

# **Recapitulation Study Guide**

## **Recapitulation by Wallace Stegner**

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# Plot Summary

Recapitulation is a novel by acclaimed writer, Wallace Stegner. This novel is about Bruce Mason, the protagonist of a previous novel by Stegner, who has returned as an older man to his hometown in order to arrange the burial of an aunt. Mason explores the home of his youth and begins recalling people and events that molded his young life, pushing him onto the road that led to where he is today. Much of Mason's past revolves around a young woman he nearly married, but he soon realizes the truth of his past centers more on the relationships he had with his parents than the heartbreak of this fateful love affair. Recapitulation is a novel of discovery and forgiveness that takes the reader on an emotional roller coaster that will leave them forever changed.

Bruce Mason arrives in Salt Lake City in the early evening and proceeds directly to the funeral home where his aunt is being prepared for her funeral the following morning. As Bruce walks up to the funeral home, he realizes it is the same house that once held an apartment belonging to a girl he knew. Bruce asks the funeral director to see the room where this apartment once was, finding himself filled with memories of the young woman and her roommate of a short time, who would become the only woman Bruce would ever ask to marry him. Bruce embraces these memories, even as he pushes the darker ones away, before returning to reality. As Bruce leaves the funeral home he receives a box that was found among his aunt's belongings and a phone number from a mysterious caller.

Bruce walks around the neighborhood for a short time, recalling buildings and places he once visited regularly as a young man. Back at the hotel, Bruce looks up the number of an old friend only to discover it is the same number the funeral director gave him. Bruce promises himself he will call the number later. Bruce goes to dinner and finds himself remembering moments from his childhood. One memory takes Bruce to the first home he shared with his family in Salt Lake City. In this home, Bruce's father would often entertain neighbors and local politician with illegal alcohol. This lifestyle forced a sort of closeness on his family that was filled with shame and fear, leaving Bruce filled with resentment toward his father. Another memory is one in which Bruce recalls a summer he worked as a busboy at a busy restaurant. Bruce was waiting in line for the train one night and felt a young woman's breast who was in line in front of him. It was one of Bruce's first experiences with the opposite sex and left him fearful for his life as the girl's boyfriend chased him through the crowd.

After dinner, Bruce drives through the streets of Salt Lake City, finding himself outside the home of his good friend, Joe Mulder. Bruce briefly thinks of knocking on the door, but it is late and he does not want to disturb Joe. Instead, Bruce walks through the neighborhood, thinking of the nights he often spent with the Mulder family, feeling empowered by being made an honorary member of a family that was so much more respectable than his own. Bruce returns to his car and drives around the area, visiting the tennis club which no longer exists, where he was forced to go one summer to please his mother and met Joe Mulder as a result. Bruce also goes to a house he once



shared with his parents, the same house they lived in when Bruce's mother underwent surgery for breast cancer.

Back at his hotel, Bruce recalls attending a college prom there with Nola the spring he graduated from college. Bruce recalls that night as being a magical night that included a visit home to see his mother. Bruce always kept his social life separated from his family life, shamed by his father's chosen profession. However, Nola was so important to him that Bruce wanted to share her with his mother. Unfortunately, Bruce's father arrived home unexpectedly, injecting tension into the visit and changing the entire tone.

Bruce decides to open the box his aunt held for him for nearly forty-five years to see what the woman thought was so important. Inside Bruce finds a college athletic sweater, letters, and photographs. Bruce realizes this is a box Nola brought to him at Joe's after his father's funeral, returning to him all evidence of their relationship. This box brings to mind the day Bruce learned his professor had helped arranged a fellowship for him to attend law school, a decision that caused the rift between himself and Nola and eventually led to the destruction of their relationship. Bruce puts the box aside and attempts to get some sleep. However, Bruce's sleep is littered with memories, including a trip to a cabin that introduced Nola to Bailey, the man for whom she would eventually leave Bruce.

The following morning, Bruce makes a list of the things he must do that day, including ordering flowers for the funeral, attending the funeral, and calling Joe Mulder. A phone call adds some urgency to Bruce's plans as he learns that he is needed to attend a political meeting to aid diplomats from the Middle East. Bruce quickly goes about his business. When he finds a few spare minutes on his hands, Bruce goes on a driving tour of Salt Lake City. Bruce finds himself parked outside the building that stands where the building once was that his mother died in. Rather than think about his mother's final days, Bruce recalls a conversation with his father the last day they saw each other in which Bruce's father became overwhelmed with grief while talking about Bruce's mother. Bruce had not recalled that final day in such detail in a long time and could not trust his own impressions of that day.

Bruce goes to the cemetery where he visits his brother, mother, and father's graves. Bruce's father does not have a gravestone over his grave. During the funeral for his aunt, Bruce thinks about this place and its significance. Finally, when Bruce stops to order a gravestone for his aunt, Bruce arranges for a gravestone for his father's grave as well, more than forty years after his death. Bruce then returns to his hotel, deciding against calling Joe Mulder. Bruce decides it is best to leave his memories unaltered. Bruce mentally draws a rectangle around Young Bruce Mason and inks him out, deciding to go on with his life with the past securely in the past.



# Part 1: Chapters 1-2

## Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Bruce Mason is a diplomat who has been caring financially for his elderly aunt for many years. Bruce is not close to his aunt and the news of her death does not cause for him any feelings of grief, only relief that he might now be free of his family obligations. Bruce has, however, taken the time to travel to Salt Lake City, Utah in order to take care of his aunt's funeral arrangements himself because it is an opportunity to see the city in which he spent many of his years of his life.

In chapter 1, Bruce Mason arrives in Salt Lake City, Utah and immediately checks into his hotel. Bruce then walks to the funeral home where his aunt's body is being prepared for her funeral in the morning. As Bruce walks, he thinks of a woman he knew who had an apartment in a large house in this area. Bruce is surprised and amused to see that the same house where his friend's apartment was is where the funeral home is now. Bruce speaks to the funeral director briefly about the arrangements and views his aunt before requesting the chance to go upstairs and see the rooms that were once his friend's apartment. The funeral director agrees. Bruce finds the rooms altered, the funeral home is being updated and many of the rooms remodeled to fit their needs, but he recognizes much of what was once the living room. Bruce recalls spending time with Holly in these rooms, singing along with her piano playing or fighting for her attention with the other young men she often had over. Bruce remembers the crush he had on Holly and how he could have been her man, but he had panicked when she once begged take her away with him. Bruce also recalls Nola, who was briefly Holly's roommate, but Bruce makes the conscious decision not to think of her just now.

In chapter 2 of part 1, Bruce returns downstairs and thanks the funeral director for the chance to walk down memory lane. The funeral director gives Bruce his aunt's belongings and a box that she had apparently kept for Bruce for many years. Finally, the funeral director hands Bruce a phone number on a slip of paper, telling him a woman called there looking for him. Bruce is upset by this because he has been very careful to keep his arrival in the city quiet. After arranging a time to meet in the morning before the funeral, Bruce leaves. Bruce walks slowly, thinking of the boy he once was, roaming these streets with his friends as a high school boy and later a college man. Bruce begins to think of himself as two different people, the Mature Bruce and the Young Bruce, as he walks these streets, with Young Bruce identifying familiar buildings and landmarks ever as Mature Bruce notes the changes that have been made in the forty-five years since he left. Bruce returns to his hotel and looks down on the street, memories of himself walking through those streets with his friends, Joe Mulder and Jack Bailey, playing out in his mind's eye like an old newsreel. Bruce recalls how he left Salt Lake City hating Jack Bailey, but thinks now he might like to see him again. Joe Mulder, too. Bruce looks up Joe in the phonebook and is amused to see the phone number of his parents' old house is the same as the one the funeral director gave him. Bruce decides he will call him, not now, but before he leaves.



## Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first two chapters of the novel introduce the protagonist, Bruce Mason and the situation that has brought him to Salt Lake City, Utah, his hometown. Bruce is a celebrated diplomat who has appeared as a child in an earlier novel by Wallace Stegner. Now Bruce is in his late fifties, early sixties, and has returned to Salt Lake City for the first time since leaving it for good as a young adult. Bruce has come on a mission of humanity, to bury an aunt he knew but did not like. He finds himself falling into moments of nostalgia as his errand takes him to unexpectedly familiar places. Bruce appears happy to be in his hometown and ready to reconnect with friends, even after forty-five years of separation. This embraces the memories of Young Bruce, the Bruce who was a young man in this city and one with whom Mature Bruce has somewhat separated himself from as he begins his walk back in time.

Bruce is a strong, confident man who had a rough childhood, as many Stegner fans will realize. Bruce remains single and devoted to his work, suggesting an insecurity regarding women and relationships that possibly stems from his past. Bruce mentions a girl named Holly whom he cared for in his late teens, and remembers her fondly despite his inability to respond to her pleas of intimacy. Bruce also thinks of another girl as well. This second girl Bruce purposely decides not to think about at this point, suggesting there is a great deal of pain still associated with their parting. Later, Bruce mentions a young man he hated when he left Utah. To the reader, this suggests a lover who left Bruce for another man, a friend. This could explain Bruce's perpetual bachelorhood.



# Part 1: Chapters 3-4

## Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3 of part 1, Bruce has dinner in a familiar section of the hotel that has been transformed into an elegant restaurant. Bruce feels the breeze come down from the mountain and it brings to mind nights lying out on the grass in Joe Mulder's backyard. As he eats, Bruce thinks of his early years in Salt Lake City. Bruce had been an outcast in school, too small and too smart, always picked on by the athletes he thought of as big, dumb apes. In chapter 4 of part 1, Bruce recalls a Latin teacher who once expressed the wish to have a model of a Roman castra whenever the class read Caesar's Gallic Wars. Bruce decided to get some clay from a slough outside of town and make her one. Bruce goes to the slough to gather the clay in his lunch box, getting the sticky mud all over himself and making the walk home miserable. Bruce arrives home and rings the bell to avoid dropping the books he has carefully placed inside his pants to protect from the weather. Bruce's father opens the door and they immediately start snipping at one another. Bruce rushes off to the kitchen where his mother helps him clean up while fussing about the cold and his chances of developing pneumonia.

After a quiet dinner with his mother and father, Bruce begins work on the castra. Bruce and his mother are often relegated to the kitchen because Bruce's father Harry, or Bo, runs a speakeasy in their sitting room. As Bruce works on the project, he mentions it would be nice to have an eagle to place in front of the commander's tent. His mother says she has a pin that might work, but is in her sewing box in the sitting room. Bruce convinces her that his father's customers have gone because he has not heard music or talking through the register that connects to that room. Bruce leads the way, but when he opens the door he finds a customer in a lover's embrace with a woman who is not his wife. Bruce quickly explains his reason for interrupting while the couple attempts to hide their passions. The girl is polite to Bruce, asking about his project, but the man is clearly annoyed by the interruption. Before Bruce and his mother can finish their errand and get out of the way, the customer announces they are leaving.

Bruce's father is angered by the loss of a customer, insisting that they have caused him to lose money from this customer. Bruce listens to the argument his mother and father have through the register while continuing to work on his project. Bruce begins to cry shortly after his mother returns. Embarrassed by this, Bruce runs out of the house and walks around the neighborhood, his anger at his father boiling over in his mind. Bruce hates his father for running the speakeasy, for making it so that no one in the family can have friends, can make connections in the neighborhood, and so that they have to move every few months or so to stay ahead of the police. Slowly the anger leaves and Bruce begins to focus on his mother, a woman who has put up with these things out of a sense of responsibility to her family, her husband and two sons. Bruce steals a cabbage out of a neighbor's garden and returns home, presenting it to his mother in a gesture that is meant to show that she will not starve to death if she leaves her husband. Neither knows how to respond to this gesture. Finally they simply hug.



## Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Bruce Mason goes down to have dinner and the simple feel of a breeze off the mountain brings forth memories he has not thought about in years. Bruce thinks of his early days in Salt Lake City, how he was a misfit who was too smart and too small, often bullied by other kids. The reason for Bruce's sense of awkwardness is better revealed as he recalls an episode in which he and his mother interrupted some of his father's speakeasy customers in an attempt to find a piece of jewelry Bruce wished to use on a school project. The setting of the novel is fully revealed here as the reader comes to realize that Bruce's father runs a speakeasy because it is the time of prohibition when the production and sale of alcoholic beverages was illegal.

Bruce hates his father because he feels that his father's choice of professions has left the family isolated, unable to make friends or even stay in one place for long because of fear of the truth coming out. At the same time, Bruce hates his father because of the way he treats his mother. Bruce feels that his mother deserves so much more than living with a man who places his desire to break the law above his love for his family. Bruce sees how hurt his mother is by his father's actions which leaves him feeling angry and resentful toward his father and perhaps a little disappointed in his mother, who chooses to stay with her husband rather than provide a better life for her children on her own. All of this gives the reader a great deal of insight into the childhood that shaped the man Bruce becomes and the conflict that existed between Bruce and his parents.





## Part 1: Chapters 5-6

### Part 1: Chapters 5-6 Summary

In chapter 5 of part 1, Bruce speaks to his waitress and identifies her accent as being from Cache Valley. The waitress is embarrassed by this and turns somewhat rude despite Bruce's attempt to give her some friendly advice. As Bruce watches her walk away and his eyes fall on a busboy, he recalls a time when he worked weekends as a busboy at a restaurant on the lake. As Bruce works, he watches the couples dance together, his eyes drawn to a young girl not much older than himself dancing with her boyfriend. When work is over and Bruce has collected his pay, he finds himself in line for the train behind the same young couple. As the crowd undulates, waiting for the gate to open, Bruce feels himself being pushed forward. Bruce takes advantage of the situation and allows his hand to brush the young girl's breast. The girl's boyfriend is infuriated and attempts to stop Bruce, but the gate opens at that moment and Bruce is able to escape onto the train. Bruce, still afraid the boyfriend will find him, walks all the way home, causing his mother to request he quit his job.

In chapter 6 of part 1, Bruce drives out onto the streets and finds himself in front of a hotel where Nola Gordon once lived. Bruce recalls a night when he brought Nola home to this hotel and wanted to take her to her room, but the elevator attendant would not allow it, claiming it was against the rules. Bruce decided to go anyway, taking the stairs while the elevator man was escorting Nola up in the elevator. Bruce waited at the stair door and realized the elevator man predicted his next move and was intent on catching him. Bruce waited several minutes as the elevator man first paused on Nola's floor, went to the floor below, then returned to Nola's floor in an attempt to catch him. He did not, however, and Bruce was able to join Nola in her room. They kissed for a time, but Nola made him leave, insisting she was not ready to take their relationship to the next step.

### Part 1: Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Bruce begins to recall himself as a sex crazed teenager. Young Bruce is curious about women but lives in a time when Playboy had yet to begin publication and sex was still a taboo subject. Bruce is a normal young man, however, and he manages to steal a feel of a young woman's breast. However, the episode leaves Bruce so terrorized that he refuses to ride the streetcar home in fear of getting beat up by the girl's boyfriend. This episode, while most likely very common to the experiences of most boys, again explores the setting, including the moral atmosphere of the setting, and shows the reader the type of sexual experiences and morality with which young Bruce grew up.

Bruce later has a girlfriend about whom he clearly cares a great deal. This girl, Nola, is described as living from the neck down, experiencing her life rather than thinking and planning for it. Nola is a girl who needs a boy in her life and needs the gratification of exciting a young man. Bruce knows this from the beginning and is naive enough to



believe that Nola can love him and only him. This episode discussed in this chapter shows the lengths Bruce will go to to be with Nola and how she encourages his immoral behavior despite her religious background and the moral compass of the setting. This episode suggests trouble for Bruce down the line, implying either an unwanted pregnancy or an abrupt ending to a relationship that clearly means more to Bruce than Nola.



## Part 1: Chapters 7-8

### Part 1: Chapters 7-8 Summary

In chapter 7 of part 1, Bruce continues to walk through the streets, noting changes to the city. The clothing store where Jack Bailey once worked is no longer there. This makes Bruce think of Bailey, who was a genius when it came to men's fashion but something of a cad when it came to women. Bruce recalls that Bailey once told a group of them how he made love to a girl standing on her front porch and how her mother came to the door, actually having a conversation with Bruce while he remained inside her daughter. Bruce recalls how he admired Bailey even while he thought him immoral. Bruce continues past the old movie theater and thinks of a girl he once knew who worked the ticket counter there. Bruce drives past the place where his father once had a pool hall but which has been replaced by a tall building. The motel, too, where his father killed himself is gone, replaced with slick high rises. Bruce continues on, thinking of the people who populated his past and whom he left behind when he left Salt Lake City for good, the people he buried and those left behind. Bruce comes to the old tennis club and gets out of his car, curious about this place that changed the direction of his life once.

In chapter 8 of part 1, Bruce recalls the summer after he graduates high school. It was shortly after Chet was arrested with their father, his reputation ruined, and he had run off to marry his high school girlfriend only to have the marriage annulled. Bruce was aimless, sitting around his house doing nothing because there was nothing to do. Bruce's father sold alcohol to the manager of the tennis club, so his mother had him arrange to get Bruce a membership there for the summer. Bruce was unhappy at this turn of events because he was convinced he would not fit in there, that everyone there knew how to play tennis and had known each other for lifetime, leaving little room for outsiders. However, on his first day there, Joe Mulder came and sat beside him. When Mulder learned that Bruce knew little about tennis, he began to teach him. Over the summer, Bruce became a capable tennis player and he and Joe developed a friendship that would last many years. Back in the present, Bruce studies a sign out in front of the old tennis club and discovers it has been turned into a senior recreation center.

### Part 1: Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Bruce continues his tour of the city and comes to find that many of the places where important events in his life took place no longer exist. Bruce is saddened by this, coming to realize that time cannot be stopped. Bruce stops at the tennis club where he met Joe Mulder and became good friends with him; it no longer exists either. Bruce recalls their first meeting there, how Bruce expected to feel like an outcast as he has most of his life and how Joe surprises him by inviting him into the group. It begins a friendship that will last many years, the years in which Bruce attends college alongside Joe. Joe has been an important person in Bruce's life, and the reader can see this through the affection in

which Bruce remembers his friend and his desire to call only this one person of the many people he must have known and befriended in his years in Salt Lake City, Utah. This suggests that Bruce will eventually call his good friend, but up to this point Bruce has avoided that call. The reader can only speculate as to why.



## Part 2: Chapters 1-2

### Part 2: Chapters 1-2 Summary

In chapter 1 of part 2, Bruce parks down the street from the Mulder home and walks to the house. Bruce studies the outside of the house and is surprised to see how little has changed about it. Bruce spent a lot of time at this house as a teen and young adult, often annoying his father with his hero-worship of Joe's father, J.J. The Mulder's were Mormons who did not drink or indulge in other immoral behaviors, the exact opposite of Bruce's father. Bruce wonders if anyone inside is still awake, his memories of Joe telling Bruce that Joe most likely is still awake. However, Bruce is reluctant to knock on the door. Instead, Bruce walks back to his car, thinking of some of the good times he and Joe shared. One of this times is the day Joe shoved Bailey into a trash can for attempting to hit on the pregnant girlfriend of the tennis club manager.

In chapter 2 of part 2, Bruce continues to drive through town, coming to a small house he once shared with his mother and father. Bruce recalls this house as one of the happiest homes his family ever shared. Chet was married by this time, his annulled marriage renewed when they learned his wife was pregnant. Bruce can recall his father playing with the baby on the couch, pushing a cushion into her face until she would cry with annoyance. While living in this house in the spring of 1930, Bruce recalls getting ready to go to a prom while his mother recovered from breast cancer surgery in her bedroom. Bruce was reluctant to leave his mother alone, but she insisted that he not miss his big night out since he was on the committee that organized the dance. Bruce went to pick up Nola at the apartment she shared with two other girls, overwhelmed by her intense beauty. In the present time, Bruce returns to his hotel and walks past the very room where the prom was held. Several of Bruce's friends wanted Bruce and Nola to join them for intermission in a room they had rented, but Bruce and Nola would rather be alone. They talked for a time and Bruce let it slip that his mother was recovering from surgery. Nola suggested they go visit her until the dance resumed. Bruce, who normally liked to keep his social life separate from his home life, thought perhaps this rare visit would help to raise his mother's spirits.

Bruce and Nola arrived at his home to find his mother embarrassed by her appearance and the appearance of her bedroom. However, Bruce's mother was also clearly pleased by the visit. Bruce stepped out of the room to get refreshments while his mother and Nola got to know one another. Moments after he returned to the room, Bruce and his mother both could hear Bo Mason's car pull up outside. Apparently Bo, who had suddenly needed to go to Los Angeles on a liquor run while his wife recuperated from surgery, had returned home. Bruce went to let him in, quietly letting him know they had a guest so that he would not talk about his illegal business in front of witnesses. Tension immediately filled the room as Bo joined the group, and he and Bruce began taking verbal shots at one another. Nola commented on the relationship between father and son as they left, but Bruce quickly distracted her by suggesting they skip the rest of the prom and go make-out on Wasatch Boulevard.



## Part 2: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Bruce goes to the childhood home of his friend, Joe Mulder. This visit causes Bruce to remember the days he spent with this conventional, religious family. The Mulders were respectable people, the exact opposite of the Masons. Bruce embraced them, wishing that he could have been a part of such a good family rather than the illegal, bootlegging family to which he belonged. This desire shows the reader how Bruce sees his family and how he holds himself separate from them, as though by sheer will he could change his status in life and live become above the level his father forced on the family.

Bruce then visits a house he shared with his family during happier times. Chet, his brother, was arrested shortly before this, an event that ruined his reputation and left him unable to receive the scholarships he would have required to go to a good college. Instead, Chet marries his high school sweetheart and becomes a father at an age in which he is not quite done with his own childhood. This again underscores the differences between the Masons and the Mulders, as well as the difference between Bruce and the rest of his family.

Bruce remembers a time when his mother suffered from breast cancer. Bruce's affection for his mother is shown in this chapter when he offers to stay home with her rather than attend a prom he has helped organize. Bruce also goes against his instinct of keeping his social life separate from his home life and agrees to take Nola to see his mother. However, this rare visit is ruined when Bruce's father arrives home. This arrival also reveals the tension more clearly between Bruce and his father as well as Bruce's growing hatred toward his father when it is revealed that Bo went to Los Angeles rather than deal with his wife's illness. Bruce sees his father as an uncaring, callous man, unable to comprehend his father's inability to deal with emotional stress.



## Part 3: Chapters 1-3

### Part 3: Chapters 1-3 Summary

In chapter 1 of part 3, Bruce goes back to his room and prepares for bed. Spotting the box Aunt Margaret has kept for him all these years, Bruce becomes curious to see what she thought was so important to hold onto this time. Bruce opens it and finds two stacks of letters, an envelope filled with pictures, three books, and a college athletic sweater. Bruce realizes this box was not packed by Aunt Margaret but is a box Nola returned to him via Joe Mulder more than forty years before. The sight of the sweater causes Bruce to recall the day he gave it to Nola. In chapter 2 of part 3, Bruce recalls going to the school to pick up his athletic sweater and stopping by to visit his English professor, Bill Binnion. Bill asks Bruce about his future plans, having already offered him a fellowship in the English department; however, Bill believes Bruce's future lies elsewhere. Bill tells Bruce about a fellowship another professor has arranged for him at the University of Minnesota's law school. Bruce has never considered law school and is unsure he would be willing to go that far from Nola, but he picks up the application anyway.

Bruce encounters Joe and they decide to play some tennis before going to work at the Mulder Nursery. Bruce tells Joe about the fellowship in Minnesota. Joe tells Bruce that his father plans to offer them both shares in the nursery in the hopes that they will run it together upon his retirement. This gives Bruce another possible future and complicates his decision. In chapter 3 of part 3, Bruce goes to Nola's to give her the sweater and finds her ex-boyfriend there with her. After the ex-boyfriend leaves, Bruce learns that he had come to ask Nola to marry him before he deploys the following day. Nola has refused, but it has left her confused about her own future. Aware of her dilemma, Bruce immediately asks her to marry him. When Nola says yes, they make plans to attend the wedding of Nola's sister, making excuses that will allow them a night alone together on the ranch of one of Nola's relatives.

### Part 3: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Bruce has looked inside the box his aunt felt was important enough to save for him for more than forty years and discovered the mementos from a failed relationship. It brings to mind a crossroads in Bruce's life when he was forced to make the choice between leaving Salt Lake City and everyone he loves to continue his education in law school or remaining in Salt Lake City to live the respectable life of a business manager, the only life he truly aspired to for himself. Bruce's choices appear to hinge on which is the greater desire, to get away from his family and their legacy, or to remain with his friends and Nola. When Bruce asks Nola to marry him, it seems his decision is made. However, the reader suspects Bruce's shame of his father is much greater than his love for Nola. It is a decision that is not easy to make and one the reader is curious to see the outcome.



## Part 3: Chapters 4-5

### Part 3: Chapters 4-5 Summary

In chapter 4 of part 3, Bruce looks at one of the letters. He recognizes his own handwriting and knows the letter was written after his visit home for Chet's funeral. Bruce had been unable to come home for Christmas, but made the trip in January when Chet succumbed to pneumonia after helping a man dig his car out of the snow one wintry day. Bruce spent as much time with Nola during that visit as he could but found her desperate for more of his time. Bruce tried to remind Nola that they would have months together over the summer, but it seemed to do little to lift her spirits. Mature Bruce then turns his attentions to the pictures, reluctant at first to look at them. The pictures are from the wedding for Nola's sister they attended the weekend they first made love. Bruce goes to bed, beginning to dream, his dreams confused with his past in Salt Lake City and his life in the Middle East as a diplomat.

In chapter 5 of part 3, Bruce dreams of the wedding he attended with Nola as though seeing it through the lens of his camera. Nola's family are Mormon ranchers, simple people who border on being called hicks. Bruce likes Nola's brother and father, but finds the other family members barely tolerable. They all seem to like him. Nola's brother takes him behind the barn to share a bottle of whiskey. The wedding begins shortly after and the groom is deeply frightened, stumbling through the ceremony. Nola later tells Bruce that her sister only married him because she needs a man to help raise her children after the death of her first husband. Afterward is a big feast before the bride and groom leave on their brief honeymoon. Bruce is anxious to leave as well, but forced to wait a few hours to keep from arousing suspicion. Finally they are able to escape to a nearby canyon where they spend the night together under the stars.

### Part 3: Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Bruce's brother has died in the winter of 1931. Bruce recalls the funeral, not out of sadness or grief, but because of the time he spent with Nola during that period. Bruce had come home from law school, so now the reader knows he made that choice even though he seemed to be leaning the other way. As suggested in an earlier chapter, Bruce's desire to get away from his father and to become someone more respectable like the Mulders, suggested he might make this choice rather than remain in Salt Lake City with Nola and his friends. However, it is clear that this separation between he and Nola causes a strain that might not be something they can survive, as suggested by the fact that they do eventually break up. The reader knows this because of the box Nola has returned to Bruce at the end of their affair.

Bruce dreams of the wedding he attended with Nola for her sister. This wedding was a simple affair with simple people. Bruce clearly feels himself above these people but also gives the impression that at the time he believed Nola above them as well. This idea





has clearly changed with time, however, as the mature Bruce often suggests Nola was an uneducated woman who would not have appreciated the books he loaned her or the wordy letters he wrote to her. Bruce had a high opinion of himself in his youth, perhaps a defense mechanism when it came to his father and his reputation. This speaks a great deal to young Bruce's relationship with his father and how it affected the other aspects of his life.



## Part 3: Chapters 6-7

### Part 3: Chapters 6-7 Summary

In chapter 6 of part 3, Bruce begins to defend to himself his relationship with Nola. Bruce believed Nola was not a virgin their first time together. Nola explained that she had to see a doctor who took her virginity, but Bruce believed this to be a lie to cover up the fact that she had slept with her high school boyfriend. Bruce went on to explain to himself that he and Nola rarely had time alone together, restricting their intimate moments. There was one weekend they spent together, but the memory of it causes Bruce a great deal of regret, even now. In chapter 7 of part 3, Bruce dreams of the weekend he and Nola went to a cabin together with Bailey and one of his women. They played strip poker, the men cheating against the clueless women, until both ladies were nearly naked. Bruce became aware that Bailey was attracted to Nola and conspiring to make her lose. Bruce cheated, adding a card to Nola's deck to give her the upper hand over Bailey. When the game was over, Bruce took Nola outside and apologized. They discussed leaving, but Nola felt it would be rude to leave Bailey and his girl without a ride back to the city. Nola was also concerned about the gossip Bailey might begin about them. On the way back to the cabin, Nola went to the outhouse. Upon her return, Nola told Bruce that she had started her menstrual period, ending all hope on his part that they might be intimate. Instead, they lay in each other's arms listening to Bailey and his girl make love.

### Part 3: Chapters 6-7 Analysis

Bruce dreams of the past, his sleep restless. Bruce recalls the first time he and Nola made love and how he discovered Nola was not a virgin. Bruce believes now, though he might not have realized then, that Nola lied to him to hide the fact that she was sexually active before meeting him. This underscores Bruce's idea that Nola was the kind of girl who needed a man around all the time, not just summers and Christmas breaks.

Bruce also recalls a weekend in which he and Nola went away with Bailey and one of his girls. Bruce knows now that Bailey was deeply attracted to Nola then and that she avoided sleeping with Bruce that same weekend. It was one of the last times they spent alone before Bruce went off to law school and Nola chose to run away with Bailey, supposedly making him her singing partner. Nola's choice in Bailey was foreshadowed in this weekend, but Bruce did not recognize that until time had passed and hurt had dulled.



## Part 4: Chapters 1-3

### Part 4: Chapters 1-3 Summary

In chapter 1 of part 4, Bruce awakes from his restless sleep. As Bruce begins his day, making a list of the things he must do that day, he gets a phone call from the Assistant Secretary of State asking him to attend an OPEC meeting in Caracas to help the Middle Eastern countries' delegates. Bruce agrees, but it means he will have to leave Salt Lake City that afternoon. Bruce leaves the hotel and orders flowers for his aunt's funeral. With a few hours to spare, Bruce once more drives around Salt Lake City. Somehow Bruce finds himself outside the building where his mother died more than forty-five years before. In chapter 2 of part 4, Bruce recalls the month after his mother's death in which he lived with his father. Bruce's father, Bo, bought a pool hall in the final months of his wife's life and ran it with a partner who hosted illegal card games in the back room most nights. One afternoon, Bruce went hunting and brought home several ducks for his father's approval. Bruce was shocked to find his father did approve, causing a moment of brief accord between the two men. However, when Bo came home to their shared room that night smelling of a woman's perfume, Bruce's good feelings went flying out the window.

The following day, Bruce went to Joe and asked for the money to return to Minnesota. Bruce went to his father's pool hall to tell him the news, but his father had spent the day with his partner, roasting the ducks. They sat down to eat together. Bruce's father began telling stories of the past, telling Bruce about other duck feasts he had shared with his wife and friends. The story caused Bruce's father a moment of profound grief, causing him to run from the room. Bruce told him when he returned that he was leaving and this was the last words he spoke to him. Bo would commit suicide the following July. Mature Bruce is not sure if his memories are clear, not sure he can believe even now his father was capable of that kind of emotion.

In chapter 3 of part 4, Bruce arrives at the family plot in which his mother, brother, and father are buried and his aunt will be buried that day. Bruce looks at the gravestones for his brother and mother and finds them appropriate to their lives. Bo Mason does not have a gravestone, only a plastic marker with a number. Bruce wonders if he should get his father a gravestone now. The funeral director arrives followed by several helpers as well as the director of the home where his aunt lived and four of her close friends. A rainstorm causes the service to be quick. Bruce leaves after the others when the storm passes, stopping in the cemetery office to order a gravestone. Bruce also orders a stone for his father, marked simply father above his name and dates. Bruce then returns to the hotel, having marked everything off his to-do list for that day except making a call to Joe Mulder. Bruce decides it is best to keep his memories of Joe intact and not cloud them with new memories. As Bruce goes to his room in preparation for returning to his life outside Salt Lake City, he inks out young Bruce from his mental list, determined to face the future free of the past.



## Part 4: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Bruce is forced back into the present when he receives a call from the Assistant Secretary of State. Bruce agrees to go to an OPEC convention to help the Arabic delegates. This means Bruce will have to leave that afternoon, putting a limit on the time he could spend with Joe, if Bruce calls. Bruce has put off calling Joe several times throughout the book; therefore, it is no surprise to the reader when Bruce finally decides it is better to preserve his memories of Joe rather than create new ones that might change the past.

Bruce recalls the last time he saw his father. Bruce and his father shared a duck feast with ducks that Bruce killed on a hunting trip. Bruce did this in some sort of attempt to get his father's approval even though his mother's death left their relationship tenser than ever. Bruce is angry with his father for hunting in the days before his mother died and for taking a girlfriend in the final weeks of his mother's life. However, the child in Bruce is still attempting to get approval from his father. Bruce is so shocked when his father shows grief over the passing of his wife that he has somehow blocked it out of his mind for forty-five years. When Bruce recalls this grief, it changes his opinion of his father enough that he decides to get a gravestone for his father's grave that reads "Father." It is a simple stone, but it says everything Bruce knows. Harry "Bo" Mason was his father, like it or not, and had a great deal to do with who Bruce became and the life he has lived, more so than a girl who left him for another lover. It has taken Bruce more than fifty years to come to this understanding, but now that he has, he feels safe going on with his life without holding on to the hurts of the past.



# Characters

## Mature Bruce Mason

Mature Bruce Mason is a diplomat who has been caring financially for his aunt for many years. The aunt has recently passed away, so Bruce comes from his home in San Francisco to arrange her funeral. Bruce could have arranged the funeral from his home, or sent an assistant to deal with it because he was not close to the woman. However, Bruce has decided to come to Salt Lake City in order to see the place he lived during the more formative of his childhood and young adult years.

Bruce begins running into memories almost from the moment he drives into Salt Lake City. The funeral home in which his aunt is being prepared for the funeral is the same house that once contained an apartment where two girlfriends of Bruce's once lived. Bruce slips up to this room to take a look, finding himself filled with memories of a time that was more carefree and filled with uncertainties. After leaving the funeral home, Bruce goes on a walking tour of the neighborhood and begins to remember other parts of his life in this city, including family angst and a girlfriend who he once promised to marry.

Bruce has lived a long life away from this city, serving as a diplomat in many foreign countries, most often in the Middle East. However, Bruce has never come so close to marriage again nor has Bruce kept in touch with his friends from Salt Lake City. Now Bruce indulges these memories but quickly comes to the realization that he is no longer the Bruce he was in those days and there is no reason to dwell on the past.

## Young Bruce Mason

Young Bruce Mason is the son of a bootlegger during prohibition and the woman who was both ashamed and in love with this man. Bruce grew up feeling shame for his father's profession as well as a constant fear that someone would find out what was happening in their home. Bruce's best friend as a child was his mother because he was too afraid to seek out companionship with kids his own age, both in fear they would learn the truth and in fear that he would have to move again just as the friendship began to grow. This situation causes a great deal of angst between Bruce and his parents, most especially his father.

Bruce is a smart boy and graduates high school early. Bruce's mother arranges for him to join a local tennis club where he befriends Joe Mulder, the boy who will remain his close friend through college and a few years after. During this time, Bruce also meets Nola Gordon. Nola is a young Mormon girl who has come to the city to attend college. Though older than Bruce, Nola quickly becomes the object of Bruce's affections. Bruce has never taken a girl home to meet his parents, compartmentalizing his life in order to



keep his family life separate from everything else. However, after his mother has surgery for breast cancer, Bruce brings Nola home to meet her.

Bruce finishes college and comes face to face with the dilemma of figuring out what to do with the rest of his life. Bruce has two options. First, he can marry Nola and settle down to help run his friend's nursery where he has worked most of his life and is offered a partnership. Second, Bruce can go to law school and become a lawyer, perhaps to teach. Bruce struggles with these two options and finally elects to continue his education and sacrificing his relationship with Nola. This choice leads to Bruce becoming a diplomat later in life, leaving Salt Lake City and never returning.

## **Nola Gordon**

Nola Gordon is a girl of Indian descent who grew up on a ranch in the countryside of Utah. Nola's family is simple Mormon people who believe strongly in family and religion. Bruce finds her family to be somewhat backward, people who are uneducated and have little respect for those who are educated. Nola has broken free of these people in her pursuit of an education, supported, but not understood. Bruce meets Nola through a female friend with whom she shares an apartment for a short time.

Nola is the only girl in Bruce's life to whom he has ever proposed. Nola is also the only girl who Bruce has allowed to get close enough to break his heart. Bruce knows when he first meets Nola that she is a girl who lives from the neck down, placing her body and its needs as a priority rather than living from the neck up, placing education and future as a priority. Despite this knowledge, Bruce believes Nola loves him enough to wait for him while he goes away to law school. Bruce is wrong. Nola leaves him for another man, breaking his heart in way that it will take him many years to recover from it.

## **Joe Mulder**

There are a group of boys in Bruce Mason's high school that he refers to as the big and stupid guys, the guys who are athletes and who bully smaller boys just because they can. Joe Mulder is one of this group, but is not as stupid as the others. In fact, Joe has often greeted Bruce in the halls and gone out of his way to be nice. When Bruce meets Joe at the tennis club, Bruce is grateful for Joe's kindness and understanding of Bruce's inexperience at the sport. Joe spends the summer helping Bruce perfect his game, and eventually they become close friends.

Joe Mulder represents to Young Bruce everything a young man should be. Joe comes from a good, respectable family who work hard at a respectable business, attend church, and socialize within the community. Joe and his family are everything Bruce's family is not and everything Bruce has ever wanted to be. Over the years, Bruce spends a great deal of time at the Mulder home, becoming so close to the family that Joe's father offers him a partnership in the family nursery. Having played this important part in Bruce's life, it is only appropriate that Joe would want to get in touch with Bruce when



he returns to the city for his aunt's funeral. However, Bruce decides not to call Joe, preferring to leave his memories of this good friend intact.

## Jack Bailey

Jack Bailey is a young man Joe and Bruce knew as young adults. Jack Bailey is a lady's man who claims to have made love to a great many girls, sometimes in highly compromising situations. Bruce both dislikes and admires Bailey. Bruce looks up to Bailey because of his prowess with women and his strong sense of fashion. However, Bruce dislikes Bailey's clear disregard for the feelings of the girls he has been with and his habit of disregarding these women's feelings as a nuisance. In the end, Nola runs off with Bailey, leaving Bruce both heartbroken and convinced he caused the situation by introducing the two in the first place.

## Holly

Holly is a young woman Young Bruce had a crush on before meeting Nola through her. Holly is a strong woman who lives from the neck up, always calculating relationships and situations in regards to how they will affect her future. Bruce is madly in love with her, but when Holly makes a pass at him, inexperienced Bruce has no idea how to react. As a result, Bruce backs away from Holly, leaving himself open to a relationship with Nola. When Mature Bruce returns to Salt Lake City for his aunt's funeral, he discovers the funeral home is in the same house in which Holly once had an apartment. Bruce visits the apartment and reflects on all the times he spent with Holly there, purposely pushing Nola from his mind for the time being.

## Bill Bennion

Bill Bennion is an English professor at the University of Utah. Bruce befriends Bill and the two work closely together during Bruce's time at the school. When Bruce graduates, Bill offers Bruce a fellowship in order pursue a master's degree in English. However, this is not where Bill believes Bruce's talents lie, and Bill encourages Bruce to take a fellowship at the University of Minnesota where a fellow professor has arranged for Bruce to attend law school. This is not something Bill has ever thought of doing before, but the offer begins to shape the life Bruce will lead that will bring him back to Salt Lake City as a famous diplomat.

## Harry

Harry Mason is Bruce's father. Harry is a bootlegger during prohibition, buying illegal alcohol and selling it out of his house. This profession has caused the Mason family to have to move often, causing Bruce to live in many different homes throughout his childhood. Harry is not a loving father, often forcing his children and his wife to hide out in the kitchen while he serves his customers and berating his son anytime he breaks the



rules. Tension builds between Bruce and Harry as Bruce grows because Bruce blames his father for the shame that hangs over their family and the unhappiness he sees in his mother. When his mother becomes ill with cancer, Bruce's anger toward his father only builds as he watches his father run away from the situation and avoid the emotional aspects of it. As Bruce's mother lies dying, Harry begins seeing another woman. This is the last straw that pushes Bruce over the edge, causing him to leave home for good to return to law school. Shortly after this, Harry commits suicide in the rundown motel room he once shared with Bruce.

## **Elsa Norgaard Mason**

Elsa Norgaard Mason is Bruce's mother. Elsa is a quiet, intelligent woman who is deeply shamed by her husband's profession. However, Elsa has been taught to be loyal to her husband no matter what, so she refuses to leave him. Elsa complains about the situation her husband has placed the family in but never really does anything to force change. When Bruce is a senior in college, Elsa is diagnosed with breast cancer. Elsa undergoes a surgery to remove one of her breasts and treatments to rid her body of the cancer. Over the next year, Elsa is forced to bury a child when Chet, Bruce's older brother, dies of pneumonia. Shortly after this, the cancer returns and Elsa dies, knowing that her husband is cheating on her with another woman.

## **Aunt Margaret**

Aunt Margaret is a relative of Bruce's father who comes to Salt Lake City shortly after Harry Mason's death. Bruce finds himself in a position of being forced to care for this elderly lady because he is her only relative. Bruce does not like this woman and never visits her during the long period in which he pays for her care in an elderly care home. When Aunt Margaret dies, Bruce comes to arrange her funeral, but he has come more out of a desire to see his old hometown than out of respect for his dead relative. It is an experience that helps Bruce see how events in his early life shaped the rest of his life and allows him to let go of old hurts and move on with his life.





# Objects/Places

## Box

The funeral director gives Bruce a box that was among his aunt's things but was intended for him. When Bruce opens the box later in his hotel room, he discovers it is a box of mementos from his relationship with Nola, a girl he almost married after college.

## Phone Number

The funeral director gives Bruce a phone number from a woman who called looking for him at the funeral home. Bruce later discovers the number is that of an old friend, Joe Mulder, from his college days in Salt Lake City. Bruce thinks about calling this number but finally decides it is best to leave those old memories intact.

## Funeral Home

Bruce Mason arrives at the funeral home where his aunt's body is being prepared for her funeral and realizes it is the same house where a couple of girlfriend's from his college days lived.

## Tennis Club

The summer after Bruce graduates high school his mother arranges for him to have a membership at a local tennis club in the hopes he will make friends there. Bruce meets Joe Mulder there, a young man with whom Bruce went to high school. Joe and Bruce become best friends over the next four years.

## Girl's Hotel

After leaving Holly's apartment, Nola lives in a girl's hotel for a short time. The rules of this hotel do not allow men in the rooms after a certain time. One night, Bruce sneaks into Nola's room after the curfew in order to spend a few extra minutes with her.

## Cabin

While they are dating, Nola and Bruce spend a weekend in a cabin near Mount Majestic with Jack Bailey and his girl. During this weekend, Nola and Bruce play strip poker with Bailey and the other girl. When Nola later breaks up with Bruce to be with Bailey, Bruce thinks back to this weekend and believes it was the beginning of the end.



## **Mulder Nursery**

While attending college, Bruce Mason takes a job at Mulder Nursery. Mulder Nursery is owned by the father of Bruce's best friend, Joe.

## **Pool Hall**

After his mother's death, Bruce's father opens a pool hall where he works until he commits suicide the following summer. This business is the last place where Bruce sees or speaks to his father.

## **Motel**

Bruce and his father live in a rundown motel after the death of Bruce's mother. Bruce eventually returns to law school, leaving his father alone. Bruce's father will take his life in this rundown hotel the following summer.

## **Gravestone**

Bruce visits the cemetery before his aunt's funeral. In the family plot, even though there are three graves, there are only two gravestones, one for Bruce's brother, Chet, and one for his mother. Bruce never got a gravestone for his father's grave. Now, forty-five years after his death, Bruce orders a gravestone for his father.

## **Statue of Brigham Young**

A statue of Brigham Young serves as a centerpiece of downtown Salt Lake City.

## **University of Utah**

Bruce Mason is educated at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, Utah, before continuing on to law school.

## **University of Minnesota**

Bruce Mason attends law school at the University of Minnesota thanks to the help of a college professor who takes an interest in his future.

## **Salt Lake City, Utah**

Salt Lake City, Utah is where Bruce spent a large portion of his childhood, specifically the teen years and the early part of his adulthood. Salt Lake City is where Bruce's mother, brother, and father die and are buried. Salt Lake City is also where Bruce's aunt lived and died, the reason why Bruce has returned home for this brief visit.



# Themes

## Revisiting the Past

Bruce Mason, a successful diplomat in the Middle East, comes home to Salt Lake City, Utah, to bury an aunt. From the moment Bruce arrives in Salt Lake City he is overwhelmed with memories of his past. Ironically, the house in which the funeral home where his aunt has been taken is located is the same house in which a couple of Bruce's girlfriends, during his time in college, had an apartment. This begins the flood of memories as Bruce requests to be allowed to view the room in the apartment which was once these two girls'.

Bruce takes a walk through the streets of Salt Lake City and finds himself drawn to buildings and places where he spent a great deal of time as a college student. Many of these buildings are related to Nola Gordon, the only girl Bruce ever came close to marrying. Bruce visits a hotel where Nola once lived as well as places where they would go on dates and areas in which they would park. Bruce is not happy with all his memories of Nola, especially since the relationship ended when Nola left him to be with another man.

All these memories of Nola seem to be a mask, however. At the same time Bruce remembers his relationship with Nola, memories of his family begin intruding. Bruce had a volatile relationship with his father and has held on to resentments of him over the years. As Bruce wanders around Salt Lake City, visiting homes he once shared with his parents as well as the motel where his father took his own life, Bruce begins to recall the anger and resentment that existed between him and his father. Eventually, Bruce visits the cemetery for his aunt's burial and realizes that so much time has passed that it is ridiculous to continue holding onto the past. Bruce lets go, inking out in his mind the darkness of his past, and moving on with his life.

## Friendship

Bruce was a shy young man who had difficulty making friends; therefore, when Bruce is forced to join a tennis club in order to give him some sort of purpose, he is convinced it is a pointless venture. People at these clubs tend to be close knit, unwilling to let in new people in their long established friendships. Bruce is surprised to find a young man from his high school seek him out and express an interest in befriending him. The friendship blossoms over the summer and spills into the fall when both boys become freshmen at the local university.

Bruce and Joe Mulder become close friends. Bruce begins working at the nursery owned by Joe's father. There are times during the next four years that Bruce stays with the Mulder family, becoming more of a family member among these kind strangers than in his own home. The Mulder's are a respectable family, people who work hard and live



their lives with morality. Bruce embraces this because his own father is a bootlegger who runs speakeasies during the days of prohibition. Eventually Bruce learns that Joe's father wants to give his business to Joe and to Bruce for them to run it when he retires. It is a life to which Bruce has aspired. However, Bruce has the opportunity to go to law school, a decision that changes his life and sets it on a course that takes Bruce away from Salt Lake City for more than forty years.

At the same time Bruce develops the first important friendship of his life, he also falls in love. Bruce begins dating Nola, an attractive young lady from a ranch in the Utah countryside. The relationship appears to be strong. However, when Bruce makes the decision to attend law school and introduces distance into his relationship, Nola is not able to wait. Nola misses Bruce too much and is too unhappy being alone for such long stretches of time. Eventually Nola leaves Bruce for another man, ending the only relationship Bruce has ever had that came close to marriage.

## **Dysfunctional Father-Son Relationships**

Although the bulk of the novel follows Bruce as he recalls his relationship with Nola, his relationship with his family, and specifically his father, underscores all his memories. Bruce's earliest memories of Salt Lake City involve the nights at home in which he and his mother were relegated to the kitchen because his father was using the sitting room as a speakeasy for those willing to pay for illegal alcohol. Bruce recalls the tension this caused between Bruce's mother and father and the shame it leveled on the entire family. It is the illegal acts and shame that Bruce recalls coloring his early childhood.

As Bruce grows older, his shame and embarrassment involved in his feelings toward his father causes a great deal of tension between the two men. Bruce is often angry with his father, especially when it comes to his mother. Bruce's mother becomes ill with breast cancer his senior year of college. Bruce's father finds excuse after excuse to escape the home, leaving Bruce to care for his ailing mother. Later, when Bruce's mother begins to succumb to her illness, Bruce's father again finds reasons to leave town. Bruce becomes enraged with his father for leaving just days before his mother dies, leaving Bruce alone to deal with her passing.

Bruce spends a few weeks living with his father in a rundown motel after his mother's death. Bruce is in shock over the death of his mother; therefore, he remains with his father despite his growing hatred of the man. The fact that his father has a girlfriend, a girlfriend who was a part of his life before the death of his wife, has Bruce filled with rage. Bruce is convinced his father never cared about his mother and treated her poorly. This rage continues to grow even when Bruce witnesses his father suffering grief over memories of his mother. It is not until forty-five years later that Bruce can see how much his father loved his mother and how weak his father was, unable to deal with the emotional tragedy of his mother's fight with cancer. It is this realization that finally allows Bruce to move on, leaving his father in his past where he belongs.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view. The point of view centers on Bruce Mason, a diplomat who has returned to his hometown to arrange the funeral for an aunt who has been in his care for many years. As Bruce explores all his old haunts, he begins to move back and forth from the present to the past. In order to better explore these memories with the reader, the author has chosen the third person point of view with an omniscient quality that allows the reader to see and experience Bruce's thoughts and emotions alongside, remembering the past with Bruce. This narration also allows the reader to view some of Bruce's dreams in which Mature Bruce experiences again some of the climatic moments of his relationships with a girlfriend, a best friend, and his family.

The point of view of this novel is important because the plot moves so frequently into the past that it is important to utilize a point of view that allows the reader to move back and forth in time without confusion. The point of view of this novel is third person, a point of view that is somewhat separating, allowing the reader intimacy with the main character, but not as much intimacy as might be established with a first person point of view. The first person point of view might not be a good choice in a novel such as this in which the narrating character basically separates himself from the person he was as a young man, making it seem to himself and the reader as though there are two main characters rather than just one. Therefore the third person point of view is a good choice because it allows this separation without adding confusion to the plot and tells a story that leaves the reader feeling as though they have gone on a roller coaster ride of emotion with both Bruce Masons and survived, as Mature Bruce has done.

## Setting

The novel is set in Salt Lake City, Utah. The novel begins in Salt Lake City in 1975 as Bruce Mason, a diplomat, returns to his hometown to arrange the funeral of an aunt he has taken care of financially for many years. As Bruce arrives in town and begins seeing familiar buildings and landmarks from his childhood, the setting begins to shift. The setting of Bruce's past is Salt Lake City and its surrounding areas in the late '20s and early '30s. This Salt Lake City is very different from the later city, not only geographically but also morally on the part of the people inhabiting the city. Young Bruce lived in a world in which prohibition governed the actions of both moral and immoral people and where nudity was not an everyday experience. This world greatly impacted Young Bruce's actions, as well as his relationship with his bootlegger father.

The setting of this novel plays an important role in the novel. Bruce Mason has returned to the city of his childhood and faces memories of those days with his every passing moment in Salt Lake City, Utah. In the past, the moral and religious aspects of the city



helped shape a young man who would find himself often in a moral crisis, stuck between his father, who broke the law by selling alcohol to his neighbors during prohibition, and his friends, who grew up in strict Mormon households. This conflict, and his own frustrated hormones, will cause in Bruce a rage toward his father that will last nearly forty-five years. However, as Bruce continues to visit all his childhood haunts on this visit home, he will soon discover that times have changed; buildings have been demolished and replaced, showing him that nothing can last forever. Eventually Bruce will apply this idea of impermanence to his rage regarding his father, allowing him to move past his childhood and face the future renewed.

## Language and Meaning

This novel is written by a highly-educated man about a highly-educated diplomat. The language, therefore, is a little more complex than a simple best seller. Bruce thinks, speaks, and writes in a language that includes words a reader might have to use a dictionary to fully understand, including the unfamiliar word used in the title of the novel. The narration also includes many foreign phrases that the author does not explain in the text before or after the phrase appears, perhaps expecting the reader to recognize the words or infer their meaning from the overall theme or context of the chapter or section in which the phrase appears.

The language of this novel fits the character about whom the plot revolves. The language is highly educated, reflecting the education and work experience of Mature Bruce, a diplomat who narrates the novel upon his return to his hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. However, the language may be a deterrent to some readers who are unfamiliar with some of the weighty words or frequent foreign phrases that are not explained and may be difficult for someone untrained in these languages to understand. This obstacle, if overlooked, is a minor barrier between the reader and plot, making the book all that much more rewarding for the reader who sticks it out and continues through the end of the novel.

## Structure

The novel is divided into four parts. Each part has its own, individually numbered, set of chapters. The chapter numbers begin anew with each section, with each section containing between three and eight chapters. The novel is written almost exclusively in internal dialogue, with many memories book ended by Mature Bruce's thoughts and opinions regarding the part of his life being described in the memory. There is dialogue within these memories, and occasionally the present tense sections in which Mature Bruce comes into contact with people around him.

The novel is written in a series of flashbacks bracketed by the present in which Bruce Mason has arrived in Salt Lake City, the predominant city of his childhood, to bury his aunt. The novel only contains this one plot, following Bruce as he explores the city, visiting many places he once lived, played, or worked. As Bruce travels through the city,

he recalls moments in his childhood and young adulthood that center around conflicts with his parents as well as special moments with a girlfriend and his best friend. The novel ends when Bruce finally orders a gravestone for his father's grave over forty years after his father's death, finally realizing that the past should stay in the past.





## Quotes

"Forty-five years had made differences, but they did not seem critical. The city had spread a good deal, and he was surprised, after the desert, by the green luxuriance of its trees. But the streets were still a half mile wide, and water still ran in at least some of the gutters."

Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 4

"Like someone tapping at a door, wanting to interrupt a private conversation, Nola was there in his head asking to be asked in. He found it curious that he didn't want to ask her in, not just now, though she was surely a more significant part of this lost place and past time than Holly. It was Holly he wanted to talk to just now; she seemed fresher with possibilities, not so tainted with old sullen emotions." Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 12

"As he reached the door he threw an apologetic look back at the room as quiet and empty as a chapel, and at the corpse that lay so quietly at its center. There was a dread in the room that he would not stay for. He meant to tiptoe out, but he heard almost with panic the four quick raps his heels made on the bare floor before they found the consoling softness of the stairs."

Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 15

"All his impressions suffered from distortion and ambiguity. Looking at buildings, he couldn't say whether he remembered them or whether his memory was filling the street with things it wanted familiar. Though he had been vaguely prepared for changes, he had not foreseen how strangeness and familiarity might fuse. He knew the street but was made uneasy by it. Was that because the person who saw and the person who remembered were not the same, though they used the same eyes?" Part 1: Chapter 2, pg. 19

"He pushed his comic ferocity ahead of him like a shield behind which siege forces advance toward a defended wall. Born mascot, midget, he muscled secret bricks. He ran around the block a lot, mostly at night when he wouldn't be seen. He dreamed." Part 1: Chapter 3, pg. 29

"Perhaps the true climax of that rueful day, perhaps the culmination of that depressed period of their life as a family, was that tableau in which Bruce after a fashion presented and his mother in some sort accepted the grotesque vegetable he had stolen to compensate her for the uncertainties and deprivations of her life. He brought her this gift, this proof of his love and loyalty, and they stared at each other with emotions mixed and uneasy. What should they have said there in that kitchen? What another family might greet with great belly laughs they could not handle so easily. They had no margin for laughter." Part 1: Chapter 4, pg. 48



"Unlikely as it seemed, they were a close family. The internal strains that tore them apart also forced them together. Because they lived outside law and community, they had no one but themselves to share themselves with." Part 1: Chapter 8, pg. 89

"Here nothing had changed except himself." Part 2: Chapter 1, pg. 107

"He keeps falling out of his time machine. Instead of ushering a gorgeous girl in by the front entrance, he drives up to the side. The attendant comes out his glass office and Mason turns the car over to him. The lobby, instead of boys in dinner jackets and girls in party gowns, shows only bellhops and two belated couples who have been doing whatever it is one does now in the evening in Salt Lake, and who are waiting in their denim leisure suits and Hamro slacks for the elevator." Part 2: Chapter 2, pg. 131

"It wasn't a time of choices, though it might seem so. The sun leaned on us, and warmed us on that side. We turned toward what shone on us, and if we leaned too far, we toppled, and toppling, toppled others. Call it the domino theory." Part 3: Chapter 1, pg. 152

"It was a cold, skin-tightening shock to realize that the hound eyes were cloudy with tears. The rubbing hand went over them, shading them like a hatbrim, but the mouth below remained distorted." Part 4: Chapter 2, pg. 261

"He told himself that it is easy enough to recover from a girl, who represents to some extent a choice. It is not so easy to recover from parents, who are fate." Part 4: Chapter 2, pg. 264

"As he drove down to the hotel and turned his car over to the youth in the glass office, he was busy in his head with one final check-off. Around Bruce Mason as he once was, around the thin brown hyperactive youth who had so long usurped space in his mind and been a pretender to his feelings, he drew a careful rectangle, and all the way up on the elevator to pack his bag he was inking it out." Part 4: Chapter 3, pg. 278



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Bruce Mason? Why has Bruce come to Salt Lake City, Utah? Why does Bruce begin thinking of himself as two people, Young Bruce and Mature Bruce? What does Mature Bruce see that is different between the boy he once was and the man he has become? Why does Bruce travel around the city, viewing the different places he once lived, played and worked? What does Bruce hope will come of this visit?

What phone number does the funeral director give Bruce at the beginning of the book? To whom does the number belong? How many times does Bruce put off making a return call? Why? What does Bruce think will happen when he calls the number? Why does Bruce eventually decide he will never call the number? Is this a wise choice?

What is the box the funeral director gives to Bruce? What is in the box? How long does Bruce wait before opening the box? Why does Bruce refuse to go through the letters in the box? What memories do the things in this box bring up for Bruce? Are they good memories? Why or why not? Who packed the box? Who kept the box for Bruce? Why?

What is prohibition? How did Bruce's father make money during this time? Why? What tension did this profession cause for Bruce, his mother, and the rest of the family? Why? How did this profession on Harry Mason's part affect his relationship with his wife? With his sons? Why does Bruce assign this profession some responsibility in the death of his brother, Chet?

What illness does Bruce's mother suffer from? How does Bruce's father react to her illness? Why does Bruce resent his father's behavior during his mother's illness? Who does Bruce take to visit his mother while she is recovering from cancer surgery? Why? What impact does Bruce hope this will have on his mother? Does it? What does Bruce's actions in taking this person to see his mother imply about his feelings for this person? How does the arrival of Bruce's father change the tone of this visit? Why?

Discuss Nola Gordon. Who is Nola? What relationship did she have with Bruce? How did Bruce feel about his relationship with Nola? What did Bruce promise Nola before going to law school? How did going to law school change Bruce's relationship with Nola? What did Nola do when she ended her relationship with Bruce? Has Bruce ever forgiven Nola her actions? Why or why not?

Discuss Bruce's decision to go to law school. How would Bruce's life had turned out if he had remaining in Salt Lake City? Would Bruce have gone on to be a diplomat? Why or why not? Would Bruce have married Nola? Would it have been a happy marriage? What job would Bruce have taken? Would he have been happy in that job? Why or why not? Would staying in Salt Lake City have changed Bruce's relationship with his parents? Why or why not?