

The reception of the GOD float by the parade spectators is interesting. The float is clearly bizarre and completely out of context and it initially elicits a bewildered silence. Soon, however, the crowd determines that it is original and interesting and wildly cheers. The float's slogan, half in English, half in Chinese, says "Grace Order of Dadaists says 'Pork'" is simultaneously humorous, unintelligible, and ridiculous.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 65-66)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 65-66) Summary**

Steve receives a letter from Doug, now attending college in Austin. Doug has joined a band and is having fun. Steve does not initially write back.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 65-66) Analysis**

This brief section reconnects Steve with his old friend Doug. Doug, the same age as Steve but one year ahead in school, is attending college in Austin. Although Steve does not immediately write back, he will eventually respond to Doug. The section also continues a lengthy series of short sections that rapidly switch back and forth between the present-tense narrative and Steve's written recollections of the past.

## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 66-67)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 66-67) Summary**

The GOD float, Get Hammered, wins the prize for most original float, and the club receives a small monetary award. All of the club members are elated at the news and Steve briefly hugs Dub, hoping that she does not notice his erection.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 66-67) Analysis**

That the float won a prize is unexpected and makes most of the club members very happy. Steve high-fives and celebrates with the other club members, and briefly gives Dub a hug - which gives him an immediate erection. His physical attraction for Dub is clearly evident and sarcastically noted in the text.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 67-68)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 67-68) Summary**

Steve drinks at school and then tries to visit DeMouy. He discovers that Allison Kimble is in DeMouy's office preparing college applications. Steve stands in the doorway and makes jokes until he suddenly realizes the parallels between his recent behavior and Allison's behavior. He becomes awkward and uncomfortable because of his sudden interest in academic performance, and he hurriedly leaves the school offices.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 67-68) Analysis**

Steve stops by DeMouy's office for a visit and then begins to poke fun at Allison for taking college so seriously. Allison is clearly serious and involved with the process though she is able to take Steve's ribbing with a good nature. Steve's sudden realization that he is beginning to, once again, value academic achievement leaves him confused and somewhat angry, and he rushes from DeMouy's office.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 69-77)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 69-77) Summary**

The GOD club meets at night to dismantle the Get Hammered float. They goof off, drink, and dismantle the float. After the float has been taken apart, most of the club members sit around and continue to drink and talk. Dub publicly announces that she would like to go to the homecoming dance. She says she wants to have the high school date experience, with a corsage, dress, suit, and dance. One of the other club members knowingly kicks Steve several times but he doesn't get the hint. Steve, ignorant and naive, wonders why the iconoclastic Dub would want to go to a school dance. Later Doug drinks so much he passes out and Steve, Dub, and another friend take him home. Doug's older brother meets them outside and, with assistance, hauls Doug into the house - leaving Steve and Dub alone. Steve hems and haws and then indirectly asks Dub on a date, although he does it without any tact. After a brief argument, Steve directly asks Dub if she will go to the homecoming dance with him. Dub, uncharacteristically unsure, never actually accepts though she does not decline.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 69-77) Analysis**

Through some overly complex plot development, Steve and Dub arrange to go out on a date to attend the homecoming dance. Steve has never been on a date before, and worries about the mechanics. Instead of asking Dub outright, his initial approach is awkward and somewhat insulting. Dub challenges him, presumably expecting him to back down and withdraw his somewhat shaky offer. Instead, Steve directly asks her and she indirectly agrees. Thus, their relationship begins along the same fuzzy lines that will characterize it for the next several months.





## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 77-80)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 77-80) Summary**

Sarah asks Cindy for permission to attend a distant rock concert with her boyfriend and then spend the night with a group of friends in a hotel room. Her mother refuses to give permission, and looks to Chuck for backup. When Chuck agrees with Cindy, Sarah explodes with anger and emotion, noting that he is not her father, and runs out of the house. Steve is confused but decides to remain uninvolved in the exchange.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 77-80) Analysis**

Sarah is typically very levelheaded and personable. Her outburst at the table, directed at Chuck, is uncharacteristically confrontational for her and foreshadows later developments in the novel. The apparently innocuous rock concert also sets up a series of events that will dominate Steve's life over the coming months, which ironically contrasts his decision to remain uninvolved.

## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 80-81)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 80-81) Summary**

After the awkward exchange in front of Doug's house, Steve and Dub ride home in silence while their mutual friend makes fun of their strained relationship. It is Steve's first official date and he begins to worry about the mechanics of dating.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 80-81) Analysis**

Instead of being excited about the following night's date, Steve and Dub both become withdrawn and insecure. Steve begins to fret about the particulars of dating and realizes he is absolutely ignorant of most of the details.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 81-83)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 81-83) Summary**

Over several weeks, Steve begins to spend several hours alone each day, writing and thinking. He does not spend much time with his drug-using associates, and reduces the amount of marijuana he smokes. He spends time thinking about Doug and finally selects a funny postcard, writes a brief and cryptic note, and mails it to Doug.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 81-83) Analysis**

DeMouy's writing assignment is clearly beginning to alter Steve's perspective. Instead of hanging out with pothead associates, he begins to sit, think, and write in a local cafe where he is anonymous. Additionally, instead of simply ignoring his previous life he begins to want to reconnect with at least parts of it, as indicated by his belated reply to Doug. In his reply, however, he confides in Doug that he has no desire to ever return to Texas.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 83-88)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 83-88) Summary**

Steve and his father typically avoid each other, rarely having conversation. In fact, Steve arranges his day to purposefully be home only when his father is not. This strained relationship stems from Steve erroneously believing that his father was primarily responsible for his parents' divorce. Steve also resents having a famous and successful man for a father, and feels that he is living in the shadow of his father's notable accomplishments.

Even though their relationship is particularly strained, Steve decides to ask to borrow his father's new car for the homecoming date. Because he does not want to answer any questions regarding his date, he borrows the car on the pretext of using it for work as his own car, he lies, is momentarily inoperable. Steve then looks through his closet and despairs at his lack of adequate clothing. Fortunately, Sarah calls him on the telephone. Dub has called Sarah and informed her of the impending date. Sarah instructs Steve on how to dress; giving him a list of required clothing items and stores. She also instructs him on proper dating etiquette. Steve then telephones Doug and the two friends exchange information on recent events.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 83-88) Analysis**

This section is notably funny and displays how inexperienced and nervous Steve is at the prospect of his first official date. Like most teenagers, he finds the prospect of dating daunting. Fortunately for Steve, his younger sister Sarah is socially accomplished and willing to share tips and tricks of the trade. For once, Steve's standoffish coolness does not prevent him from taking his little sister's candid advice.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 89-90)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 89-90) Summary**

Sarah talks to Steve and asks him to intervene with their mother. Steve agrees to talk to their mother and to try and secure her permission for Sarah to go to the rock concert.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 89-90) Analysis**

This brief section continues to develop the rock concert plot element that will have such a great impact on Steve's future. It also demonstrates that Steve is beginning to regard Sarah in a different way. She has ceased being simply his irritating younger sister and has become a trusted friend and accomplice.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 90-97)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 90-97) Summary**

In order to maintain his going-to-work pretext, Steve leaves home five hours before his homecoming date appointment. He goes shopping and spends a huge amount on clothing and other date accessories, and then goes to Doug's house to kill some time. His nervousness irritates Doug who is glad when Steve finally dresses up and leaves for his date. He arrives at Dub's house early and meets her parents with an awkward formality. He tries to remember and execute all of Sarah's directives as the night slowly progresses. The date is an agony of minute events for Steve and he is relieved when some friends show up at the dance. They actually dance, and Dub finally asks Steve to dance, although he declines. Instead, Dub dances with some friends and Steve watches her movements and becomes aroused. After some more coaxing, he agrees to slow dance and enjoys touching Dub's back and watching her body. They dance for several songs and hold each other closer and closer. Finally, at the end of the evening, they begin to relax and have some fun.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 90-97) Analysis**

The descriptions of the minutia of Steve's first official date are hilarious and authentic. From the strained silence in the automobile to his worry about Dub's parents mistaking the automobile keys in his pocket for something else are all enjoyable aspects of an insightful description of a first date. Fortunately for Steve, nothing goes seriously amiss and by the end of the evening he and Dub have become relaxed and are able to enjoy each other's company.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 97-98)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 97-98) Summary**

Two identical fancy letters arrive from Alan York, addressed to Steve and Sarah. Steve ignores his letter until Sarah demands he open it up. He opens it to discover it is a wedding announcement - Alan York is engaged.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 97-98) Analysis**

Steve appears emotionally detached from his father's announcement, though this will change by the conclusion of the novel. Sarah's intervention to insure Steve fully receives the announcement is telling of their developing relationship.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 98-100)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 98-100) Summary**

After the homecoming dance ends Steve drives Dub home. She sits close to him in the automobile and they have an easy, pleasant conversation. He opens the car door for her and walks her to her house door. They hold hands and then Dub begins to go inside. Steve stops her and kisses her and she responds with warmth. After a short time, Dub goes inside her house.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 98-100) Analysis**

Steve and Dub finally kiss each other and allow their developing relationship to enter the next logical stage. Steve finds Dub incredibly attractive on many levels, as would be expected from a first-time teenage crush type relationship, which Dub reciprocates wholeheartedly.





## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 100-102)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 100-102) Summary**

Steve visits DeMouy's office to find DeMouy to be out of sorts and disheveled. Steve guesses DeMouy to be about thirty years old. Next DeMouy states he has broken up a fight. Steve notes DeMouy has a vomit stain on his clothing as DeMouy hands over a college application packet.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 100-102) Analysis**

DeMouy's appearance is anomalous and apparently unconnected to events in the novel; however, it will become significant in later developments. Steve is now actively applying for admission to various colleges, which demonstrates a marked change in his outlook and behavior from just a few weeks earlier.

## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 102-103)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 102-103) Summary**

The night after their homecoming date, Steve and Dub drive out to a deserted Texas beach and make out passionately for several hours.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 102-103) Analysis**

This brief section illustrates how rapidly Steve and Dub accept their new relationship, and demonstrates that, as expected, they both have a strong physical attraction to each other.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 103-105)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 103-105) Summary**

Steve travels to his mother's real estate office. He notes how cluttered and disorganized her desk is, and contrasts it to the obsessive order of his father's desk. Steve talks to his mother on Sarah's behalf, and urges her to grant Sarah permission to attend the rock concert and stay overnight at a hotel. Cindy then asks Steve about his plans to attend Alan's wedding, and Steve tells her he does not plan to attend. Cindy seems only somewhat surprised by her son's decision.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 103-105) Analysis**

As promised, Steve intervenes on Sarah's behalf. Their mother has apparently already decided to relent and begrudgingly give permission even as Steve assures her that doing so is an appropriate course of action - however, Steve's earnest and well-meaning soft sell of the trip would set off alarm bells for any parent. Steve is confused when his mother steers the conversation to his father's impending marriage, and flatly states that he will not attend the ceremony. Clearly, Steve's strained relationship with his father is more than simply a teenage disagreement with an authority figure.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 105-107)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 105-107) Summary**

Steve and Dub develop their boyfriend-girlfriend relationship over the course of three weeks. Steve spends large amounts of time at Dub's house and gets to know her parents and her sister. Although Steve considers his dad completely detached and uninvolved, Alan quickly understands that Steve is seeing someone. Steve is surprised at his father's insight.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 105-107) Analysis**

This brief section continues to develop Steve and Dub's relationship. Steve's surprise at his father's insight is indicative of how Steve has misjudged his father. On the other hand, Steve seems to quickly develop respect for Dub's parents.



# **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 107-109)**

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 107-109) Summary**

Steve is notified that he is a National Merit finalist, a notable academic achievement. He then receives a telephone call from his father. Steve is surprised that his father has called to speak with him, and the telephone conversation is somewhat formal. Alan asks Steve to be his best man at his wedding. Steve does not give a definitive answer although he already is planning on not attending the wedding. Instead, he evades answering the question. Alan concludes the call by noting that it is a standing offer. After the call, Steve smokes marijuana.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 107-109) Analysis**

Alan York is not the man that Steve imagines him to be. In many ways, he is a difficult father - demanding and somewhat domineering. Yet, he is also insightful and thoughtful and clearly desires a better relationship with his son. Steve is apparently quite upset with his father's decision to marry again, although later in the novel Steve will change his opinion about many aspects of his father.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 109-111)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 109-111) Summary**

Steve and Dub become publicly known as a couple. One night Dub queries Steve about his negative feelings for his father. Steve states that he does not like his father for several reasons; his father is an unrelenting perfectionist, his father is distant and uninvolved, and most of all because his father somehow damaged his mother and then divorced her. Dub persists in questioning Steve even as he becomes more agitated. After a while Steve abruptly breaks off the conversation.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 109-111) Analysis**

Steve feels that his parents' divorce was entirely the fault of his father. In Steve's view, Cindy sacrificed her youth and desires to ensure Alan's success and, once successful, Alan repaid her by divorcing her. Steve takes some satisfaction in noting that his mother married a commercial airline pilot which contrasts sharply with his father's career as an astronaut - Steve believes his mother married a pilot to somehow insult his father. Steve's quick emotional response to Dub's questions illustrates that he has still not come to terms with his parents' divorce.



# **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 111)**

## **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 111) Summary**

Sarah tells Steve that their mother has relented and given Sarah permission to go to the rock concert and remain overnight in a hotel room with friends. Sarah then informs Steve that he will also be accompanying her - one of their mother's conditions. She hands him two tickets and demands payment for them.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (p. 111) Analysis**

Steve's voluntary intervention has secured his mother's permission for Sarah's trip. However, Steve also learns he must act as chaperone on the extended date.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 112-113)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 112-113) Summary**

As Steve and Dub continue their relationship, the Grace Order of Dadaists Club continues without them. Steve is surprised to hear an announcement for another club meeting. He wonders how Doug could organize a meeting without first consulting with him. Steve and Dub attend the meeting, but arrive late. The meeting is to discuss the club's involvement in the upcoming school talent show. The club members decide to put on a complex multimedia show.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 112-113) Analysis**

Steve is surprised and somewhat disappointed that the GOD club continues its activities without him. Nevertheless, his principle focus remains, of course, Dub, and he does not remain very involved with the club - instead allowing Doug and other club members to be principle members.





## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 113-115)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 113-115) Summary**

Steve attends a school assembly where DeMouy presents information about graduation. Steve checks a notice board display and notes that he will not graduate due to a deficiency in English. After the assembly, Steve finds Allison Kimble and talks to her. He notes that she dresses very differently from other students. He compares his rough appearance to her distinct and polished appearance and thinks they would make a visually interesting pair. He then casually but politely asks her if she would attend the overnight rock concert with him, and she accepts.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 113-115) Analysis**

Steve notes on the board that DeMouy has not been bluffing - Steve is not going to graduate without completing his 100-page paper assignment. It is interesting to compare Steve's approach to asking Allison on a date to his earlier approach (pp. 69-77) of asking Dub on a date - his social skills have matured appreciably in three years.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 115-119)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 115-119) Summary**

The GOD club performs at the school talent show. Their performance includes a bizarre assortment of simultaneous multimedia presentations. Several club members play live music while others presents art objects. In the background, a film plays that displays images of Nazi Germany interspersed with images of Grace High School students - the film seems to compare the school pep club to Nazi SS troops. After the presentation, the audience boos and catcalls and a near-riot ensues. All of the members of the club are then summoned to the principle's office where they are accused of poor taste. The principle then disbands the club until they can find an official faculty sponsor to monitor their future activity.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 115-119) Analysis**

The principle's authoritarian response is typical and presented with a funny angle. His one-sided rant is stereotypical but will ring true to any high school student. His response of simply disbanding the club pending faculty sponsorship appears to be incredibly lenient, given the club's recent public display. Note that the near-riotous behavior of the students of Grace High School can be regarded as the most successful implementation of Dadaist principles exhibited by the Grace Order of Dadaists - especially so, given that it was probably unintentional.



## **San Diego Senior Year (pp. 120-123)**

### **San Diego Senior Year (pp. 120-123) Summary**

Steve muses about Sarah's recent reticence about introducing her boyfriend, David Rossow. When he arrives, Steve understands why - Danny is a skinhead with a pierced nose and ratty clothing. Danny is over six feet tall and Steve recognizes him from school, remembering that he has been vaguely afraid of him when passing him in the hallways. Sarah, Danny, and Steve pile into Danny's van and pick up Allison Kimble. Danny asks if Steve is sure of the address, and Steve says that he is. They drive into a very poor area of town and see various criminal-elements hanging around the streets. Steve walks up to a decrepit house and knocks on the flimsy, warped door. Allison quickly answers and, in the brief interval that the door is open, Steve sees an unkempt man staring vacantly at the television. They then pick up the other concert attendees, drive a few hours to the concert, enjoy the show, and drive to a hotel.

Steve and Allison sit by the pool and talk while the other kids go to the hotel room and begin to party. Steve and Allison eventually kiss a few times and then go to the hotel room and sleep next to each other on the floor. Steve has bad dreams centered on Dub and then wakes up with Allison's hair in his face and mouth.

### **San Diego Senior Year (pp. 120-123) Analysis**

This section begins to introduce Allison's background. Contrary to her well-groomed and affluent appearance in school, she lives in a very poor and bad part of town. Even Sarah's rough boyfriend Danny views area with trepidation and is concerned about driving there. The concert itself is not described well - Steve instead focuses on getting there and then spending time after the show talking to Allison and getting to know her.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 124-126)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 124-126) Summary**

Steve spends his last evening in Houston at Dub's house. In the morning, he will fly to San Diego to spend the Christmas vacation with his mother. Dub's sister returns home and interrupts a prolonged make-out session. Dub talks with her sister and tells her their club has been disbanded until they can find a faculty sponsor. Dub's sister, Sylvia, suggests they ask Mr. Waters to act as the club sponsor. Later that evening Steve leaves. Dub accompanies him outside where he tells her, for the first time, that he loves her. Dub does not reciprocate and Steve later flies to San Diego.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 124-126) Analysis**

Steve and Dub are understandably nervous about their first prolonged separation since developing their relationship. However, the fundamental plot twist introduced in this short section is the identification of Waters as a possible faculty sponsor for the GOD club. Waters will not only sponsor the club, but he will also profoundly affect the lives of both Dub and Steve. His character is foreshadowed by some of Sylvia's comments.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 126-127)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 126-127) Summary**

Steve hears of the suicide of Kurt Cobain. Many of Steve's drug-using acquaintances are shocked and dismayed. They hold a so-called "wake" for Cobain on the beach in the evening, and more than fifty students attend. Steve also attends with his Walkman playing Nirvana, but he does not smoke marijuana. He suddenly realizes that the sort of person for whom he no longer cares to associate surround him. He walks away from the gathering, and throws his Nirvana compact disc into the ocean on his way home.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 126-127) Analysis**

The reference to the historical suicide of Cobain places the events of this chapter in early April 1994, and grounds the fictive elements of the novel within a specific sub-culture of historical importance. This section represents a major plot turning point in Steve's development. He realizes that he is not part of the grunge-stoner group and does not hold similar values with them. Instead, he desires to focus on the positive elements in his life. He discards the rock CD in a symbolic gesture, resists getting high, and literally walks away from the lifestyle he has sought out over the past several years.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 127-131)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 127-131) Summary**

Steve returns to Houston after an uneventful Christmas vacation. Dub picks him up from the airport and they return to Steve's home where they are alone. They quickly move to Steve's bedroom and begin kissing and petting. Steve then tries to unfasten Dub's brassier and they remove their shirts. Dub notes that they are moving into new relationship territory, and Steve replies that he wants to continue. They begin serious petting when they hear the automatic garage door opening - Alan York has returned home. They quickly re-dress just as Alan enters Steve's room. Alan says hello to Dub - he knows her as one of Sarah's friends - and then tells Steve he wishes to speak to him in private. Dub quickly leaves and Alan then tells Steve that he is not allowed to have girls in his bedroom. Steve does not question the directive, but does feel resentful.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 127-131) Analysis**

Steve and Dub's relationship survives their temporary separation. In fact, their week apart appears only to have intensified their physical desires. Steve's attempts to subtly remove Dub's brassier are amusing and accurate. This section contains a small amount of explicit language about Steve and Dub's near-sexual experience.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 131-132)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 131-132) Summary**

Steve and Allison date each other for several days and get to know each other. Allison tells Steve that when she was eleven years old her brother and mother were killed in an automobile accident. After that event her father sharply declined, losing his job and apparently his will to live. Since then, they had suffered several monetary setbacks. Allison currently cares for her father who is extremely depressed and generally inactive. Their financial situation has instilled in Allison a desire to gain a top-notch education to allow her a good income. Steve also tells Allison about his previous life.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 131-132) Analysis**

Allison's character continues to be developed. She is a positive influence on Steve and a good representative of a willful and empowered young woman who has excelled at academia in high school and is poised for future success in college. Allison is, in fact, the most singularly successful and positive character in the novel. Despite personal loss and financial catastrophe, she remains a strong and skilled character who exerts a positive influence on everyone around her.

## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 133-136)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 133-136) Summary**

Steve and other members of the GOD Club seek out Mr. Waters. He is very tall and thin - Steve describes him as spidery and fragile - with a goatee and wispy moustache, graying dark hair, and in his early thirties. Waters is an iconoclastic teacher who has irked the school administration and faculty to such an extent that he is considered an outcast. He makes fun of a Dadaist movement seeking official recognition from the school organization and then agrees to sponsor the club. Thus, the GOD Club is officially reconstituted and enjoys a school yearbook photograph. Steve does not appear in the photograph but Dub, Doug, Waters, and the other members of the club do. In all, there are ten people in the photograph, each using sign language to spell out a concealed message that reads either "dog was star" or "rats saw god," depending upon which way it is read.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 133-136) Analysis**

Waters is introduced as a character. His physical description indicates he is somewhat similar in build to Steve, though about twice his age and taller. Waters has so irritated his fellow faculty members and the school administration that his classroom is tiny and out of the way and his class enrollment is vanishingly small; most students are not even aware of who he is. Waters is obviously not a mainstream teacher and he simultaneously supports and mocks the members of the club who seek his sponsorship. Waters reasons that sponsoring the dissolved club will not harm his popularity with the school administration because it is already irreversibly damaged. Waters' negative reputation and willingness to flaunt social conventions foreshadows later developments in the novel. Waters is nicknamed "Sky" because his name, Luke "Sky" Waters, resembles the phonology of a famous movie character. The reversible sign language the students use in the club photograph informs the novel's title; Steve sarcastically notes that Waters signs the 'g' in god.





## San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 136-138)

### San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 136-138) Summary

Danny, Sarah, Steve, and Allison continue to go on double dates together. One night they stay home to watch a movie that Sarah has picked. Steve is outraged to discover that Sarah has selected *The Right Stuff*, a movie detailing the lives of the first several United States astronauts, including Alan York. Steve claims he has had enough of Alan York's heroics shoved down his throat all his life and he has no desire to voluntarily watch the movie again. As Steve shouts, Sarah leaps to her feet and gets angry as well. She first compares Steve to Alan, noting that they behave and look alike. Sarah then informs Steve that their parents' marriage failed because Cindy had an extra-marital affair with Chuck, not because - as Steve believed - their father left their mother. Sarah provides several facts to support her allegation. Steve realizes, immediately, that Sarah is correct; her revelation leaves him literally speechless and reeling. Sarah then storms from the room and Allison tries to quietly calm Steve's shattered emotions.

### San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 136-138) Analysis

*The Right Stuff* is an actual movie that details the lives of early astronauts. Of course, Alan York, the fictional astronaut in this book is not discussed in the historic movie but he is presumably covered in the meta-fictionalized movie presented in the novel. Sarah's selection of the movie is presumed to be an attempt to spur a discussion with Steve about their father. Her attempt is enormously successful, and in a rare emotional outburst, Steve attacks Sarah. Sarah holds her ground and then tells Steve the real reason for their parents' divorce. Steve immediately realizes that Sarah is correct and he is staggered. This major plot development will heavily influence Steve's future relationships with his parents.



## **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 139-142)**

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 139-142) Summary**

Steve and Dub spend spring break at the condominium of a friend's parents. The condominium houses several students who watch television, party, and make out. One night Steve and Dub decide to have sexual intercourse. At nearly the last moment, however, Dub requests Steve use birth control. Steve is not prepared and therefore they do not have sex. They spend the rest of the week playing beach football, drinking, and sitting around bonfires at night.

### **Houston, Sophomore Year (pp. 139-142) Analysis**

Steve and Dub once again are ready to take their relationship forward but this time they are prevented by Steve's lack of contraception. Dub is subtly represented as being much more knowledgeable about sexual matters than the naive Steve. This section contains some sexually explicit language.



## **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 143-144)**

### **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 143-144) Summary**

The school year ends with Steve and Dub completing their sophomore year. Doug completes his junior year, and other friends graduate. Steve, Dub, and some other friends spend the night after the last day of school at Doug's house, at an informal party. Steve talks to two of his friends who have graduated - they are a couple who has been together for a few years but are now going away to separate colleges. Steve asks them how they will pursue their relationship and they state they have decided to break up, date other people, and pursue new relationships.

### **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 143-144) Analysis**

Steve's important sophomore year ends. His junior year will be spent at Grace High School, but is not well described in the novel. His senior year will be spent in San Diego at Wakefield High School. Steve also plans to spend most of his summer in San Diego. Thus, serious plot developments are foreshadowed for Steve's junior year - Dub will break his heart within a few months. Steve finds his friends' attitude about breaking up and finding new relationships unintelligible. Steve prefers to believe in long-term relationships with deep commitment. Once again, Steve's imminent heartbreak is foreshadowed by his friends' comments.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 144-146)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 144-146) Summary**

Steve begins to receive large amounts of mail from various exclusive universities. He learns he has been accepted to all of them. He is particularly interested in whether he was accepted at Harvard; because that was one accomplishment his father could not claim. Although he does not plan on attending Harvard, he is pleased to discover they have accepted his application. He then calls Allison. Allison wanted to attend Harvard, and Steve knows her grades are better than his and her application was stronger than his - he therefore assumes that since he was admitted, she will also have been admitted. Allison tells him, however, that she was rejected from Harvard several days previously. Steve then realizes that he was accepted to Harvard because of his father's fame.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 144-146) Analysis**

Steve momentarily exults that Harvard has accepted his application because his father was never accepted at Harvard. When he learns that Allison's better application was rejected while his was accepted, he realizes wryly that his father, in fact, has just been accepted at Harvard.



## **San Diego/Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 146-154)**

### **San Diego/Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 146-154) Summary**

Steve spends the summer break in San Diego, but does fly back to Houston on one short visit. Before returning to Houston, he visits a local store and purchases a box of condoms. Dub picks Steve up from the airport and they go to her house where they are alone. Dub has cooked an elaborate dinner but nothing has turned out. Steve makes a valiant attempt to gag down Dub's cooking until Dub asks him to stop faking his pleasure. They talk for a while and Dub, finally, tells Steve for the first time that she loves him. They proceed to the bedroom and try to have sex for several frustrating minutes. Finally, Dub succeeds in positioning herself correctly to allow Steve to penetrate her - Steve watches a clock and notes that they lose their virginity at 9:20 PM and by 9:26 PM they have completed their lovemaking. After, Steve feels awkward and Dub is distant. Steve quickly gets dressed and leaves, Dub does not say much. Over the next few days, they feel awkward around each other and won't have much to say. Steve is relieved to return to San Diego at the end of the week.

### **San Diego/Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 146-154) Analysis**

Steve and Dub's first sexual experience is typical in many respects - it would be nearly comical except that it is fairly pathetic. Both characters are unsure of what their activity means or how it will affect their relationship in the future. Their brief after-sex chat focuses on the sexual exploits of a French king, and then Steve leaves the house. He returns to San Diego with his box of condoms complete except for one.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 154-156)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 154-156) Summary**

Allison goes on vacation for a week and Steve spends time alone and thinking. He returns one night to discover his mother is hosting a party. She introduces him to various drunken co-workers, one of whom catches him off guard and tongue kisses him. Steve finds the entire party somewhat distasteful, and quickly escapes to his room and calls his father on the telephone. He tells his father he will be attending the wedding, and then says he will leave a ticket to his graduation at will call, in case Alan can attend the ceremony.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 154-156) Analysis**

Steve continues to reevaluate his life. He decides he must reconcile himself with his father, which demonstrates his increasing maturity. It is interesting to note that in earlier sections of the novel Steve remembered growing up with frequent social parties at his parents' house; parties in which various groups of workers would congregate and drink. Steve had earlier assumed that his father was the driving force behind these parties, and he believed that Alan treated Cindy "like a show pony" (p. 111). Since the divorce, however, Alan has not hosted any drinking parties while Cindy obviously continues to act as hostess - another of Steve's incorrect assumptions is demonstrated.



## **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 157-158)**

### **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 157-158) Summary**

Steve returns to Houston and resumes working at the movie theater where he receives a promotion and a raise. Dub is out of town when he returns and, after a few days, he calls Doug to check in. Doug pretends he does not know who Steve is, and then vaguely insults him, letting him know that his extended absence has harmed their friendship. Steve, angry, hangs up the telephone.

### **Houston, Summer Before Junior Year (pp. 157-158) Analysis**

As is expected, Steve's prolonged disassociation with his friends has caused them to strengthen other relationships and put aside their friendship with Steve somewhat. Doug is obviously upset that Steve returned to Houston during the summer but did not bother to stop by or even telephone him. Steve, instead of apologizing, reacts angrily.



# Houston, Junior Year (pp. 158-174)

## Houston, Junior Year (pp. 158-174) Summary

The GOD Club is not revived, but most of the members of the club, including Dub, Doug, and Steve, enroll in Waters' writing class. The class is taught with non-authoritarian principles and students are free to leave when they decide. Most students initially struggle with the problem of stating their own opinions, but eventually they begin to learn how to think about literature without a guidebook. Waters does not refer to the students by name, but instead allows them to select a word that he uses as their name. Thus, Doug becomes *Stallion*, Steve becomes *Cynic*, and Dub becomes *Irresistible*.

One evening Doug's band plays a show that Steve and Dub attend. Steve feels threatened by Doug's newfound popularity and makes snide remarks throughout the show. When the show is over, teenage girls scramble to take home Doug's drumsticks and Steve feels resentful of Doug's appeal. Steve and Dub have intermittent sex throughout the first half of the school year, including one prolonged weekend at a condominium where they have sex several times each day for several days. Meanwhile, their school year continues. One day in Waters' class, the students argue about the significance of Sinyad O'Connor's act of tearing up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on national television.

One day Steve receives a morning telephone call at home for his father. He goes to his father's room, knocks, and opens the door with the telephone only to discover his father is in bed with a woman. They scramble to draw up the sheets as Steve closes the door and, embarrassed, goes downstairs. A few minutes later, his father comes downstairs and is momentarily joined by his lover whom he introduces as Jacqueline Darby. Steve looks Jackie over and decides she is pretty, notes she is blonde, and guesses her age as mid thirties. She tries to be polite but Steve is sarcastic and rude in response. When she calls for a taxi, Steve instead offers to drive her home. She accepts and they have a somewhat more pleasant conversation on the road. Steve, later, decides that Jackie is not so bad.

One day Waters holds Steve after class to discuss one of Steve's recent essays. Waters praises Steve's work and asks Steve for permission to enter the essay in a local newspaper's writing contest. Steve agrees. One night Alan and Jackie attend the theater where Steve works and he is amazed to see his father attending a popular movie. While Steve is working, Dub and her friends attend one of Doug's concerts. Steve also recalls that Waters had been invited to the same concert. A few weeks later, Waters announces in class that Steve's essay has won the local contest. Steve will attend an awards ceremony to honor his essay. He tells Waters that his father will be out of town, which is not true, but Waters agrees to accompany Steve instead of Alan.

On one occasion, Steve presents Dub with a present - a gift of very expensive earrings. Steve has, in fact, spent all of his savings on the gift. Dub is briefly delighted but then





sadly refuses the gift, noting they are far too expensive to be appropriate. A confused Steve takes back the gift but, instead of returning them, just leaves them in the glove box of his car, believing that Dub will accept them on some future occasion.

## **Houston, Junior Year (pp. 158-174) Analysis**

The reference to the historical act of O'Connor destroying the Pope's photograph places some of the events of this chapter in early October, 1992, and grounds the fictive elements of the novel within a specific sub-culture of historical importance. Waters' class is obviously quite unstructured and completely different from the students' previous school experiences. At first, the students, including Steve and Dub, struggle to determine what Waters wants of them. They eventually settle into Waters' more mature style of class administration and find that the class stimulates them to think. Waters' class becomes quite popular with the small group of enrolled students.

When Steve accidentally catches his father in bed with a woman, he sarcastically notes that although he can't have girls upstairs, apparently those rules do not apply to his father. He treats his father and Jackie in a rude and belittling way, but they reciprocate with restraint and a casual kindness. This situation is the first time that Steve feels anything other than complete resentment for his father - even though at this point in his life, Steve still mistakenly believes his father is solely responsible for his parents' divorce. The casual mention that Waters attends one of Doug's concerts on the same night as Dub and her friends attend will become significant in later plot developments.

Another symbolic item is introduced in the expensive pearl earrings. Steve has used all of his earnings to buy the gift for Dub. Had she received them in good faith they would have been a magnificent token of affection. Instead, she is already emotionally detaching from Steve and is at least honest enough to refuse the gift. Steve believes that someday Dub will accept them and he is right, although the circumstances around their delivery will not be what he expected.



# **San Diego, Senior Year (pp.174-175)**

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp.174-175) Summary**

Steve reads at a coffee shop where a waitress mistakes him for someone she knows from the local university. When she realizes her mistake, she remains for a few moments of small talk. Steve tells her he is a psychology major.

## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp.174-175) Analysis**

Steve, now nineteen years old, is ready to complete high school and move on with his life. This brief incident illustrates that other people assume he is a college student not only because of his apparent age, but also because of his behavior and his selection of hangouts.



## **Houston, Junior Year (pp.175-180)**

### **Houston, Junior Year (pp.175-180) Summary**

One day Steve and Alan pick up Sarah from the airport for a brief visit. When they return home Steve watches incredulously as he sees Alan smile at Sarah. When he later comments about his father smiling, Sarah tells Steve that he also makes their father happy, though Steve disagrees.

Later, Steve attends the story-writing awards ceremony with Waters. At the ceremony, a newspaper publisher reads Steve's essay out loud in its entirety. On the way home from the ceremony Steve asks Waters about becoming a better writer, and Waters suggests writing from experience, noting that, for example, Steve would probably not be able to write convincingly about love until after he had his heart broken. The next day Steve sees a newspaper clipping hanging from the refrigerator - it is a photograph of him and Waters with the accompanying story. Alan has handwritten a note of praise in the margin. The next day at school, Steve cannot find Dub and searches for her in all of her typical hangouts. He finally locates her in Waters' classroom discussing a paper with him. When an irritated Steve asks her where she has been lately, Dub is dismissive and notes that they are not somehow connected.

### **Houston, Junior Year (pp.175-180) Analysis**

The ever-perceptive Sarah realizes that Alan York is proud of his son Steve even though Steve refuses to fashion a solid relationship with his father. Sarah's perception, of course, is correct as is illustrated by Alan's praising note on the newspaper clipping. Dub's presence in Waters' classroom and subsequent dismissive attitude toward Steve provides fairly obvious foreshadowing of events which will shortly unfold in the narrative.



## **Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 180-182)**

### **Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 180-182) Summary**

Waters hosts a Christmas party for select students at his house during the Christmas break from school. In most respects, it is a standard holiday party although Doug brings along a band groupie as a date. Steve finds her attractive, but Dub criticizes her, hinting that she is vapid. During the evening, Steve needs to toilet and goes in search of a vacant restroom. He accidentally wanders into Waters' bedroom, sees a huge, high bed, and notes a photograph showing Waters clean-shaven and getting married. Steve realizes he did not know Waters had ever been married and, in fact, knows very little about Waters. At the end of the evening Waters hands out wrapped books as gifts.

### **Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 180-182) Analysis**

Steve's particular attention to the large and central position of Waters' bed in the bedroom provides additional foreshadowing of future events. Although Waters was once married, he is clearly not living with anyone and Steve guesses that Waters is divorced. Waters gives Dub a D. H. Lawrence "banned" book as a gift - clearly symbolic of their mutual attraction. He gives Steve a receipt for a copy of *Anchor's Away* - the Grace High School year book. Given Water's knowledge of Steve's situation as the about-to-be-spurned lover, Waters gift of "remember-this" is fairly mean-spirited.



# **San Diego/Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 182-186)**

## **San Diego/Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 182-186) Summary**

Steve spends the remainder of Christmas break in San Diego. He tries to call Dub several times, but she is consistently dismissive or simply not home. He becomes frantic at her unresponsiveness and pleads with his mother until she relents to his wheedling and allows him to return to Houston a few days earlier than scheduled. Steve arrives in Houston at midnight and calls Dub's home only to be told that she is spending the night at a friend's house.

Steve drives to the friend's house only to discover that Dub is not there. Steve realizes from the friends' sorrowful look of pity that Dub has left him, and he immediately surmises that Doug and Dub have become an item. Steve furiously drives to Doug's house but neither Doug nor Dub's automobiles are there. Steve drives around in a fog and then decides that the only person who he can talk to is Waters, the English teacher. He drives out to Waters' house and discovers Dub's automobile is parked in Waters' driveway and the house lights are out except for a dim candle flickering in the upstairs bedroom. Steve sits in his car and watches the house until dawn. He then searches his car for a sharp or dangerous object with which he intends to harm himself. He instead finds the pearl earrings he had earlier purchased for Dub and which she had refused. He takes them, places them on the windshield of Dub's car, and then drives away.

## **San Diego/Houston, Christmas Vacation, Junior Year (pp. 182-186) Analysis**

The novel's climax is finally revealed - Dub has cheated on Steve with their trusted advisor, Waters the English teacher. Her relationship, which is not only inappropriate but also actually criminal for Waters, devastates Steve and his first reaction is disbelief followed by a brief period of considering personal injury as a statement of pain. Instead, he gives Dub the expensive pearl earrings that she had earlier refused.

This event is clearly the foreshadowed breaking of Steve's heart and is obviously the event that has caused him to change from an achieving academician to a sarcastic drug-using stoner. Although the event is traumatic for Steve, the point in the narrative at which it is revealed allows the reader to surmise that Steve will, in fact, survive the grief and eventually move on to a successful life.



## **Houston, Junior Year (p.186)**

### **Houston, Junior Year (p.186) Summary**

Steve stops going to class and attentively avoids Dub. He meets her by accident only one time, and as she begins to stammer, he simply walks away from her. An older co-worker at the theater begins to supply Steve with marijuana and he starts using drugs consistently. Within a few weeks he is caught smoking marijuana at work and loses his job. His grades immediately suffer and he completes the academic year with poor grades and a failed credit in English.

### **Houston, Junior Year (p.186) Analysis**

Steve's descent into drug-use and depression and his adoption of a dropout mentality is again briefly recounted, though the start of the novel presented this aspect of Steve's life in greater detail. The failing grade in English, ironically, is the very thing that will eventually cause Steve to reevaluate his life and put things to right once again. In order to have the failing grade changed to, ultimately, an A, DeMouy will challenge Steve to write the 100-page paper which recounts his previous experiences in life.



## **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 187-188)**

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 187-188) Summary**

Steve decides to retroactively entitle his 100-page report *Knee Deep in the Heart of Texas*. He completes the last few pages and delivers them to DeMouy. DeMouy finishes reading the report and commends Steve on his literary endeavor. He also shows Steve an altered transcript where the failing English credit has been changed to an A grade. Steve tells DeMouy that he has selected the University of Washington as his next destination.

### **San Diego, Senior Year (pp. 187-188) Analysis**

The novel's principle resolution is brief - Steve completes his paper and presents it to DeMouy who has changed his grade. Thus, Steve will graduate from high school and continue on to a college close to where his father grew up. The remaining sections of the novel will continue to resolve various plot elements as the narrative concludes.



# **San Diego, Graduation (pp. 189-190)**

## **San Diego, Graduation (pp. 189-190) Summary**

Steve and Allison graduate in a typical promotional ceremony. Steve's father does not attend due to work conflicts, but Cindy, Chuck, Sarah, and Danny attend. Allison's father does not attend. When Steve walks across the stage DeMouy hands him a diploma and congratulates him. Later, Steve writes a sincere but concise note thanking DeMouy and leaves it on his automobile.

## **San Diego, Graduation (pp. 189-190) Analysis**

In a graduation ceremony reminiscent of every high school graduation, Steve stands in a long line and waits to be called to the stage. He hears Sarah and Allison cheering for him and he and Sarah cheer for Allison. Steve's brief thank-you note to DeMouy illustrates the emotional and social maturity that Steve has developed over his senior year in high school.





## **San Diego, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 191-192)**

### **San Diego, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 191-192) Summary**

Allison receives a full-ride scholarship to Berkeley, and Steve will attend the University of Washington. Before leaving for college they spend one night together having sex and then Steve visits her home in order to meet Terry Kimble, Allison's father. Steve nervously prepares to meet her father but is somewhat shocked to discover he is in a nearly unresponsive depression. Later, Allison and Steve say goodbye without making any promises. Steve misses her nearly every day but harbors no illusions about their future.

### **San Diego, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 191-192) Analysis**

Allison gives Steve his so-called "Night of Infinite Pleasures" (p. 191) as a graduation gift after his academic slump. Their no-promises goodbye compares interestingly with an earlier no-promises goodbye between two of Steve's friends (p. 144). At that time, Steve found such an idea appalling, but now he realizes it as a nearly inevitable situation that occurs between high school and college.



## **Houston, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 192-200)**

### **Houston, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 192-200) Summary**

Steve and Alan pick up their tuxedos but are mistakenly dressed in each other's fitted tuxedos. Steve is alarmed and then amused to discover that aside from tiny differences, they each fit each other's tailored clothes. On the day of the wedding, Steve, Sarah, Alan, and Jackie drive together. Steve anticipates a huge event with numerous celebrities and dreads spending the day in soul-killing boredom. He is instead surprised when a Justice of the Peace at the local county building marries Alan and Jackie in a ten-minute ceremony. Steve wonders why his father wanted him to act as best man when there is no social significance to the event. In a sudden epiphany, Steve realizes that his father's affection for him is indeed real - Steve is not Alan's "show pony," he is his son. Steve as best man then toasts the happy newlyweds and advises his father to not work so hard that he ignores his bride. Alan and Steve subtly salute each other and exchange a knowing look. After the wedding, the tiny wedding party drives to a church that hosts a kitschy barbecue restaurant, and they all enjoy small talk and greasy food.

Some time after the wedding Steve calls Doug and they spend an afternoon hanging out and getting caught up on their ailing friendship. Some time after that Steve happens to look out his window one day and sees Dub's car pulling into the driveway. He nervously watches as Dub and Sarah get out of the car - they have maintained an intermittent friendship beyond Dub and Steve's breakup. Steve notes that Dub's hair is no longer dyed black and that she is dressed in essentially normal clothing. He watches as Dub says goodbye to Sarah, then gets back in her car and drives off. Steve is surprised and pleased that he does not have any overwhelming emotional response to seeing Dub.

After the summer ends, Steve leaves for college, taking only a suitcase and an old computer. In the driveway Sarah and his father say goodbye and Alan hands Steve a final parting gift. Steve opens a sweatshirt and holds it up to his chest to try the fit. Sarah gasps at the shirt - it features a University of Washington mascot above the phonetic slogan "u dub" (p. 200). Steve thanks his father for the gift, noting he will probably need warm clothing, and then drives away.

### **Houston, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 192-200) Analysis**

Steve is expecting to be paraded in front of strangers as his famous father's dutiful son; reminiscent of the way he mistakenly perceived his father paraded his mother as a



"show pony." Steve is surprised and pleased when he realizes that his father and Jackie will be married in a very informal and downscale way. Steve's realization that his father's request for him to be best man was not motivated out of anything except respect and love is a touching element in the narrative, and Steve's sudden realization of his father's love for him is another major resolution of a principle narrative element. The event obviously does not surprise Sarah. It is ironic that the couple is married in a county building but has their so-called reception in a church that serves barbecue during the week.

Steve's final encounter with Dub is completely one-way - Dub does not see Steve watching her. Steve stands and waits for his heart to start pounding, or to start crying, or for his knees to give out, but none of this happens. That is not to say that he is emotionally detached, but that he has grown beyond the pain of Dub's rejection and is looking forward instead of backward. Dub's appearance symbolically indicates that she, too, has matured beyond the emotional state that characterized her while she was in high school. Alan's gift is appropriate but also lets Steve know his selected university has an ironically inappropriate nickname - U Dub, short for the University of Washington.



## **Yakima/Seattle, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 201-202)**

### **Yakima/Seattle, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 201-202) Summary**

Steve stops in Yakima and finds a small sign that notes the town is the birthplace of Alan York. The sign is badly faded and Steve obtains some paint and renews the lettering. Just as he finishes, a policeman pulls up, assuming Steve is vandalizing the sign. After ascertaining that he is refreshing the lettering, the two exchange some pleasantries, and then the cop innocently asks "Who is Alan York, anyway?" (p. 202).

Steve continues his voyage and arrives at the University of Wisconsin, finds his dormitory room, and puts his meager belonging in the closet. He then telephones home and asks Sarah to tell their father that he has arrived safely.

### **Yakima/Seattle, Summer After Senior Year (pp. 201-202) Analysis**

Steve's journey through high school is complete and the narrative ends with Steve commencing on another journey through college. Presumably, his hard-won emotional maturity will serve him well in the coming years. His brief stop in Yakima is somewhat amusing and indicates that instead of resenting his father he has finally come to respect and honor him. The policeman's ignorance of Alan York's achievements indicates that, perhaps, Alan's shadow over Steve's life has not been as complete as Steve had heretofore believed.



# Characters

## Steven ("Steve") Richard York

When the novel opens, Steven York is a gifted nineteen-year-old high school senior who is struggling to graduate from Wakefield High School. Steve is the narrator of the novel, the meta-fictional author of a report that forms about one-half of the novel's contents, and the principle protagonist of the novel. Steve's middle name is in honor of President Richard Nixon. Steve scored highly on his SAT test and excelled at academia through the mid-point of his junior year; in the last part of his junior year and throughout his senior year he turns to drugs and his grades drop from As to Cs and Fs.

Steve was born in 1975 but his father deliberately held him back in school one year so that he would be capable of outstanding athletic performance within his grade. The strategy failed, as Steve does not enjoy organized sports and is not particularly good at them. He is very intelligent although by his senior year he begins to use drugs and alcohol. He dresses in trashy clothing and wears large hoops through pierced ears. He describes himself as scrawny, bony, and gawky.

Steve has a difficult relationship with his father, Alan York, and primarily blames his father for his parents' divorce. Steve later learns that his father, though somewhat to blame, was not primarily responsible for the divorce and through the novel Steve reconciles himself with his father, and the two men are able to develop a relationship. Steve maintains a good relationship with his mother, Cindy Black, and his sister, Sarah, throughout the novel.

During his sophomore year of high school, Steve meets and falls in love with Wanda Varner, who he refers to as Dub. The two students form an inseparable pair for several months but during their junior year Dub leaves Steve and has an affair with their high school teacher. Dub's betrayal sends Steve into a spiral of depression and drug use and causes him to move away from his home and live with his mother. Steve eventually regains his composure, makes new friends, completes high school, and goes on to college.

## Alan York

Alan York is Steven York's father. Alan is a famous astronaut who was one of the first men to walk on the moon. As a youth, Alan was nondescript and not particularly ambitious. He did save a young girl from drowning, however, and her influential father arranged for Alan to attend the Air Force Academy. Alan subsequently excelled in athletics and academia and eventually married the girl he had rescued, now an adult, in 1959. Alan then served in the Viet Nam War as an aircraft captain, flying combat missions. After his return from the war, he worked as a test pilot and then entered the space program to become an astronaut and one of the first men to walk on the moon.



Alan has two children, Steve, born 1975, and Sarah, born 1977. Alan divorced his wife of three decades in 1991, after she proved unfaithful and thereafter moved to Houston with Steve. The two are not particularly close and Alan is emotionally distant and not particularly involved in his son's life because Steve consistently rejects his father. Alan is described as physically fit, good looking, popular, and Steve finds him very controlling. In 1994, Alan meets and then later marries Jacqueline Darby. By this point in the narrative, Steve and Alan have reconciled and Steve acts as Alan's best man in a small wedding ceremony.

## **Cindy ("Mom") Black**

Steven York's mother, Cindy Black, is typically referred to as "mom" throughout the novel. She is a professional real-estate agent and is very successful even though fairly disorganized. She grew up in Washington State where Alan York saved her from drowning. In 1959, she married Alan York and remained a typical housewife while he served in Viet Nam, worked as a test pilot, and later became an astronaut. She has two children, Steve and Sarah, and they were born only after years of marriage. Cindy is very social and hosts many informal parties for her friends and co-workers. At some point in late 1980s, Cindy began an extra-marital affair with Chuck Black. The affair ultimately caused the dissolution of Alan and Cindy's marriage. Cindy subsequently married Chuck and the couple moved to San Diego. Cindy Black is a somewhat minor character in the novel, though she does appear in many brief scenes.

## **Sarah York**

Sarah York is Steve York's younger sister. She excels at academia, is athletic, and is engaged in numerous social aspects of being a student. She has the highest grades in her class and, as a junior, is elected as the student council president. As school president, she organizes the students and leads many of them in various social causes.

After her parents divorce in 1991, Sarah moves to San Diego and lives with her mother while her brother Steve moves to Houston to live with their father. Unlike Steve, Sarah intuitively understands the circumstances of her parents' divorce and is therefore able to maintain a healthy relationship with both of her parents. Instead of turning inward, Sarah is able to connect with friends and others to establish a supportive network that allows her to continue her own personal development.

Sarah is one of two particularly strong characters in the novel. She usually takes an appropriate course of action, nearly always thinks beyond the immediate situation to strive for long-term goals, and is fundamentally honest and forthright in her dealings with other characters in the narrative. Initially, Steve apparently views his little sister as just a kid without much insight, but throughout the novel he begins to discover that she is nearly always right and that her insightful consideration of others results in generally correct judgment.



## Jeff DeMouy

DeMouy is the senior counselor at Wakefield High School in San Diego. Before entering counseling, DeMouy worked as a high school English teacher for several years. He is described by Steven York as a new-age flake, but he appears to be a dedicated student counselor. He is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. His office is full of plants, files, and books, and contains a humidifier and a constantly playing low-volume soundtrack of jungle noises. DeMouy's office smells of oolong and he sometimes offers tea to Steve during their academic discussions. DeMouy drives an economy car that Steve pokes fun at and is otherwise a fairly typical and engaged student counselor.

In the opening scenes of the novel, DeMouy notes that Steve will fall short of graduation requirements by ? credit in English, and suggests that Steve could satisfy the credit by writing a 100-page report. Steve initially rejects the idea but after some consideration decides it is the best course of action. The resultant report constitutes about half of the narrative. DeMouy routinely receives the report, a few pages at a time, from Steve. DeMouy then reads and annotates the report and apparently returns the annotated pages to Steve. Throughout this process, DeMouy builds trust with Steve and eventually helps Steve to stop using drugs and complete high school. DeMouy also assists Allison Kimble with her application processes. Although DeMouy appears in several scenes of the novel, he remains essentially a minor character.

## Mrs. Schmidt, Mrs. Martin, and Mrs. Croslin

Mrs. Schmidt is a physics teacher at Wakefield High School. She notices that Steven York smells of marijuana during class and subsequently inspects his eyes, completes some paperwork, and sends him to the office for discipline. Mrs. Martin is the attendance secretary at Wakefield High School; she tracks Steven York's constant truancy, and he describes her as overweight and unattractive. Mrs. Croslin is York's English teacher at Wakefield High School, and he describes her as particularly unimaginative. Mrs. Schmidt, Mrs. Martin, and Mrs. Croslin are minor characters in the novel, and are representative of the several instructors that Steve mentions from time to time throughout the novel.

## Allison Kimble

Allison Kimble is a student at Wakefield High School and is identified as one of two National Merit finalists, along with Steve York. Allison is a dedicated and intelligent student and is easily the most positive and capable character presented in the narrative.

Allison was born in 1976, apparently in or near San Diego, California. She lived with her parents and brother until 1987 when her mother and brother were killed close to home in an automobile accident while out performing routine errands. Allison's father, Terry, was unable to cope with the loss of his wife and child and quickly slipped into a lifelong depression. Within a few weeks, he had lost his job and he subsequently provided for



his only daughter through insurance payouts. The Kimbles then moved from nicer areas to cheaper areas, eventually ending up in a particularly poor and crime-ridden area of San Diego - albeit an area with cheap rent.

Throughout her father's declining mental health, Allison remained positive and enthusiastic about life and pursued academic excellence as her ticket out of a life of poverty. Her school achievements are incredible given her poor living conditions. Although her father is not abusive, he is nearly catatonic and spends his days in pajamas watching television. Allison not only cares for herself, but also cares for her father.

Allison dresses in a unique but modest style and appears to at least Steve, initially, as a bit odd and somewhat shy. Once he meets her, however, he finds her immediately attractive - and she apparently finds Steve attractive. The unlikely pair begin to date and then become a couple for the last few months of their senior year in high school. Allison completes her schooling with high marks and honors and receives a full-ride scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley.

## Wanda ("Dub") Varner

Wanda Varner is short, has brown hair that she dyes dark black, wears no makeup, and dresses in baggy men's clothing. Her eyes are set far apart and her nose is turned up at the end. Steve York, though hardly an unbiased commentator, describes her profile as looking like a cartoon face smacked with a frying pan. She wears no jewelry but totes around an enormous backpack full of books. Wanda is not particularly fond of her name and prefers the nickname of "Dub" which is short for the letter "W," the first letter of her given name.

Steve repeatedly notes that Dub is not particularly physically attractive although her personality is very strong and engaging. Dub is particularly insightful, artistic, and intelligent. She has an easy-going style and can engage in friendly, candid banter with nearly everyone she meets. Dub enjoys a wide circle of dedicated friends, both boys and girls, which includes Steve's sister Sarah York. Even after Steve and Dub are no longer on speaking terms, Sarah and Dub maintain their friendship.

Dub was born in 1976 and is a sophomore at Grace High School during the 1991-92 school year. She joins the Grace Order of Dadaists due to its artistic appeal and is instrumental in demanding that the school club be an active entity. She is one of the seminal club members for the first several months of the club's existence, later taking a backseat role to Doug Chappell and others.

Dub, via a letter, confides to Sarah that she finds Steve attractive. One of Dub's friends, Rhonda, makes some initial moves on Steve that he rejects in favor of attempting a relationship with Dub. For several weeks, Dub distances herself from Steve to demonstrate solidarity with her rejected friend Rhonda. Eventually, however, Dub and





Steve once again become good friends, start to date, and eventually form a couple. Dub and Steve then have frequent sexual intercourse for a period of several months.

During the 1992-93 school year Dub, Steve, and other friends enroll in a creative writing class taught by Mr. Waters. Steve excels in the class while Dub finds herself attracted to the instructor. When Steve travels to San Diego for the Christmas 1992 school break, Dub begins a sexual relationship with her high school instructor and quickly distances herself from Steve.

## **Francis and Maureen Varner**

Francis and Maureen are Wanda Varner's parents. They are both accomplished professionals who occasionally indulge in a little marijuana smoking, although they deny it to their children. They are fairly "hip" parents and don't mind if Dub has Steve at the house when they are not there to supervise. Steve finds them likable and approachable and sometimes wishes his parents - his father in particular - were more like them. They are relatively minor characters in the novel and do not appear to be particularly effective at successful parenting.

## **Chuck Black**

Chuck is Steven York's stepfather. He is a pilot for Delta Airlines and is frequently - in fact, usually - away from home and flying to some exotic locale, accompanied by his wife Cindy. Chuck met Cindy and began an extra-marital affair with her while she was married to Alan York. After Cindy left Alan, Chuck and Cindy were quickly married. Chuck prefers to be uninvolved in parenting Cindy's children and is either oblivious to what is going on in the house or simply parrots Cindy's decisions and opinions. He is a minor character in the novel.

## **Doug Chappell**

Doug is a student at Grace High School in Houston, Texas. During his sophomore year, Doug forms a student association for skateboarders named "Skate or Die" to win a bet with his father about getting his photograph in the school yearbook. The skateboarding club is successful and Doug wins the bet. During his junior year, Doug meets Steve York, a sophomore, and the two become good friends. When Doug obtains his driver's license and automobile, however, he loses all interest in skateboarding. During his junior year, he forms a student association called the "Grace Order of Dadaists," again to win a bet with his father about getting his photograph in the school yearbook. The so-called GOD club enlists about a dozen other students. Doug initially intends to let the club remain entirely idle, but due to the insistence of Wanda Varner and others, Doug eventually leads the club in several participatory events, including a school float parade and the school talent program.



Doug also forms a band, *The Grippe*, which enjoys modest local success for several months. As expected with any high school band project, *The Grippe* experiences personnel changes and varying degrees of success playing at local venues. Steve finds Doug's success somewhat irritating but he also haltingly admires Doug's newfound appeal to young women. After completing high school in Houston, Doug moves to Austin and there attends an unnamed college, presumably the University of Texas at Austin, and plays in another band that enjoys some club circuit success.

Doug's character provides an interesting counterweight to Steve throughout the narrative. Although Doug appears in many scenes, he is not fully developed as a character and in many respects can be viewed primarily as a narrative plot development element in the book.

## Jacqueline ("Jackie") Darby

Jackie is Alan York's girlfriend and, eventually, Steve York's stepmother. Steve describes her as blonde, pretty with a good figure, and in her mid thirties. She is portrayed in the novel as a typical woman who is easy to talk to and generally friendly. When she marries Alan in 1994, she would be about 36 and Alan would be about 57. Their age disparity initially bothers Steve, but he later accepts it. Jackie is a minor character in the novel.



## Objects/Places

### Wakefield High School

Wakefield High School is the school in San Diego where Steven York completes his senior year. The school is the primary setting for a large portion of the novel. In nearly all respects, the high school is a typical four-year school. The school counselor is DeMouy, who has a profound effect on Steve's life by allowing him to make up a missing English credit and therefore be able to graduate.

### Grace High School

Grace High School is the school in Houston where Steven York completed his freshman, sophomore, and junior years. The school is the primary setting for a large portion of the novel. The school's motto is "Home of the Buccaneers," and the school is a typical four-year high school in nearly all respects. Steve often notes that the school is very recently constructed; for example, the grounds have only small trees that are still staked. One of the instructors at Grace High School, Mr. Waters, has an inappropriate - indeed illegal - sexual relationship with Dub, a student.

### The Cineplex

Steve works at a movie theater while living in Houston. He performs several jobs at the theater, starting out at the concession stand then being promoted into the projectionist booth and finally ending up in the lower ranks of supervisory roles. He appears to somewhat enjoy his job and routinely looks over the movie-going crowd to see which friends or family are attending the shows. He saves most of his income and uses it to buy a pair of pearl earrings that he gives to Dub. After Dub ends their relationship, Steve is introduced to drugs by a fellow Cineplex employee, and eventually loses his job when his boss catches him smoking marijuana while on the clock.

### Steven York's 100-Page Report

Steve York is ? credit short of his graduation requirements. To satisfy the ? credit deficiency, Steve writes a 100-page report and submits it, a few pages at a time, to Jeff DeMouy. The report, in effect, is about half of the novel. The report is represented within the novel in a bold-face sans-serif font and composes approximately one half of the pages within the novel.



## Skate or Die

Skate or Die is an official Grace High School club organized by Doug Chappell in his sophomore year. The club's activities consist of meeting at various locations to skateboard and drink beer. Doug organizes the club to win a bet with his father about having a club photograph in the school yearbook. After Doug receives his driver's license, he immediately loses all interest in Skate or Die, though the club survives for at least a few more years.

## Dadaism

Dadaism is a cultural movement that began during World War I, which primarily involved visual arts and theatre, and was characterized by deliberate irrationality, randomness, and the rejection of prevailing attitudes in art. Steve and his fellow students interpret the seminal tenets of Dadaism to conclude that acceptance by the prevalent social order is not important, that individualized self-expression is significant, and that art should be viewed as a context-less expression of images, as a sort of anti-art. Therefore, it is of course amusing that they desired to organize an official school club around the principles of rejection of the established order of thing.

## Grace Order of Dadaists ("GOD")

Grace Order of Dadaists, usually shortened to GOD, is an official Grace High School Club organized by Doug Chappell in his junior year. The club is originally intended to be non-active, serving only to allow Doug to win a bet with his father about having a club photograph in the school year book. However, many of the students who join GOD, notably Dub, insist that the club must be active. The club eventually becomes active in school functions and then briefly becomes the social focus of Steve York. The club is later disbanded after showing some distasteful art during an assembly and then reformed when a faculty advisor is selected. The reformed club wanes in popularity and never again participates meaningfully in school activities. The very idea of a conventional school club espousing the ideals of Dadaism is somewhat ridiculous. This same strange combination of Dada and organization can be found in the club's official name - they form the "order" of Dadaists.

## Get Hammered

The Grace Order of Dadaists creates a float for the Grace High School parade. Most of the other floats depict the school's mascot defeating a rival school's mascot. Get Hammered is a huge mechanical claw hammer that moves up and down, seemingly pounding on the cab of the truck that pulls it slowly along. Thousands of lifesavers have been glued on a large sign on the float to spell out "Grace Order of Dadaists says 'Pork'" - the word "pork" being represented by a Chinese character and, hence, unintelligible to most. The float's public parade reception consists of a prolonged period



of bewildered silence, followed by wild cheering. The float is later voted "most original" and wins a small monetary award.

## The Pearl Earrings

Steve York saves the money he makes working at a movie theater to buy an expensive pair of pearl earrings that he attempts to give to Dub as a gift. She admires the earrings but, strangely, refuses them as being too expensive. Steve does not return the earrings for a refund as he considers returning rejected jewelry to be pathetic and beneath him. The earrings are, therefore, symbolic of Dub's rejection of Steve. When Steve later discovers Dub's unfaithfulness, he comes across the earrings while he is looking for an instrument with which to harm himself. Instead of harming himself, he silently places the earrings on Dub's automobile's windshield, thus giving her the gift she had earlier rejected.

### *Anchor's Away*

The yearbook of Grace High School is incongruously titled *Anchor's Away*. The yearbook is not particularly well described and thus is probably typical in all respects. Doug Chappell has a yearly bet with his father about having a special photograph in the yearbook - this monetary bet drives Doug to always form an official school social club to secure the bet. Steve's photograph does not appear in any yearbook because he actively attempts to be anonymous and disappear into the woodwork. For Christmas, shortly before beginning a sexual relationship with Steve's girlfriend, Mr. Waters gives Steve a gift - a paid receipt for a copy of *Anchor's Away*. Given that Waters likely knew what was about to happen, his gift is nearly a slap in the face to Steve and is particularly inappropriate.



# Setting

Schoolrooms in California and Texas are the major settings for *Rats Saw God*. Given Thomas's teaching experience, that is not surprising. The scenes in California pale in comparison, though. The high school there never takes on a character like Grace High in Texas, and San Diego never seems to matter much to Steve. But the Clear Lake setting, like the events that happen there, shape Steve. Clear Lake (a suburb of Houston where the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is based) is described as almost a paradise: a "world of sports cars, designer clothes, fifteen acre malls, *Rats Saw God* 349 million-dollar homes . . . and private tennis coaches." It is, in short, everything that Steve rejects. He chooses an old El Camino as his vehicle, dresses like a pirate, avoids both the mall and mall culture, and casts off all the advantages of this lifestyle. Just as he rejects everything his father wants him to be, Steve rejects everything Clear Lake offers.

He also deliberately rejects the conformity and normalcy of Grace High School.

With his best friend Doug, he cofounds the club GOD (Grace Order of Dadaists) and, with his flippant remarks and attitudes, Steve chooses not to fit in. He wants to be an iconoclast; in his words, to be "constantly looking for ways to exist outside the mainstream." He rejects being a good student citizen in any traditional sense. Much to his father's annoyance, he refuses to participate in sports or even care about them.

What better place to be a nonconformist than in a large suburban high school which thrives on conventionality and ritual? Which, as Dub notes, makes Grace High School the perfect place for the Dadaists to make trouble. Ironically, the first meeting of GOD takes place at a Pizza Hut, a dull corporate brand-name teen hangout. Most of the key scenes in *Rats Saw God* take place against similar backdrops of the "events" of high school life—club sign-up day, homecoming parade and dance, talent show, parties, etc.

Steve, Doug, and Dub are willing to participate in such rituals, while mocking them.

By mocking them, they can keep a distance.

If they pretend not to care, then it does not matter if they fail or do not fit in.

This mocking distance plays into the central theme of *Rats Saw God*: living up to expectations.



## Social Sensitivity

One of the most controversial aspects in *Rats Saw God* is the casual use of drugs and alcohol by the characters. Smoking dope does not destroy Steve's life although readers see that it is not without cost. But smoking dope does not lead him to harder drugs, does not cause him to have unsafe sex, or result in him splattering his brains like an egg in a frying pan as all the drug prevention adds proclaim. Characters also drink, but they do not crash their cars, they do not become alcoholics, and they do not ruin their lives. Thomas told Shoemaker, "[If] you have this sort of Reefer Madness mentality—a kid takes a hit of marijuana and suddenly he's homicidal or suicidal—you're begging to have a kid close your book. He knows you're full of it." At the same time he admits that "I don't think I would write a book in which my protagonist is constantly doing drugs without facing any consequences—not because I feel compelled to have an anti-drug message in there—I just wouldn't feel as if it was truthful." By walking that line, Thomas is treating the subject of drug use by teens not only with sensitivity, but with a more sensible attitude than readers find in most young adult novels.

The same is true of his handling of sexual content. It is, for a young adult novel, fairly graphic but also rendered with great hilarity.

The novel is not as graphic as the film *American Pie*, but it is also not your typical young adult fare. The sex scenes are handled, as are most things in the book, with honesty and humor. The first sexual encounter between Steve and Dub is not really beautiful or romantic; "awkward" describes it better. Thomas follows the relationship between Steve and Dub from their first meeting to mutual attraction to first kiss to their sexual encounter. During this courtship period, Dub several times "slows" Steve down when he is racing ahead and he accepts this. He loves her, or thinks he does.

She says the same. As young adults what they are learning, every day, is to take on adult roles, responsibilities, and routines.

That they decide to have sex is not shocking; it makes sense in the context of the story and the course of that relationship. It would have been dishonest to avoid the sex scenes. Also, if Steve and Dub had not been intimate, Steve perhaps would not have been as devastated. In that way, Thomas is showing some consequences of sexual intimacy when undertaken by teens: physically they can do it, but emotionally they find the repercussions hard to handle.



## Literary Qualities

The most striking element about *Rats Saw God* is its unusual structure: the book-within-the-book approach. Rather than telling the story in straight chronological order, Thomas has decided to cut back and forth between the present and the past. In some ways, the book is constructed like a mystery novel. The "crime" is what happened to Steve in Houston. The flashbacks are the clues. In writing about *Rats Saw God*, Richard Peck argued that a "straight narrative line would have diminished cause and effect, actions and their consequences."

Moreover, this structure sets up a series of contrasts between Steve's life in California and his life in Houston. Each life has the same elements: a parent, a girlfriend, a school setting, a supportive faculty member, a set of friends, but Steve is not the same person. Finally, the structure which gives so much weight to Steve's diary entries allow Thomas's greatest gift as a writer—his authentic voice—to shine through.

Voice is critical to the novel. Because the story is told in first person, readers are hearing and seeing the world through Steve's ears and eyes. It is a voice, which, reviewer Julie Hudson commented, "screams 'read me now while I am hot' and hot it is. Steve and his friends are real, not just an idea of what kids are like." From the adolescent humor to the pop culture references to the overall tone of the book, Thomas has captured the essence of being a teenager in the 1990s. Despite Steve's marijuana use, the book is not lethargic; in fact it crackles with energy. The energy is often built through conflict as Steve bounces up against walls everywhere, but in particular at home with this father and at school with the "straight" kids. Steve's take on these conflicts creates the heat that solders the reader to the novel.

Steve's typical response is to make a joke. The use of humor is critical to the book, as it is to Steve's life. Steve sees the world through wisecrack glasses. Scene after scene is depicted not with a detailed description of people, places, and things but with Steve's smart-aleck commentary on events. This is particularly true in the dialogue. Desperate to escape from the school counselor, Steve does not ask to go back to class, instead saying, "we're at the end of World War Two in history, and I can't wait to find out who wins." The voice is obviously that of a smart, funny, likable kid who is using humor to get out of situations that make him uncomfortable. When interviewed for the high school newspaper about being a National Merit Scholar, Steve will not answer the questions straight, replying with nothing but sarcastic comebacks. Humor is his escape valve, but it also shows that he is smart, creative, and likable.

And he is very much a teen, an older teen who merges the concerns of teen culture into his own personal culture. Pop culture references abound. While in some ways this can serve to date a book, it also places it within context. References to bands define Steve: a kid who listens to Pearl Jam has a certain sensibility as opposed to someone who listens to top forty or thrash metal.

Thomas's use of these types of references give the novel its immediacy and hipness.



Music is everywhere throughout the book— not just because it is an interest of Thomas's, but because music helps mark out teen life. In addition, the interest in sex shown by Steve adds even more creditability to the book. *Rats Saw God* has characters who talk about masturbation and Steve writes that one of his goals for his date with Dub is to "squeeze tits." From the makeout sessions in cars to the fumbling first sexual intercourse scene, Thomas is referencing the sexual energy that rarely is discussed in young adult novels.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

The novel is a brief form of a narrative structure typically referred to as a *Bildungsroman*, or apprenticeship novel. Steve York, the narrator, meta-fictional author, and principle protagonist, relates his personal voyage from adolescence to maturity in a first person, autobiographical, style. In some respects, the novel is nearly a diary or journal of events interspersed with self-introspection about Steve's development. Secondary elements in the narrative deal with the character development and maturation of additional characters such as Wanda Varner, Sarah York, Doug Chappell, and Allison Kimble.

Nearly all of the principle characters in the novel are high school students who are trying to develop identity and extract meaning from the world. They perform these activities in a wide variety of methods. For example, Sarah becomes a focused and social woman while Allison devotes her time to personal success and excellence. On the other hand, Steve turns to drugs, Doug devotes his energies to playing in a band, and Dub seeks out an illicit and inappropriate relationship with one of her high school teachers.

The end of the novel demonstrates that nearly all of the characters have achieved maturity in varying degrees of success. Doug has proceeded to college and established himself as a musician in the local club circuit, and Sarah continues to pursue academic excellence and develop meaningful relationships with her boyfriend, friends, and family. Steve and Allison complete high school and look forward to entering college. Only Dub, apparently, does not emerge to a bright future. Steve simply notes that she had quit deliberately costuming herself to fit a certain role and instead presents herself as a more-or-less normal-looking young woman; but her plans, future, and goals remains undetermined. Presumably, Dub's future will involve several years of personal upheaval as she deals with the consequences of some of her past decisions.

## Dealing With Adversity

Steve, the principle protagonist in the novel, experiences two primarily adversarial events in his life. First, his parents divorce when he is in his mid-teenage years, which leads to a disintegration of his nuclear family and a drastically negative impact on his relationship with his father. Second, Steve's first serious girlfriend and sexual partner, Dub, betrays him in a particularly mean-spirited and ill-conceived way when she engages in a bizarre and illegal sexual relationship with one of her high school teachers. Dub's negative treatment causes Steve to reject his previous value system, take up heavy drug use, and begin to espouse the "drop out" attitude that characterizes the first part of his senior year in high school.



This behavior contrasts with, for example, Sarah York's behavior. Her parent's divorce does not cause her relationship with either parent to markedly suffer. Indeed, Sarah appears to come to terms rather quickly with the causes and effects of the divorce and move past them. By the time Steve is beginning to recover, Sarah is ready to be his mentor. Moreover, whereas Dub's cheating causes Steve to spiral out of control, Cindy's cheating with Chuck on Alan did not cause Alan to lose all sense of proportion. In other words, the characters in the novel behave differently to similar circumstances based on their individual perspectives.

The novel is somewhat moralistic in its approach to dealing with adversity in that every character that responds to a negative situation in a socially appropriate way is measurably rewarded throughout the narrative, while those characters that respond in socially irresponsible ways suffer the penalties of their actions. This correlation of acceptable behavior to good outcomes, unfortunately, does not particularly resonate with verisimilitude. Nevertheless, the novel does attempt to establish that irresponsible behavior, such as drug use, leads to undesirable results.

## Family Relationships

The novel is constructed around the experiences of the York family. For example, the novel's beginning and concluding scenes deal with Steve York interacting with his family, and the entire construction of the narrative is based around the York family experience, of course with a strong focus on Steve's personal experiences. Two other families have large roles in the novel - the Varner and the Kimble families. In most of the salient narrative elements, the histories of the three families diverge, though the children of the families find themselves in similar circumstances. This narrative construction allows the various families, the York family in particular, to represent a broad class of American families. Because of this, the narrative takes on a social significance somewhat beyond the day-to-day details of the York family's history. All of the novel's family members ultimately derive a great deal of support from intra-family relationships, even the depressed Mr. Kimble who relies heavily on his daughter for nearly everything.

These familial relationships are contrasted sharply by Mr. Waters, a divorced man, who seems adrift without any anchor of family life. Mr. Waters' response is to become isolated from his peers and then to develop an inappropriate - in fact, illegal - sexual relationship with at least one of his students. Alan York is also divorced, but instead of allowing this to lead him into a strange life as a social hermit or sexual predator he pursues limited dating opportunities and eventually once again marries and begins another family relationship.

Finally, one of the principle conflicts throughout the novel is the poor relationship between Steve and Alan York. Steve wrongly holds Alan nearly completely responsible for his parents' divorce and Alan is unwilling to lay the blame on his ex-wife. Thus, Steve finds himself briefly alone and without a family support network through the most turbulent period of his life. It is only as the novel nears completion that Steve is

reconciled to Alan and the two characters begin a mature family relationship. Thus, family and family relationships are a dominant theme in the novel.



## Themes/Characters

In the first chapter of *Rats Saw God*, Steve is high. Asked by the guidance counselor if he resents his father, Steve replies, "I don't anything him." By the last chapter, Steve has arrived at his new college home in Washington (where his father was raised).

He calls his dad to tell him he has arrived "safe and sound." He also stops in his father's hometown to pay tribute to his dad, whom he has disrespected most of his teen years. Steve's coming-of-age through his teen years is the guts and the glory of *Rats Saw God*. The unique structure of the book, however, allows readers to watch Steve's character develop in opposite directions. In Houston he starts off "good" then is betrayed and starts his fall; when he arrives in San Diego, he is "at bottom" but starts putting his life back together. In each location, however, he is struggling to make the transition from boy to man, and all the expectations such a transformation brings with it.

In Steve, Thomas has created a real teenage boy. He has captured the intensity and essence of adolescence with a voice so solid, so sure, and yet so heartbreakingly honest. It is a voice that, in the words of Joel Shoemaker, is "so hip and cool and strong it hurts." It is not just a matter that Thomas gets the outward details right, although he does. He manages to capture the pop culture details and, especially in Steve, the essence of adolescence. The irony, the moodiness, the glib remarks, and the smart-aleck comments are the core stuff that makes most teenagers twist and turn. Unlike many authors of books for teens, Thomas does not believe that if his characters are wearing the rights shoes and listening to the right band, they will emerge as real young adults.

But it is more than that, much more.

Thomas's fiction is ultimately about honesty, about not pulling punches, about depicting teens who think about sex, use drugs, and curse. Thus, honesty is both a theme of the book and a style choice. A prime example of this honesty is found in the language in the book. The language in *Rats Saw God* certainly is not rated G. Obscenities are used regularly, not reserved for special occasions. Since books are words and words demonstrate the language in action, perhaps a book for teens should not or would not include vulgarities. But when left without adults, lots—not all, maybe not even a majority—but lots of kids curse. It just part of the outland: if you have a teen boy getting upset about something, he is not going to yell out "oh shoot" or to tell someone off. He is not going to say, "forget you."

From Steve's cocky defiance at the start of the book, to his earlier nervousness about sex and his final acceptance, Thomas honestly portrays the essence of adolescence.

Amazingly, Thomas was able to do this even though Steve's experiences are not based on his own high school years. He told Joel Shoemaker: I purposely made Steve York my opposite. First of all, Steve was, and possibly is, much smarter than me. He would have loathed me. I dug high school. I was a jock.



I was involved in all sorts of clubs and activities. I got along terrifically with my parents. I didn't drink or smoke.

In this book, Steve jokes that jocks are one-eyed monsters. Thomas perhaps comes to life in some of the other characters, such as Doug with his passion for music (his band covers Clash songs just as Thomas did with his band) and Sarah with her good grades and occasional crusades. Just as Thomas and Sarah find identity by becoming joiners, Steve and Doug find identity through accepting each other, as well as other school outcasts.

GOD becomes a group for the disenfranchised. Most join, Steve presumes, "for their own wiseass reasons." At one point, Steve gives a rundown of each member of GOD describing them physically and guessing at their reasons for joining the group. Most, he figures, join because they do not really fit in anywhere else. Like most great young adult novels, *Rats Saw God* concerns itself with the search for acceptance and identity. Readers get to see Steve wear both hats: that of the successful if screwy sophomore and that of a stoned senior. Readers see him change physically, in particular in his appearance from a fairly "normal kid" to someone who, in his own words, resembles a pirate with his big hoop earrings and dorag. As a smart kid, "gifted" is the word Steve uses, he is desperate to avoid being stereotyped as nerd; thus, just as in his relationship with his father, Steve does the opposite and becomes the epitome of hip.

Opposites are used throughout the book.

Steve's sister, Sarah, is so different from him that he wonders how they could have been made from the same genetic material.

Dub is the opposite of Steve's California girlfriend, the nice, if slightly boring, Alison. Mr. DeMouy, who changes Steve's life for the better, is an opposite of Mr. Waters, who almost ruins it. By using opposites, Thomas shows the different influences on Steve's life. But also opposites attract. Steve comes from a fairly conventional background; his desire to escape that is to take the route least taken: to become an iconoclast, a high school Dadaist. Some kids are just outsiders. Steve chooses to be more, mostly out of a desire to avoid being "normal." He is though, for all of his coolness, a little bit of a geek, in particular when it comes to interacting with girls.

Dub's first line to Steve is "so, you're not really an asshole?" She is just as funny, smart, and sarcastic as Steve. She tells him that she goes by the name Dub rather than her legal name of Wanda because Wanda sounds suited for careers "on a roller derby team or waitressing at a truck stop." He later confesses to being in love with her from the first time they speak. She makes Steve nervous, yet he is drawn to her, and ultimately, almost destroyed by her. The scene after he discovers her infidelity is heartbreaking. All Steve can think about is how to hurt himself physically to match how much he is hurting emotionally. The relationship with Dub is the central relationship of the book, but not the only one.



He also learns that his mother cheated on his father, which seems one factor in Steve finally growing closer to his dad. Steve's grows as his relationships with everyone around him evolve or evaporate.

Coming-of-age stories are about lessons learned the hard way and *Rats Saw God* is no exception. The life lessons are basic ones about trust, responsibility, fairness, honesty, and character. The teens featured in *Rats Saw God*, as Beers and Lesesne point out, "come to an understanding of what it takes to survive in school and in the real world beyond school. They are changed in some ways by their experiences, but they know there is much more to come."

From Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield to Steve York, coming-of-age heroes grow through learning the hard truth that life is often unkind, sometimes unfair, and never uncomplicated. For Steve, this is driven home when he is betrayed by Dub. While Steve is not based on Thomas, this part of the story is. Thomas says, "I knew plenty about being the victim of infidelity. In a way, I was able to release some of my own demons through Steve's story, though we dealt with our heartbreak in very different ways." The heartbreak of the story derives from the gap between what Steve wants in his life and what he can have.

"Alan, you can't turn him into you."

That line, spoken by Steve's mother in the scene where she and his father are telling the kids about their divorce, lays out one of the central themes in *Rats Saw God*, acted out in the relationship between father and son. The book is about the pressure of expectations. Because Steve is smart and funny and the son of successful parents, it is expected that he, too, will succeed. His fear of failure drives him to reject all those demands. His failure with Dub leads him to abandon even the hope of meeting those expectations.

Richard Peck writes that *Rats Saw God* is "a classic story about a defensive son moving in fits and starts toward the inarticulate father who has loved him all along." But mostly fits. Steve's life seems based on a simple premise: not pleasing his father. His father wants him to stand up at a baseball game, Steve sits down. His father wants him to be popular, he distains the "popular" crowd and refuses to join any groups.

His dad wants him to play football; instead he takes a part-time job. His father wants him to become a man, Steve resists. But in Alan York, Steve has more than a father. He has a good old-fashioned American hero, one who has even walked on the moon. In college, he was a football hero; although Steve cannot recall what position he played.

In Vietnam, he was a war hero. Everything he does, he does well. Steve is scared of his Dad; scared he can not live up to his standards, his expectations, but mostly measure up to his life. Steve quits caring when he loses Dub and runs away in a pot-filled haze; he also quits caring about his father when he realizes he can never be like his father. It is only when Steve learns that all he needs to be—and all his father really wants him to be—is himself that the pressure of those expectations is lifted.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is related with two differing points of view. The primary narrative structure, which opens and closes the novel, is related from a first person, limited point of view using present tense in an almost autobiographical style by Steve York, the narrator and principle protagonist. Steve, throughout the novel, writes a lengthy report that summarizes his experiences of the past few years. Steve's report is presented, without commentary, in numerous sections that are interspersed throughout the primary structure. Steve's report thus constitutes about one half of the novel and is related from a first person, somewhat limited, point of view using the past tense. With the benefit of hindsight, Steve will often fill in details about events or other characters in his report that he could not have known at the time they occurred.

This dual point of view, coupled with a somewhat complex chronology, makes the novel interesting to read and adds an enjoyable depth to the novel's construction. The two points of view are distinguished from each other by the use of typeface selections within the novel - one is presented in a light serif font, the other is presented in a heavy sans-serif font. Thus, the reader is always aware of what point of view is being used in any given textual passage.

## Setting

The novel features two principle settings. About half of the novel takes place in Houston, Texas, during the early 1990s. In Houston, Steve York attends Grace High School and works at a local Cineplex. He lives in a large, five-bedroom house with his father and drives a 1975 El Camino. Houston is not particularly well described as a setting, and is best interpreted as simply a hot, urban area in the United States of America. Steve's Houston neighborhood is apparently middle-class Caucasian in nearly all respects. The events that transpire in Houston are nearly all in the past and are related through the report Steve writes for Jeff DeMouy.

The remaining portions of the novel are almost entirely set in San Diego, California, during 1994. In San Diego, Steve attends Wakefield High School and spends most of his time smoking marijuana and avoiding doing any work. He lives with his sister, mother, and stepfather in an apparently typical house and retains his 1975 El Camino. San Diego, at least the area where Steve spends his time, is described as an affluent beachfront community that is primarily middle-class Caucasian. The narrative events that transpire in San Diego constitute the primary time-line of the novel and are narrated by Steve in the first person point of view in the present tense.

The two principle settings are alternately featured as the novel's chronology rapidly switches from time to time. Thus, nearly every other scene is set in a different place and





locale even though both sub-texts are developed chronologically. In general, the novel starts with Steve living in Houston with his father and he thereafter moves to San Diego and lives with his mother. However, he frequently visits his non-custodial parent on holidays or other significant events and thus the locale is not always fixed in a particular period.

## Language and Meaning

The novel uses simple language and fairly basic grammar, and is easily accessible to a wide audience. The language used contains a large amount of slang and is heavily tied to a specific period of time and a specific geographical culture. For example, various West Coast mid-1990s rock bands are listed by name with the implication being that a savvy reader can infer personality by looking through a character's music collection - an event that, in fact, happens in the novel when Jackie flips through Steve's tape collection with a running commentary.

Other real-world events referred to in the novel anchor it in time and provide an extra-textual gritty texture. Unfortunately, for readers who are not familiar with the events described, such as the suicide of Kurt Cobain or the actions of Sinyad O'Connor, the narrative structure may lose impact. Many other aspects of the novel are particularly American and will be very familiar to individuals familiar with Western conventions. It is also worth noting that the novel, typically considered juvenile fiction, contains a fair amount of sexually explicit language and behavior, includes a large amount of casual drug use, and presents "dropout" culture as a viable alternative to productive life during high school.

## Structure

The 203-page novel is divided into numerous sections, ranging from perhaps fifteen pages to a single paragraph. Each section is entitled with a broad period of time that delineates when the action of the section takes place. This aspect of the novel gives it a considerably complicated chronological organization that must be fully understood to comprehend the novel. The complexity, however, is not fully validated by the results obtained, because aside from Steve's betrayal being exposed toward the end of the novel, there is no particular reason for the complex construction. Further, Steve's betrayal is so heavily foreshadowed that when it finally happens it is nearly anticlimactic.

The sections in the novel can be assigned to two broad categories - the first is a traditional narrative structure related in the first person, present tense by Steve York, the narrator. Sections in this category are printed in a light serif font and they are organized in chronological order amongst themselves and span a period ranging from early in Steve's senior year in high school through graduation to his entrance into college: from 1993 to the fall of 1994. The second category purports to be a 100-page report written by Steve York who assumes the duties of meta-fictional author as well as narrator. Sections in this category are printed in a heavy sans serif font. They are also organized

in a chronological order amongst themselves and span a period ranging from Steve's freshman year through the mid-point of his junior year in high school: from 1991 to Christmas of 1992. The narrative gap, from Christmas of 1992 through mid-1993, is not narrated in the text but is infrequently referred to indirectly.

The two types of sections are presented in a nearly alternating series of events - thus, the novel can be viewed as one with consistent flashbacks to prior events. Actually, Steve relates the prior events as he completes a writing assignment, and the text is purported to be portions of that writing assignment delivered from time to time throughout the year.



## Quotes

"That's one hundred typewritten pages. You do have a choice. Summer school would probably be easier.'

"You don't want a paper; you want a novel.'

"You get to choose the topic,' DeMouy continued. 'It can be fiction or nonfiction, an action adventure, a tale of teen angst and neglected cries for help. Though I would suggest you choose a topic you know something about.'

"Who's going to grade this? If it's Mrs. Croslin, it can be a grocery list as long as I punctuate it correctly.'

"You'll turn the pages in to me, five to ten at a time,' DeMouy said.

"Are you sure you're qualified? I mean, did all those years spent probing the teen mind leave any room for a true appreciation of literature?'

"I can manage. My first six years out of college I taught English. Now, I've never worked with a prodigy before, so you'll excuse me if I occasionally fail to grasp some of your especially esoteric passages.'" (p. 6)

"Dadaism is not dead!

"- Did your second-grade teacher scold you for coloring an apple purple and the sky red, thus destroying your artistic urges? If so, Go with GOD.

"- Do paintings of Medieval noblemen or dreamy Renaissance-era panoramas of European countrysides all begin to look the same to you? If so, Go with GOD.

"- Do *predictable, mundane, ordinary, common, and routine* sound like bad words to you? If so, Go with GOD.

"The question all of us should be asking ourselves is not why, but rather, why not?" (p. 30)

"Dub was still looking in the direction of the open front door. I took the liberty of staring at her profile. I knew before looking that she wasn't beautiful. Her face had a cartoon puggishness to it, like an animated character smacked with a frying pan - the eyes huge and splayed at dolphin width. Separately her features would have seemed comical; together they gave her a funkiness that caught your attention like a log cabin in Genericwood Estates. Though I could see only one eyebrow from my angle, I had often noted how they harmonized her stray features. They were dark brown, her original hair color, and they arched and descended like a designer's French curve - striking and perfect.



"Dub's body was an enigma. All of her clothes seemed purchased with an all-star wrestler in mind. A voyeur would have a better change of spying Dub's mystery flesh through the gaping arm holes of one of her short-sleeved shirts than other traditional cleavage opportunities. Dub shunned more feminine garments neither out of a need to hide weight nor latent lesbian masculinity. 'Comfort' was the one-word answer she would give to explain her fashion sense, but I think she was savvy enough to oblige the masses to deal with her on her own terms. Spiral perm her and dress her at the Limited and she would have evaporated in the halls of Grace." (p. 75)

"Dub's hands stretched high above her head where they seemed to be kneading an invisible lump of dough. Her feet were stationary, but her knees, hips, and shoulders swung hypnotically. She kept her eyes shut, and her ear rested against one of her upraised shoulders. In her queer dance I grasped, for the first time, the difference between sensuality and some athletic Fly Girl's simulated banging." (p. 95)

"Sarah didn't think I was funny. 'Just open it.'

"I slid my index finger under the envelope flap and carefully peeled it open. I found, as expected, an invitation inside.

*"I'll be damned. The astronaut's getting married."* (p. 98)

"What was that crap you were playing up onstage? This Satan-smack-big-dumb-sex shit you kids watch on *Headbangers Ball* - someone explain it to me. I don't get it." (p. 119)

*"Laundry room...predivorce...talking to Mom...watching her fold clothes...there had been a bra. Think, Steve, think. Ah yes, I remember now. A clasp, maybe two, in the back.*

"I slid my hand under Dub and began tracing the fabric of her bra. When I got to her spine, I intensified my search for any bump or node that would identify the hook mechanism. I tried to disguise my fumbling as some sort of exotic foreplay involving the lower shoulder blade erogenous zone.

"Want some help?"

"Please," I answered pitifully.

"She brought her hands up to the front of her bra, to a spot between her breasts, and with a swift twist (I should have asked her to demonstrate this slowly), she unhooked herself. Quickly we were out of our shirts, naked from the waist up, and pressed against each other. Dub rolled me over on my back and straddled me. She kissed my forehead first, then my lips, then my neck. In the process her nipples skimmed along the surface of my chest, and I luxuriated in the unearthly smoothness of female breasts against my skin. I felt a dangerous tingle, but the sound of the automatic garage door opening interrupted any worries I had of embarrassing myself." (p. 129)



*"I pissed off my parents in the following ways: I didn't visit any colleges, I spray-painted the name of my band on my jeep, I refused their \$250 offer to cut my hair*

*" -Stallion*

*"I became a woman.*

*" -Irresistible*

*"This summer I came to the conclusion that Texas isn't as bad as say, Oklahoma.*

*" -Cynic" (p. 160)*

*"It's not so much learning as it is living. You can improve your technique through classes and through reading, but you've got to have some truth to put behind the language. Otherwise, no one will connect to it. It's tough, for example, to write about love until you've had your heart broken." (p. 179)*

*"Every time I have a bad day, like those you're so kind to remind me of, something happens that turns it around. We get someone into college who didn't think he'd make it. We find scholarship money for someone who needs it. I see kids who should never graduate - because they're getting beaten up at home or because they've got a learning disability or because they get pregnant - make it across that stage.*

*"DeMouy opened the bottom right folder labeled York, Steven R. I hadn't seen it since my first trip in. From within the folder he pulled out a transcript. He pushed it across the desk. I scanned it and discovered the modification. My failing grade in English had been changed to an A. DeMouy's signature appeared by the new grade.*

*"Sometimes I get to see sharp kids put their lives back together." (p. 188)*

*"The cinder block Cavalry Baptist Church and Barbeque serves meals 'family style.' The restaurant occupies an off-shoot - probably a garage in a former manifestation - of the congregation hall, and six days a week the men of the church barbecue ribs, brisket, and sausage over hickory pits outside the building while the woman prepare the coleslaw, potato salad, sweet tea, and bread that serve as the only sides. Every dish came to our indoor picnic table on heaping unmatched platters. We ate with disposable forks and knives that came sealed in plastic along with our salt, pepper, and napkin. We were the only white people - a crucified Jesus adorning the church events calendar excepted - in the joint. I thought momentarily of the teenaged astronaut as the sole non-Hispanic grape picker in Yakima County." (p. 197)*

*"I contemplated the one item hanging in my room. On the far wall, the photograph Sarah had taken after my freshman year, the one of the lost swan landing on Clear Lake, still hung. I realized then why she chose this particular shot for me. I thought of its twin hanging in the astronaut's study, the one of the panicked salamander, wide-eyed and frightened having just lost half of itself. I knew then, too, why Sarah had framed that one for him." (p. 199)*



## Topics for Discussion

1. Would *Rats Saw God* have worked better as a "straight forward" novel told in chronological order starting with the events in Houston?
2. Why does Steve hurl his Nirvana CD into the ocean when he hears that Kurt Cobain has killed himself? Why does he react so strongly?
- 354 *Rats Saw God* 3. What would have happened to Steve if Mr. DeMouy had not come along? Would he have graduated? Gone on to college?
4. Why do Steve and Doug form GOD? What does it mean to them?
5. Steve's decline is directly tied to his betrayal by Dub. Was this the only factor? What else did he have in his life to give it meaning? What was missing?
6. One reviewer called Steve's doomed romance a "contrivance." Do you agree with that statement? Were there signs that something was going on between Dub and Mr. Waters?
7. Steve says he and his sister have very little in common? Is that true? What similarities do they share? How are they different?
8. What are the causes for the distance between Steve and his father? Is one more to blame than the other? Does Steve's mother contribute to their conflicts? In what ways?
9. How realistic are the portrayals of the two major adult characters Mr. DeMouy and Mr. Waters? Do they seem like real people? Do they really care about Steve? Why?
10. Steve constantly describes himself as an iconoclast. Is he right? If so, how does he live up to this title?



## Essay Topics

The novel portrays a large number of characters that use drugs such as marijuana. The novel also portrays widespread alcohol consumption among teenagers. Are these portrayals accurate? Do they glamorize illegal drugs and alcohol? What are the reasons the characters use drugs? What are the consequences of drug and alcohol use?

The novel portrays several characters who engage in pre-marital sex including Steve, who has sexual relations with two fellow students, and Dub who has sex with Steve and, later, with one of her high school teachers. What are the reasons the characters engage in sexual activities with each other? Are the characters responsible in their sexual activities? What are the consequences of pre-marital sex?

Alan York is a famous astronaut and constantly receives public adulation for his overwhelming achievements. Steve feels that he must grow up in the shadow of his father. Allison Kimble's father is a severely depressed man who does not provide for his family. The two characters react differently to their disparate situations. Is Steve validated when he feels resentment about having a successful and public father?

In the early part of the novel, Steve entirely blames Alan for his parents' divorce. Later, Sarah tells Steve that Cindy had an extra-marital affair that ended the relationship. Analyze what you know about Alan and Cindy's marriage - ultimately, who was responsible for its failure?

DeMouy learns that Waters, a colleague in a distant state, is having sexual relationships with his underage students. Knowing this information, what actions do you think DeMouy should take?

B. J. Stokes, the principal of Grace High School, disbands the Grace Order of Dadaists after they show a particularly insulting and notably ungraceful film during a student talent show. Principal Stokes does not appear to take any other disciplinary action and, in fact, allows the GOD club to be reformed after they find a faculty sponsor. How realistic is this portrayal of Principal Stokes?

Would you rather be friends with the sophomore-year Steve, an academic scholar, or the senior-year Steve, a drug using near drop out? If you were selecting a girlfriend, would you pick Wanda Varner or Allison Kimble? Was Steve or Doug a better friend in their relationship?

Discuss Dadaism and its implementation by the Grace Order of Dadaists. How insightful were the members of the GOD club in their personal implementation of Dadaist principles during the school float parade? During the talent show? In their own lives?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Steve's group GOD was named after the Dadaist movement. Research this movement and its influence. Where did it come from? What did Dadaists believe? Who were some of the major figures of Dada?
2. Marijuana use figures prominently in the novel. Research the various issues surrounding marijuana, in particular the move to legalize its use.
3. Steve's father was an astronaut. Research the Apollo space program, concentrating on the moon landing missions.
4. Steve makes fun of football players throughout the book, but in Texas, high school football is serious business. Investigate the popularity of high-school football in Texas.
5. Steve is the product of a broken home. Research the effects that divorce has on children, in particular with regard to risk-taking behavior among teens.
6. Steve is a National Merit Scholar. What does this mean? How are National Merit Scholar's determined? Research the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). Where did this test come from? Why is it so important? What does it measure?
7. The setting for most of Rats Saw God is the city of Clear Lake, a suburb of Houston, Texas. Research the history of Houston, focusing on the impact of the space program to the region.
8. Some of the first friends Steve makes in Houston are skaters. Research the whole "skate" movement. What are the aspects of skate culture? When did skating transform itself from kid stuff into an almost alternative culture?
9. Bands such as Pearl Jam and Soul Asylum are mentioned in Rats Saw God, as is the death of Kurt Cobain. Research Cobain and the "grunge" music scene. Focus on why Cobain's death had such an impact on so many young people.
10. Steve talks about the efforts Wakefield High is making to crack down on Rats Saw God 355 "stoners." Research the issue of drugs in schools. What are the social, legal, and political issues? Do students have the right to refuse to have their lockers searched? How is the war on drugs being fought in high schools in the United States?





## Further Study

Adams, Lauren. Horn Book (July-August 1996): 468. Lengthy, positive review of Rats Saw God containing mostly plot summary but noting that the novel is an "entertaining and engaging read" and that Thomas brings "a fresh new voice to YA literature."

Beers, Kylene, and Teri Lesesne. "Rob Thomas." In *Writers for Young Adults*, New York: Scribner, 2000. Long analytical article reviewing each book, as well as themes, style, and structure.

Cohen, Jason. "Teen idol." *Texas Monthly* (April 1997): 24. Short profile of Thomas, discussing the process of publishing Rats Saw God, as well as his work in music, movies, and television.

Cooper, Ilene. *Booklist* (June 1, 1996): 1704.

Positive review of Rats Saw God, noting the book's humor and authentic language.

Hudson, Julie. *Voice of Youth Advocates* (June 1996): 102. Very positive review of Rats Saw God, noting the "accurate voice that screams 'read me now.'" The book is given the journal's highest rating for quality.

Lesesne, Teri S. "Beginnings: New Voices, New Approaches." *Emergency Librarian* (September-October 1997): 56. Short, positive reviews of Rats Saw God and *Slave Day*, noting that Rats Saw God is "hilarious" and that Thomas is a writer of "considerable talent."

Maughan, Shannon. "Changing Hats." *Publishers Weekly* (January 18, 1999): 198-199.

Looks at Thomas and two other young adult writers who have made the leap from young adult novels to writing for movies and television.

Peck, Richard. "Writing in a Straight Line."

*Horn Book* (September-October 1997): 529-33. Peck, an award-winning young adult novelist reviews Rats Saw God in the context of the structure of the young adult novel. While "writing in a straight line" may work for some novels, Peck argues, a book like Rats Saw God benefits from its "book-within-a-book" structure.

*Publishers Weekly* (June 10, 1996): 10. Short, positive review of Rats Saw God, noting humor, strong voice, and notes that Thomas "nails his setting with dead-on accuracy."

"Rob Thomas." In *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 25. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Short biographical sketch.

Shoemaker, Joel. "Rats Saw Rob: An Interview with Rob Thomas." *Voice of Youth Advocates* (June 1997): 88-91. Long interview with Thomas conducted just after



publication of *Slave Day*. Thomas discusses his past, his writing style, and his aspirations. Thomas talks in detail about *Rats Saw God*, as well as *Satellite Down* and *Slave Day*. He discusses his writing process. Essential reading.

Shoemaker. *School Library Journal* (June 1996): 154. Long review of *Rats Saw God*, featuring plot summary and discussion of book's structure. Classified as a "starred" review, signifying a top pick of the month.

Stevenson, Deborah. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (May 1996): 317. Critical review of *Rats Saw God*, citing problems in pacing and plotting. Reviewer wrote that book is not "up there with the best YA-turning-a-man novels" but appreciated the tone, atmosphere, and voice.

"Thomas, Rob." In *Contemporary Authors, Volume 164*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Basic biographical sketch, lists of writings and short profile.

"Thomas, Rob." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*. 2nd edition. Edited by Tom and Sara Pendergast. Detroit: St. James Press, 1999. Essay reviewing Thomas' life and works.

## Related Titles

On its more basic level, *Rats Saw God* is a classic coming of age story of a young man on the edge of adulthood who is appalled by the "phyness" he sees around him. It is yet another contender for the *Catcher in the Rye* of its generation title as the big themes of *Rats* matches up with those of J. D. Salinger's masterpiece in capturing the turmoil of becoming an adult. Other recent contenders for that crown such as Stephen Chbosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower* and E.R. Frank's *Life is Funny* are related to *Rats Saw God* in many ways. In particular, both titles capture the intensity and the humor of the coming of age story. Humor is foremost in *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor, at times almost a middle school version of *Rats Saw God*. Told with an authentic voice, sharing similar themes, but mostly telling the tale of "new kids on the block," Bloor and Thomas explore the heartbreak of adolescence with high humor. One of the hooks of *Rats Saw God* is its journal format, which is a staple of young adult literature. Recent titles such as *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicholson* and *Don't You Dare Read This Mrs. Dumphrey* by Margaret Peterson Haddix are excellent examples of the diary genre. A similar conceit is a novel told in letters, such as *Ironman* by Chris Crutcher. While Crutcher and Thomas differ in many ways, *Ironman* with its central struggle between a father and son is a novel which would appeal to readers of *Rats Saw God*.

## Related Websites

"Rob Thomas—Author, Musician, Screenwriter." <http://www.hieran.com/rob/index3.html>. April 30, 2001. Author's official Web page with information about his books, music, and screenwriting.

Includes quotes from reviews, television scripts, music and video clips, and a Frequently Asked Questions page, as well as a chronology.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996