

Recoil Study Guide

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Contents

Recoil Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1, Doc Luther.....	6
Chapter 2, Cosgrove.....	8
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	10
Chapter 5.....	11
Chapter 6.....	12
Chapter 7.....	13
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	15
Chapter 10.....	17
Chapter 11.....	19
Chapter 12.....	20
Chapter 13.....	21
Chapter 14.....	22
Chapter 15.....	23
Chapter 16.....	24
Chapter 17.....	25
Chapter 18.....	26
Chapter 19.....	27
Chapter 20.....	28
Chapter 21.....	29
Chapter 22.....	30



[Chapter 23..... 31](#)

[Chapter 24..... 32](#)

[Chapter 25..... 33](#)

[Chapter 26..... 34](#)

[Chapter 27..... 36](#)

[Chapter 28..... 37](#)

[Chapter 29..... 38](#)

[Chapter 30..... 39](#)

[Characters..... 40](#)

[Objects/Places..... 46](#)

[Social Concerns..... 48](#)

[Techniques..... 50](#)

[Themes..... 51](#)

[Significant Topics..... 52](#)

[Style..... 54](#)

[Quotes..... 56](#)

[Key Questions..... 62](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 63](#)

[Literary Precedents..... 64](#)

[Related Titles..... 65](#)

[Copyright Information..... 66](#)



Plot Summary

Pat Cosgrove, a convicted bank robber, is serving an indeterminate prison sentence well beyond his parole date. Ineligible for parole because he lacks a sponsor, Pat is overjoyed to finally receive a job offer and sponsorship from Doc Luther. Within just a few hours of his release, however, Pat begins to realize that things are not as straightforward as could be desired. Over the next several weeks Doc Luther introduces Pat to powerful senators, shady business associates, and beautiful women. Doc Luther also provides Pat with housing, ready cash, a job that does not require working, automobiles, and fine clothing. A worried Pat wonders whom he can trust even as he develops relationships and attempts to discover what he must eventually do to repay Doc Luther's apparent kindness. Pat eventually discovers he is trapped in a web of deceit and intrigues - and realizes that Doc Luther intends to frame Pat for a murder and then collect the insurance payouts. Pat finally turns to his sarcastic parole officer for assistance, and manages to free himself of Doc Luther and his associates while remaining on the safe side of the law.

As an impetuous seventeen-year-old, Pat Cosgrove walks into his local small-town bank and robs it. His unpremeditated escape route leads him to unsuccessfully attempt the hijacking of a small airplane - unfortunately the local judge is the sole frightened passenger and, thus, the juvenile Pat draws an adult prison sentence of ten-years-to-life. After ten years in prison, Pat becomes eligible for parole but can't locate a willing sponsor and, therefore, spends another five years incarcerated. Much to Pat's amazement, one of his unsolicited mailed-in job applications is finally accepted by one Doc Luther, and the newly-sponsored Pat is quickly paroled.

Doc arranges for Pat to live in an affluent apartment, complete with servants. He then finds Pat a job at the Highway Department which provides a State automobile but does not require that Pat even show up for work. Doc's kindness is apparently limitless, and he purchases Pat an entire high-end wardrobe, furnishes him with spending money, and introduces him to powerful senators and attorneys, and a few beautiful women. Pat begins to realize that Doc's kindness is not altruistic, and wonders what the ultimate price will be.

Warned by his sarcastic parole officer that Doc is up to no good, Pat begins his own discreet inquiries into Doc's operations. When the private investigator that Pat hires winds up dead, Pat knows that his very life hangs in the balance of Doc's plans. Pat begins to develop relationships with several other characters - all of whom are involved in Doc's plans to some degree. He eventually discovers that most of Doc's business associates have one plan, Doc has another plan, and a few of Doc's trusted friends have yet a third plan. Pat also realizes that his involuntary participation in any of the various intrigues will likely lead to his return to prison. Pat finally turns to the one person he is sure he can trust - a vapid but beautiful woman named Lila who stands to lose as much as Pat if Doc's plans are successfully executed. Lila informs Pat's parole officer of Pat's predicament, and that night Pat's parole officer and the police listen outside the door as Doc explains his entire nefarious scheme and attempts to set it into motion. The

police then burst in and Doc and his associates are arrested, Pat is pardoned, and soon he is married to his faithful girlfriend.



Chapter 1, Doc Luther

Chapter 1, Doc Luther Summary

Pat Cosgrove, a convicted bank robber, is serving an indeterminate prison sentence well beyond his parole date. Ineligible for parole because he lacks a sponsor, Pat is overjoyed to finally receive a job offer and sponsorship from Doc Luther. Within just a few hours of his release, however, Pat begins to realize that things are not as straightforward as could be desired. Over the next several weeks Doc Luther introduces Pat to powerful senators, shady business associates, and beautiful women.

Doc Luther also provides Pat with housing, ready cash, a job which does not require working, automobiles, and fine clothing. A worried Pat wonders who he can trust even as he develops relationships and attempts to discover what he must eventually do to repay Doc Luther's apparent kindness. Pat eventually discovers he is trapped in a web of deceit and intrigues - and realizes that Doc Luther intends to frame Pat for a murder and then collect the insurance payouts. Pat finally turns to his sarcastic parole officer for assistance and manages to free himself of Doc Luther and his associates while remaining on the safe side of the law.

Doctor ("Doc") Ronald Luther sits at his home desk and reviews various documents that indicate one Patrick ("Pat") M. Cosgrove is being paroled from Sandstone prison into the custody of Doc. The documents indicate that Pat will work at Doc's psychiatric clinic - but no such clinic exists. The documents also indicate that Pat has been incarcerated for fifteen years and has been eligible for parole for the past five years; as Pat had no family and no sponsor, he has remained incarcerated.

One of the documents is a letter of introduction from Pat and a request for employment - sent out apparently at random and received by Doc. Pat's employment request - a sort of rudimentary resume - indicates he is thirty-three years old, is incarcerated for robbing a bank when he was seventeen years old, and possesses a high school diploma and the equivalent of a two-year college degree through a self-directed course of study. Doc quickly hides the documents as his supposed wife, Lila Luther, enters the room. Doc and Lila are on obviously strained terms.

Chapter 1, Doc Luther Analysis

Chapter 1 is unique within the novel because it is narrated in the third-person limited point of view. The remainder of the novel, Chapters 2 through 30, is narrated in the first-person limited point of view by Pat Cosgrove. This is noted by the titles of the first two chapters, namely "Chapter 1 Doc Luther" and "Chapter 2 Cosgrove," while the remaining chapters are only numbered. Chapter 1 provides significant background details on several principle characters, particularly Pat, and establishes the basic plot of



the novel - the convict Pat has recently been paroled into the sponsorship of Doc Luther.

The documents reviewed indicate that Doc has exerted a considerable amount of effort and political influence to secure Pat's release. The chapter's point of view, an atypical and significant departure from the remainder of the novel, allows the reader to view Doc and Lila without Pat's narrative intrusion. The construction does prove problematic, however - who, then, is the narrator of the text? For Chapters 2 through 30, the first-person narrator is clearly Pat, yet for Chapter 1 the narrator is an unnamed though reliable presence who does not recur in the remainder of the text. All Chapters are written in the past-tense.

Note that the relationship between Doc and Lila Luther is a seminal element of the plot, and is not what it appears. Doc and Lila purport to be married but they are actually not - Doc is married to Madeline Flournoy, a character that first appears in Chapter 7. The relationship between Doc, Lila, and Madeline are gradually discovered by Pat, although he does not announce them in the narrative until late in the novel. Even though Doc and Madeline are married, they are fairly estranged - Madeline apparently maintains a sexual relationship with Bill Hardesty and lives in her own apartment. While Doc and Lila live in the same abode, they are apparently not sexually involved with each other. Chapter 1 hints at the strange situation in the obviously strained relationship between Doc and Lila, and firmly establishes Lila as nearly completely subordinate to Doc.



Chapter 2, Cosgrove

Chapter 2, Cosgrove Summary

Pat Cosgrove is elated to finally be released from Sandstone State Reformatory due to a recent and unexpected sponsorship offer from Doc Luther, a complete stranger to Pat. Doc picks Pat up from the prison and drives him back toward Capital City. Pat describes Doc as about fifty years old, with thin sandy hair. Doc is overweight but not grossly obese, and has bulging eyes and wears thick spectacles. Doc has a soft voice and three of his upper front teeth slightly protrude, giving him the constant appearance of a hidden smile.

On the way to Capital City they stop at a roadhouse diner and each lunch. Pat notes that the roadhouse, formerly situated in apparently pristine natural surroundings, is now severely compromised by huge pools and rivulets of sludge that issue forth from a nearby oil refinery. Doc complains about the sludge and the lack of responsibility demonstrated by the refinery. Doc then drops a rather unexpected bombshell - he has no real job to offer Pat. In fact, the Luther Psychological Clinic does not even exist. Doc assures Pat that he will locate some job for him and that his offer of sponsorship is genuine. Pat does not appear overly alarmed by Doc's rather irrational kindness and pledges unfailing loyalty to Doc for his recent sponsorship.

Chapter 2, Cosgrove Analysis

Chapter 2 begins the novel's standard construction - the remainder of the novel is narrated by Pat Cosgrove in the first-person limited point of view. Chapter 2 presents Doc through Pat's eyes and begins to develop him as a character. The reference to Doc's protruding upper teeth is repeated throughout the narrative and eventually becomes Doc's defining physical characteristic. The focus on this rather common feature makes Doc a fairly comical character which contrasts nicely with his ruthlessly opportunistic personality. Chapter 2 also sets up the central conflict of the novel - Doc has caused Pat to be paroled from prison and clearly expects to get something in exchange. Pat will spend the remainder of the novel trying to ascertain how his freedom will benefit Doc.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After lunch Doc drives Pat to an old and expensive two-story house. The house has been divided up into apartments. Doc takes Pat upstairs and into an apartment where he introduces Pat to Senator Burkman. Doc says that Burkman was instrumental in obtaining Pat's release and he then wrangles a job for Pat from Burkman - Pat will work at the Highway Commission. Doc then leads Pat downstairs where Pat discovers that three of the lower apartments are occupied by Doc and Lila. The third apartment has been finished for Pat's convenience. Doc introduces him to Willie, a black servant, and tells Pat to make himself at home.

Doc then explains that the president of the board of parole, Myrtle Briscoe, would never have allowed the parole to occur. Doc therefore had to wait until Myrtle was out of town whereupon Governor Clay issued the parole. Doc knows that this will anger Myrtle, but he is confident that she reluctantly will go along with the *fait accompli*. Pat has had a few drinks on the drive and he quickly falls asleep in his new room.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The old two-story house is a principle setting of the novel, and much of the narrative's subsequent action takes place in one of the house's downstairs rooms. The physical structure of the apartments is not noted in detail - the house features a long central corridor on each floor which apparently opens onto three apartments on each side of the hall, indicating the house has been divided into twelve separate units. Doc apparently rents or owns one side of the entire bottom floor. Doc lives in one unit, Lila lives in another unit, and Pat lives in the third unit. Burkman rents at least one of the upstairs apartments where he either lives or at least conducts sexual trysts. The rooms are noted as being well-appointed with expensive furniture.

Pat continues to wonder what Doc has planned for his future - not only has Doc obtained Pat's parole, he has located Pat a job and is now allowing Pat to live within his own apartments. Pat is clearly very important to Doc's future, but so far Doc has not given any indication that his interest in Pat is anything other than philanthropic.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning Doc takes Pat into the downtown area of Capital City. Pat has not seen the downtown area in fifteen years and he notes that it has become a grimy place, nearly a slum. Doc takes Pat to a clothier where he purchases several complete sets of clothing, charging them to Doc's account. Doc then gives Pat a large amount of cash as pocket money. After being fit for his new clothing, Pat walks back to Doc's car where he overhears the end of an argument between Doc and another man. The argument appears to indicate the Doc is jealous of the other man's flirtatious involvement with Mrs. Luther. Pat moves to protect Doc, but this proves unnecessary.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Doc continues to shower Pat with favors, buying him an entire new and expensive wardrobe and padding his empty wallet with cash. Pat realizes Doc likely has nefarious ulterior motives, but rationalizes that anything is preferable to spending several more years in prison. Bill Hardesty will become one of the central antagonists in the novel, but Pat will eventually realize that the confrontation between Doc and Hardesty was staged for his benefit. After witnessing this confrontation, Pat decides that Doc is jealously protective of his wife's affections and infers that Hardesty has some type of inappropriate relationship with her. Pat's easy physical domination of Hardesty foreshadows another physical conflict between the two men in Chapter 29 where Pat will, once again, easily prevail.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Doc introduces Bill Hardesty, a man who is apparently a long-time associate and business partner. Doc tells Pat that Hardesty was instrumental in obtaining his parole. Doc explains that his wife Lila has recently inherited a sizeable estate and that Hardesty, an attorney, is assisting the Luthers in the settlement. Doc explains that his wife Lila is a notorious flirt and that he gets unwarranted pangs of jealousy when she flirts with other men. He concludes that the large amount of time she has been spending with Hardesty is reasonable given the circumstances.

After Hardesty leaves, Doc questions Pat at considerable length about what portions of the conversation he had overheard. This is merely a ruse on Doc's part - for the conversation was staged - but it does allow him subtly to determine that Pat has an excellent memory as he recites, nearly word-for-word, the portion of the conversation he heard. The two men drive to the State Capitol building after Doc is satisfied that Pat has divulged everything he knows.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 provides the initial characterization for Hardesty - he is an attorney who is intimately involved with Doc's finances and business. Pat finds him a likable and bluff man, but will eventually discover that Hardesty is every bit as scheming and manipulative as Doc. Nearly everyone Doc introduces to Pat has played some part in his parole - a fact not lost on Pat and which leaves him wondering to just how many people he is indebted. Doc's extensive quizzing session establishes Pat as a very intelligent character with good observation skills and particularly good memory.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

At the Capitol Doc and Pat visit Myrtle Briscoe, the elected state commissioner of corrections and the president of the board of pardons for Sandstone State Reformatory. Myrtle's political sphere is not intertwined with Doc's influences, and she clearly feels he is a corrupting influence. She resents Doc's end-run around her authority to obtain Pat's parole and she is verbally abusive to Doc. Myrtle counsels Pat that he is being taken advantage of and is rapidly becoming involved in something that is likely illegal. She tells Pat that Doc cashed in numerous political favors to secure his parole, and that such actions from a man like Doc are not offered without a very steep price. She concludes by suggesting Pat remain strictly within the bounds of his parole and by hinting to Doc that the upcoming elections might not be a case of business as usual.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Just as Doc predicted, Myrtle Briscoe is upset with Pat's parole, she but complies with it because it has already been accomplished. Pat describes Myrtle as five feet tall with a full head of red hair. She has served as the elected state commissioner of corrections for thirty years, and has remained in office by being completely honest and blatantly straightforward. It is because of this that her politics stand in direct opposition to those of Burkman and Doc whom she rightly considers to be corrupted and self-serving. Myrtle will become a significant protagonist in the latter portion of the novel, and will genuinely take Pat's interests into her own hands.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After meeting with Myrtle, Doc and Pat have lunch in the Capitol building cafeteria. Doc talks to several senators and then announces that he has some confidential business to pursue with Burkman. Burkman announces that he has arranged a job for Pat and then Pat spends a few hours wandering around the Capitol. He notes that the building is in disrepair. He then sees a woman walk toward the parking lot. Pat is immediately attracted to her and is nearly dizzy with an overpowering desire for her. He passes her in the hallway and then follows her into the parking lot. He notes with alarm that she stops by Doc's automobile and grabs an envelope from the seat. Pat moves to protect Doc's belongings and physically stops the woman from, as he thinks, absconding with the envelope. A brief tussle ensues and the woman falls into the car, landing on the back seat, with Pat atop her. Just as Pat realizes his compromising position, Doc appears and demands to know what is happening.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 introduces Madeline Flournoy, a principle protagonist in the novel. Pat's initial reaction to Madeline is one of overpowering attraction. The normally level-headed character is stunned by her physical presence and executes the rather sophomoric course of action of following her to watch her. He believes that she does not notice him - although in later chapters Madeline will assure him that she not only noticed him, but also found him similarly attractive.

Madeline is actually Doc Luther's legal wife, although the two characters are nearly completely estranged. When Pat meets Madeline, she is living alone and apparently pursuing a sexual relationship with Hardesty. Madeline, Hardesty, and Doc are all involved in a scheme to garner a huge insurance payout at Pat's expense. Fortunately for Pat, Madeline eventually finds in him a true friend and decides to sell out both Doc and Hardesty to obtain Pat's pardon and her own freedom. It is interesting to contrast Pat's description of Madeline's non-perfect but breathtaking beauty to his Chapter 8 description of Lila Luther's perfect but somehow unappealing physical perfection. The process of events that leads to Pat lying atop Madeline in the back seat of Doc's car is humorous but not particularly credible.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Doc demands to know why Pat and Madeline are apparently petting in the back of his automobile. Pat makes a flustered attempt at explaining and is rescued by Madeline's summary. Doc introduces them, telling Pat that Madeline is his secretary - he had sent her to fetch the envelope. Madeline then leaves and Doc and Pat drive to Doc's apartment. On the way, Doc tells Pat that he does not allow his employees to fraternize, and sternly warns Pat that he would not tolerate any relationship between Pat and Madeline.

At the apartment Pat is introduced to Lila Luther who is a tall, slender ash blonde woman possessed of a flawlessly perfect beauty. Pat guesses her age at about thirty and notes her physical perfection. Lila strangely accompanies Pat into his personal apartment and closes the door behind them. She then flirts with Pat and makes a pass at him, drawing him down onto the bed. Pat, flustered, jumps up and moves to leave the room - his hand turns the doorknob just as Doc turns it from the outside.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 introduces Lila Luther, Doc's supposed wife, the final significant character to be presented in the narrative. Lila is described as physically perfect and exceptionally beautiful. She is tall, thin, and has naturally colored ash blonde hair. Pat guesses her age at about thirty. Although Pat sees her as very beautiful, she does not affect him the way that Madeline did in Chapter 7.

Madeline and Lila are thus contrasted as the two principle women in the narrative development. Both women are highly sexualized within the novel, although the flagrantly flirtatious and sexual Lila leaves Pat cold. He finds her physically attractive but resistible, and is immediately worried how her flirtatious behavior will complicate his relationship with Doc. Pat's apprehension is heightened by the staged encounter between Doc and Hardesty in Chapter 4 - an encounter which has convinced Pat that Doc is jealously protective of his wife. As with nearly everything and every character in the novel, Lila is not at all what she appears and is playing a carefully crafted part in Doc's charade.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Doc enters Pat's room and is obviously upset to find Lila inside. He gruffly orders her to leave and she responds by flinging her drink in his face and storming from the room. Pat is embarrassed for Doc's emasculation and Doc seems confused and humiliated. Doc cleans up in Pat's bathroom and then the two men share drinks. Doc delivers a long and somewhat rambling account of his previous life which, he states, should help Pat to understand why he is being so generous.

Long ago Doc had been a psychology professor at a community college. He had conducted a sexual affair with one of his students, Lila. In order to retain Lila's student funding, as well as his position, they had kept their relationship a secret and eventually married in a private ceremony. Lila soon became pregnant, but hid her pregnancy for as long as possible. Lila's pregnancy eventually prevented her from attending school, and the Luthers' mounting debts and needs made Doc's salary seem ridiculously inadequate.

One day Doc visited the registrar's office to discover the registrar out to lunch and the school safe standing open. Doc impetuously stole all of the term's tuition receipts from the safe. He was apprehended within a few days, although he claimed that he had already lost all of the money through gambling. Instead, he used the funds to establish Lila. Doc agreed to leave the school and the town in exchange for avoiding being charged with the crime.

He left for Capital City where he established a psychology practice. Fearing exposure for Lila, he communicated with her only twice in the next several months. Lila's baby was stillborn and, convinced that Doc had abandoned her, Lila was nearly wild with grief. Meanwhile, Doc had learned numerous embarrassing secrets of his influential clientele and, when his past finally became widely known, he was allowed to remain in an influential circle largely because of the political damage his knowledge could potentially create. Doc then sent for Lila who joined him in Capital City and, since then, Doc has involved himself heavily in the shadier aspects of political profiteering while entirely abandoning the legitimate practice of psychology.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 apparently confirms Doc's jealous nature and also establishes that Lila is a dominant character - which jars startlingly with the Chapter 1 introduction of Lila as completely submissive to Doc's desires. Although Pat doesn't know it, an observant reader will instantly realize that Lila's lascivious behavior is an act inspired by directions obtained from Doc, and Doc's seemingly random entrance is, in fact, carefully orchestrated.



Doc's explanation of his past is apparently essentially truthful in nearly all respects save one - the identity of his wife. Doc states that the woman was Lila but, in fact, the woman was Madeline. The stillborn baby will become notably significant in Pat's deductive reasoning in later chapters of the novel. Although it does not seem plausible that the authorities would agree to drop prosecution if Doc simply left town, one must remember the social circumstances prevailing when the novel was written. At the time, Doc would have been perhaps fifty years old - placing the date circa 1940.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

In the morning Doc drives Pat to the Capitol where Pat meets with Rita Kennedy. Rita proffers Pat the promised job, informing him that the position includes a state automobile and hefty pay, as well as a meal allowance. Rita gives Pat a stack of so-called survey forms with a tacit wink and lets him know that from time to time he needs to turn in completed forms. She then warns him to not park the state automobile in front of bars very often. Pat somewhat slowly comes to the dawning realization that his "job" is simply a political device whereby he will receive public monies for performing no real work. Pat then goes to the motor pool where he is assigned a nice black coupe. Pat is somewhat disappointed to be so tenuously employed, but he realizes that it is an enormous improvement over life in prison. Pat then reminisces about his own prior life.

Pat grew up in a small rural town where everyone knew everyone else. He had been seventeen years old and was going a field for the day. He was down to only two shotgun shells and decided to stop by the bank and make a withdrawal in order to purchase more shells. Instead of making a withdrawal, he impetuously entered the bank with his shotgun and robbed the teller who he knew on a first-name basis. Outside of the bank, Pat ran into the oblivious local police chief, with whom he was also on a first-name basis, and spent a few minutes discussing college plans before racing down the street. Pat made his way to the town airport and attempted to hijack a small airplane that was getting ready to take off. The sole occupant was, unfortunately for Pat, the town judge. Pat was quickly apprehended. Instead of being sent to juvenile detention, the angry judge convicted him as an adult and sentenced him to ten-years-to-life in the state prison.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Pat's job is obvious a boondoggle at the taxpayer's expense. Doc, Burkman, and Rita Kennedy all know and tacitly admit that Pat's "work" involves periodically turning in meaningless survey forms to provide the appearances of propriety. Chapter 10 provides a parallel narrative development to Chapter 9. First Doc recounts his own past life to Pat, and then Pat recounts his past life within the narrative. Although Pat's past behavior was clearly criminal, nearly everyone - notably including Myrtle Briscoe - feel that his incarceration as an adult on such a severe sentence was a travesty of justice. Pat's prison nickname of "Airplane Red" stems from his abortive adventure hijacking an airplane coupled with his brilliant red hair.

Doc notes that Pat's story is similar to Doc's story - both men stole about the same amount of money, though Doc at least got to keep his stash. Doc muses over the strange twist of circumstances that left Pat incarcerated for fifteen years while allowing Doc to walk away and pursue a life of successful private practice. Doc's observations

are particularly poignant when one considers that the "lucky" Doc is a fundamentally untrustworthy and shiftless man, while the unfortunate Pat has become a level-headed and reliable adult. However, by the conclusion of the narrative the two men ironically will have completed a complete exchange in life circumstances.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Pat visits Madeline at her apartment. He tells her that Doc told him to stay away, but she invites him inside. They talk and get to know each other. Pat tells Madeline his life story and openly wonders and then speculates about her life story. Madeline does not fill in any details of her past but remains deliberately vague. Eventually they begin to kiss and pet. Pat then wonders why Doc arranged his parole. Madeline suggests there is a definite reason, unknown to her, and cautions Pat to be very careful around Doc. Pat then suddenly realizes that someone else has sneaked into the apartment.

Chapter 11 Analysis

During Chapter 11 Pat and Madeline begin a physical relationship that will persist through the remainder of the novel. Pat was immediately physically attracted to Madeline upon first seeing her (refer to Chapter 7); Madeline informs Pat that her reaction had been similar. Madeline is, of course, deeply involved in Doc's various schemes and has a full knowledge of why Pat has been freed, but she plays the part of an ignorant participant. Madeline's development from co-conspirator with Doc to Pat's eventual wife is one of the more interesting and subtle elements of the narrative.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

A parole officer has snuck into Madeline's apartment and catches Pat breaking the terms of his parole. Pat offers to pay a monetary bribe, and the officer is willing to accept a large sum of money to ignore the offense. Pat then explains that he doesn't have any money but is willing to pay a very high price to avoid being returned to prison. While he talks, he removes his shirt to reveal numerous scars which indicate past horrific wounds. Pat then fairly severely beats the parole officer and throws him out of the apartment. Madeline and Pat then agree to keep each others' best interests in mind and be on the lookout for information that can help each other.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The two-chapter scene involving the unnamed parole officer is a fairly unconvincing narrative development. The parole officer is presumably canny enough to catch Pat in a compromising position and corrupt enough to be willing to accept a bribe, yet not streetwise enough to avoid being intimidated by simple physical assault. The character development is not suitable to the type of parole officer initially portrayed, and is in general not consistent with the novel's edgy texture. Additionally, the scene serves no purpose in the narrative beyond, perhaps, allowing Pat to partially strip down in front of Madeline and remonstrate with her against the unfairness of the various physical depredations to which he was exposed in prison. In any event, the parole officer is apparently sufficiently cowed to leave Pat alone for good, and Madeline's sympathy for Pat convinces her that perhaps he can be trusted after all.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Pat has been out of prison for three weeks and his sense of foreboding continues to increase. Seeking possible further enlightenment, Pat visits Hardesty. Pat explains that Lila's constant flirtations are threatening to compromise his situation with Doc. Pat has noticed that Lila appears to respond to Hardesty's advice and, therefore, he asks Hardesty to influence Lila to leave him alone. Hardesty agrees and then strangely explains that Doc has arranged for a large illicit money-making deal that will involve a sensational media disclosure. The media reports will be designed to divert public attention from political graft to sway an upcoming election. Hardesty tells Pat that part of Doc's plan involved obtaining Pat's parole, but he will not explain the details of the situation. He hints around that Doc's plan will involve Pat returning to prison. Hardesty then suggests that Doc's plan will not be executed for several more weeks or months.

Chapter 13 Analysis

During Chapter 13 Hardesty reveals a substantive amount of information to Pat, even while he bluntly states that he isn't telling Pat everything because it does not suit his (Hardesty's) current needs. Pat thus has a partial picture of Doc's scheme and has a suggestion that he will be involved in the scheme. Clearly, being told that he faces an imminent return to prison does not sit well with Pat.

The sensationalist media ploy involves a man named Fanning Arnholt who is the President of the National Phalanx, a super-patriotic conservative group involved in national and local politics. Arnholt has been convinced, apparently through devious methods involving illicit payouts, to deliver a series of stump speeches that attack the public school textbooks used throughout Capital City as being subversive and anti-American. Note that Arnholt's tactics are best understood in terms of the 1950s' "Red Scare," which were prevalent in American politics when the novel was published.

Arnholt's attacks will discredit the reform candidates, support the incumbent candidates, and furthermore allow Doc's business associates to make some money replacing school texts with supposedly politically correct texts. All this will presumably divert attention from corrupt politicians favorably dealing with the ruthless local oil industry, which will bring in even more money for Doc and his associates. Although the exact mechanics of these several plots are not fully elucidated in the novel, Hardesty's brief summarization allows Pat, and the reader, to realize that huge sums are at stake and that Pat is obviously simply a hapless pawn in Doc's grand illegal vision.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Pat spends a few days driving around and killing time, wondering how to extricate himself from Doc's plans. One day he drives to the diner where he and Doc had first visited after his parole, and he sits on a roadside bench and contemplates the scene of ecological destruction spread out before him. Pat then discovers that he has been tailed out of town by Myrtle Briscoe and a uniformed policeman. Myrtle talks to him and explains that she feels he has been paroled to discredit her in the upcoming elections. As the president of the board of paroles, Myrtle would be held accountable if Pat were to perform any untoward activity while paroled.

Myrtle then begins to question Pat about a car that was recently purchased in his name. Pat, of course, has purchased no such car and, after a few minutes of confusion, Myrtle suggests he look into the sale purportedly made in Pat's behalf. Pat realizes he is in serious trouble, but doesn't know what he can possibly do about it.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Myrtle's assessment of Doc's motive for paroling Pat centers on her own situation, which is completely inaccurate but does provide a realistic element in her characterization. Pat does not give Myrtle's concept much credence, as he realizes Doc is frying much larger fish than the president of the board of parole. The substantive narrative development of Chapter 14 is Myrtle's announcement that Pat has presumably recently purchased a private automobile. Pat has not made a purchase but mentally calculates his income and realizes that he potentially could have made the purchase. Since he has use of a state automobile, he has not needed a personal vehicle. Thus, Pat supposes, the purchase must be another aspect of Doc's schemes.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Pat observes that the date is sometime in May. He picks up his "new" automobile from the dealer who informs Pat that his "wife" bought the car as a birthday surprise. Pat takes the car back to his apartment and speaks with Lila. For the past several days Lila has heeded Hardesty's request and left Pat more or less alone. Now, however, she speaks to him in a slightly flirtatious way and informs him that the automobile was supposed to be a birthday surprise - even though Pat's birthday was two months in the past. Pat uncharacteristically begins to flirt with Lila and even brazenly fondles her breasts. Lila appears slightly surprised but quickly gives in to Pat's advance.

Soon Pat and Lila are making out on her bed. Pat worries and sees the bedroom door quietly open. He surreptitiously looks at a wall mirror and sees Doc peeking into the bedroom while Pat squirms around on top of Lila. Contrary to Pat's expectations, Doc quietly closes the door and, moments later, drives quietly away. Pat sits up and Lila is confused by his sudden lack of interest in her. Pat claims to feel sick. Lila wants to talk to him about Doc and the situation, but Pat decides she can't be trusted and he leaves her bedroom.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Pat uses the purchased automobile to attempt to force a confrontation with Lila or Doc. Lila's cover story involves purchasing the car for Pat's birthday, which strikes Pat as plausible but not particularly likely. He then impulsively decides to take Lila up on her flirtatious behavior to see what will happen. He is surprised that she apparently is willing to engage in immediate sexual intercourse if he continues to pursue it. But he is far more surprised when Doc peeks into the room and, instead of erupting in a furious fit of jealousy, quietly closes the door and slips away. Pat is confident that Doc believed he remained unobserved. Pat is deeply vexed at the apparent conflict between Doc's professed jealousy about his wife and his apparent disinterest in Lila's behavior.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Pat visits a private investigator named Eggleston to see if he can gain insight into his own predicament. Pat explains that he fears Doc has insured him (Pat) and intends to therefore benefit from his death. Eggleston assures Pat that he cannot have been insured for any considerable sum, and also informs Pat that, given his circumstances, a pardon would have been as easy to obtain as a parole - clearly Doc selected a parole so Pat could not leave the locale. Although Eggleston can offer no further particulars, he agrees with Pat that the situation is precarious at best.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Pat, incarcerated his entire adult life, assumes the simplest case - Doc has insured Pat and intends to kill him to collect the insurance money. The private investigator Eggleston quickly disabuses Pat of this notion. But Eggleston also validates Pat's feelings, noting that the situation is clearly bizarre and that Pat's parole is obviously part of a larger scope of planning. Eggleston, a minor character in the novel, is a humorous and gritty character that will reappear briefly in Chapters 19 through 22.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Pat reflects that he has been out of jail for thirty-one days and has not accomplished much of anything. He feels guilty about taking public monies without performing any legitimate service, but realizes it's far preferable to being in prison. He spends a lot of time trying to think things through. He finally concludes that Hardesty, Doc, and Myrtle are all trying to use him for their own purposes - all of which are at odds. He realizes that Doc isn't really jealous and that all along Doc's apparent jealousy has been an act to manipulate Pat. He wonders if Lila is with one of the other people or if she is scheming on her own. He eventually decides he can fully trust Madeline, however, and goes to her often. One time at her apartment, however, he catches a glimpse of her with her guard down and her face is contorted into a mask of hatred. Pat begins to wonder if, after all, Madeline has fooled him too. He therefore probes her for information but she resists offering anything substantive. Pat feels that Madeline senses his recent distrust for her.

Chapter 17 Analysis

During Chapter 17 Pat narrates a list of mental processes he utilizes to attempt to unravel the mystery of his situation. He is aware that his predicament is precarious and that he will be used as a pawn in some scheme, but he is unable to discover the scheme or his appointed role. He correctly judges that Doc and Hardesty cannot be trusted, except to act in their own best interests. But he incorrectly judges that Lila is not trustworthy - in fact, he will soon discover that Lila's situation is not far different from his own. Pat waffles on whether to trust Madeline. He emotionally trusts her, but his natural skepticism prevents him from fully committing to her. Instead, he tries to read small signs as being significant when they probably are not. Pat reacts as if he were still incarcerated - he knows trouble is coming but he simply sits and waits for it to arrive.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

One rainy evening Pat stops by his office of employment and turns in several bogus survey forms. His supervisor, Rita Kennedy, asks him for a ride home. When they arrive at her apartment, Rita invites Pat inside where they drink and talk. Rita states that Burkman will positively lose the upcoming election. Burkman's loss will spell the end of Doc's corrupted political influence and, therefore, means the end of Pat's state employment. Rita is not an elected official and will thus retain her position regardless of the outcome of the pending election - nevertheless, she has her own political agenda. Rita offers Pat guaranteed future job security if he will agree to provide her information on Doc's schemes. Pat declines to cooperate, and Rita makes vague warnings and insinuates that everyone is aware that Pat is sleeping with Lila. Pat explains this is not the case but Rita dismisses his assertions - she appears extremely self-assured. Pat finally leaves her apartment and, entering his car, is surprised to discover someone inside with a gun.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Chapter 18 further complicates the political intrigue by developing Rita Kennedy - first introduced in Chapter 10 - as yet another political advantage seeker. Rita's motives are not well-defined in the narrative but, since she remains essentially a minor character, this is not particularly significant. She apparently has information about Doc's activities - for example, Doc believes Pat is sleeping with Lila and soon thereafter Rita also believes Pat is sleeping with Lila. Whether this information came from Doc or has been passed on by another associate is never established in the text. In any event, Rita's narrative significance is uncertain as, once her offer of complicity is refused by Pat, she essentially disappears from the novel. She thus provides one more red herring for Pat and the reader without adding significantly to the plot development.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Pat is surprised by Eggleston, the private investigator he consulted with several days earlier. Eggleston has a gun and compels Pat to answer several specific questions about activities that were developed earlier in the narrative. Pat provides truthful answers and Eggleston then thinks for several minutes. He finally claims to have discovered the answers to Pat's various questions and offers to explain everything to Pat for a substantial sum. Pat, thinking quickly, arranges a meeting at Eggleston's office the following night just after dark.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Chapter 19 begins a rather complicated series of interactions which involve Pat trying to set up Eggleston and Eggleston trying to wrangle money out of Pat and Doc. This segment of the narrative persists through Chapter 22. Although Pat will never learn what Eggleston offers to tell him, he eventually discovers the information by himself. It is interesting to note that the remunerative amount suggested by Eggleston matches exactly the bribe amount arranged between Pat and the parole officer in Chapter 12 - apparently, Pat's price of freedom is established by everyone at five hundred dollars, about one month's pay for Pat. Although the narrative is partially resolved from Chapter 19 through Chapter 22, a large amount of irrelevant detail and extraneous plot elements are involved in Pat's escapades to defraud, unsuccessfully, Eggleston.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The next evening, Pat goes to Eggleston's office early and watches until he believes Eggleston has left the building. He then sneaks in and breaks into Eggleston's office, intending to surprise him upon his return and force him to divulge information without payment. Instead, Pat is dismayed to discover Eggleston dead at his desk - shot through the head.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The chapter presents a large amount of extraneous detail on Pat's methodology, including his juvenile casing of Eggleston's building and the exact techniques he uses to break in. The details do not add to the plot and appear rather out of place in the generally concise and rapid narrative development. Pat's methodology does indicate, however, that he is a novice at crime. Pat, the parolee, is now obviously in a very difficult situation.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Pat looks around the office and wonders what to do. He sees an open appointment book and notes that Mrs. Luther, presumably Lila, had scheduled an appointment just a few hours before. Pat wonders if Lila killed Eggleston. The phone rings and Pat picks it up, whispering to disguise his voice. The caller also whispers and apologizes about missing an earlier appointment, but notes that someone else had been sent. The caller questions if this is alright. Pat, confused, hangs up. He then decides his only hope to avoid a return to jail lies in smuggling the body out of the building. He goes through a prolonged series of actions to get the body to the lobby where he runs into a policeman just entering the main door.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Chapter 21 continues the somewhat out of place private investigator office visit. The telephone call is not particularly illuminating and is not completely developed in the latter narrative. Pat never discovers the caller's actual identity and never resolves whether the call was intended to confuse him or if it was a genuine call to Eggleston. In any event, Pat's conclusion that he must smuggle the body from the building to avoid incriminating himself is, to say the least, bizarre and out of character. He nevertheless goes through an intricately detailed series of steps to convey the corpse as far as the lobby where he runs head on into a policeman.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Pat reacts to the policeman by flinging Eggleston's body toward the cop. As the cop collapses under the corpse, Pat flees from the building, hiding his face. He immediately drives to Hardesty's apartment and discusses the situation. Pat figures he has been deliberately framed for the murder and then engages Hardesty in a rapid conversation in which Hardesty inadvertently acknowledges that he has secret plans involving Pat and Doc. Hardesty reveals that he wants Pat to kill Doc. After revealing this, Hardesty recognizes his mistake and refuses to say anything more. Pat responds by throwing Hardesty to the floor and threatening physical violence if he does not reveal his entire plot. Pat's physical attack on Hardesty is halted when he feels the barrel of a gun being pressed to the back of his neck. Pat slowly moves away from Hardesty and is stunned when he realizes the person holding the gun is Madeline.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Pat's escape from the policeman is as risible as it is unlikely - the physically large Pat hurls the corpse of Eggleston onto the unprepared policeman who crumples under the body. Meanwhile, Pat averts his face and runs to his car for a quick getaway drive. He will only later learn that his reactive attempt at anonymity has been remarkably successful. Suspecting incorrectly that Doc is trying to frame him for the murder of Eggleston, Pat turns to Hardesty for further information. When Hardesty proves unwilling to elucidate the entire situation, Pat resorts to physical violence and is interrupted only when Madeline, bearing a firearm, emerges from a back room in Hardesty's apartment. Needless to say, Madeline is perhaps the last person that Pat could expect to see.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Pat is stunned. He is staggered when Madeline explains that her assignment in Doc's scheme was to flirt with Pat and keep him diverted while the remainder of the scheme was executed. Madeline taunts Pat by placing Hardesty's hand on her breast and suggesting that she is Hardesty's lover. She taunts Pat by noting that she was able to win him over just by petting and kissing. Hardesty and Madeline take turns making fun of Pat while holding him at bay with the gun. They tell Pat that they are in cahoots and plan to subvert Doc's scheme by having Pat kill Doc at a crucial moment. Pat, thoroughly despondent over his evident loss of Madeline, is silent. Finally Hardesty ejects Pat from his apartment and he goes home, drinks alcohol, and goes to sleep.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Chapter 23 provides a major plot turning point - Madeline is revealed to be paired with Hardesty against Doc. In fact, it is evident that Madeline and Hardesty are lovers. They have convinced Doc that they are supporting him in his various machinations but, in reality, they are planning to double-cross Doc at a critical juncture. Thus, Doc has plans for Pat, but Hardesty and Madeline have different plans for Pat. Once Pat realizes what his position is within Madeline's apparent scheme, he gets drunk and goes to bed - not exactly a proactive decision, but fully in keeping with his character. Madeline, at the end of the novel, double-crosses Hardesty and remains loyal to Pat - the exact point at which she makes this decision is unclear throughout the narrative, but the mean-spirited way in which she taunts Pat indicates that during Chapter 23 she still fully intends to send Pat back to prison to further her own goals.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Pat wakes up and reads a newspaper story that summarizes the murder of Eggleston. The story suggests Eggleston was murdered by someone from "out-of-state" - Pat realizes that witnesses mistook his State motor-vehicle's distinctive license plates for some out-of-state plates. Pat is also somewhat relieved to read that the description provided of the suspect (Pat) is wrong in several particulars. Pat then reads a story about the National Phalanx and the upcoming speeches of Fanning Arnholt, which he knows have been arranged by Doc and his political compatriots.

While Pat reads the newspaper, Henry enters and serves breakfast. Henry is obviously troubled and Pat asks what is on his mind. Henry explains that the previous evening Doc had entered Pat's room and removed all of Pat's salary money - Henry is anxious lest Pat think that, perhaps, he had stolen the money. Pat thanks Henry and realizes that Doc has removed the money so that Pat can't flee the area. Later, Doc stops by and explains that Pat's room will be used to host a business meeting that evening. Doc says that Henry will need some time to rearrange the furniture and ready the room. Doc tells Pat that his attendance at the meeting is mandatory, and tells Pat to arrive at a particular time in the evening. In order to put Doc at ease, Pat thanks him profusely for being such a kind patron and an upstanding man.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Chapter 24 begins the day that will complete the novel's dramatic action; Chapters 24 through 29 all occur on this final day of the novel's principle timeline. Pat begins the day by learning that, at least for a few days, he will probably not be a primary suspect in Eggleston's murder. He also reviews a newspaper story about Arnholt's anticipated speeches, which will commence this evening. Pat is also made aware that Doc is doing whatever he can to ensure that Pat will remain in the area for the next few days.

Clearly, Pat anticipates that events will quickly be coming to a critical situation - probably this very evening. Doc's explicit instructions for Pat to arrive at a certain place at a certain time are very unusual - to this point in the narrative Doc has been very easy-going and has left Pat's decisions more or less up to chance. Of course the suave Doc couches the demand as more of a request, but his seriousness is obvious - Pat is expected at the apartment at a certain hour in the evening. These various elements combine to build a tense narrative structure and begin the immediate rising action of the novel's climax.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Pat telephones in to work to check in with Rita Kennedy and is notified that he has been fired - another employee will soon be sent to his apartment to collect the state automobile. Pat asks why he has been fired and protests his innocent involvement in Eggleston's murder. Kennedy dismisses his protestations. Pat then wastes the hours of the day and returns to his apartment in the evening at the hour specified by Doc. As he approaches the apartment, he sees Lila standing by the roadside. He stops and Lila tells him her car is out of gas, and asks him for a ride to the meeting.

Pat wants to avoid the appearance of impropriety and decides to push Lila's car to the apartment. Lila insists on a ride. Pat begins to question her and Lila admits that Doc has stationed her by the road to be picked up by Pat. She is supposed to make it appear as if she and Pat had been out on a date. Pat then begins to question Lila and quickly realizes that she is completely ignorant of Doc's plans. In a sudden moment of clarity, Pat realizes that Lila is not Doc Luther's wife.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Pat loses his job and realizes that Doc's political influence is on the wane. Rita Kennedy effectively disappears from the narrative at this point. Pat returns to what is evidently the climactic scene of the novel and finds Lila waiting for him. His questioning of the somewhat vapid Lila quickly establishes that she is a minor bit player in Doc's scheme - Lila is beautiful but dumb and apparently compliant with Doc's wishes. Pat considers her various answers and comes to the correct realization that she is not Mrs. Doc Luther. This revelation is a major turning point in the plot and further complicates Doc's schemes and Pat's reaction to them. Pat realizes that Doc has positioned Lila as his wife for many, many years - nearly everyone Pat has met believes that Lila is legally Mrs. Luther. His next task will be to discover why.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Pat confronts the beautiful Lila and she admits that she is not Doc Luther's legal wife, though she has been publicly posing as his wife for several years. Lila then divulges her life story to Pat. Lila had been married at a young age to a husband who had become ill. She gave him too much medicine and he died. She sought out psychological assistance to deal with her grief and unfortunately ended up being treated by Doc Luther.

Doc convinced the vapid Lila that she had intentionally murdered her husband, and further mentally manipulated her until she agreed to do whatever he requested so that he would not expose her as a murderer. Under Doc's guidance, Lila posed as his wife and began to engage in numerous sexual relationships with influential married men whom Doc specified. Doc would subsequently "discover" Lila's sexual dalliances and threaten to expose publicly her sexual partners - all of whom were influential politicians or businessmen. Threatened with exposure, Lila's sexual partners would quickly acquiesce to Doc's demands for political relationships and illicit business deals. Doc thus quickly gained enormous influence with local businessmen and politicians.

Aside from acting as Doc's prostitute, Lila has not been involved in any of Doc's schemes and she does not have any information about the current machinations. Pat sits in the car and thinks for several minutes, piecing together a complete picture from what he has learned from Lila, Doc, Madeline, and Hardesty. Pat then easily convinces Lila that, like him, she is in danger in a serious situation - her usefulness to Doc has come to an end. Lila seems aware that Doc is nearly ready to cast her off, or worse, and readily agrees to assist Pat in whatever actions he deems appropriate. Pat writes down some fairly lengthy instructions to Lila, giving her exact details because he wisely does not trust her intellect. He gives her some brief explanations, and then they proceed to the business meeting and arrive just a few minutes late.

Pat sees Doc, Burkman, Hardesty, and several other men - mostly senators and other politicians - sitting around a radio and listening to a broadcast. Pat and Lila take a seat and listen as Ralph Edgars, president of the State chapter of the National Phalanx, is introduced. Edgars then announces that Fanning Arnholt has been denounced as a corrupt fraud. Edgars continues, claiming that Arnholt's various political acquaintances, including Burkman, are also involved in fraudulent dealings. Edgars concludes by noting that the allegations are backed up by seemingly incontrovertible documentary proof of Arnholt's dirty business practices and corrupt dealings. Pat realizes that this announcement must be the culmination of Doc's plans and subtly signals Lila to execute their own plans. Lila quietly leaves the room as the various men present begin to shout and argue. Burkman, realizing that his career is over, begins to cry and blubber. Many other men are visibly furious and several textbook salesmen begin to demand cash. Many men accuse Doc of running his own personal scheme with contrary goals to the established schemes. Burkman infers that Doc's personal scheme involved Pat. Doc



assures them that Edgars' announcement was completely unforeseen and has ruined him as well as all of the other men. Doc confidently assures all of the men that Pat will return to incarceration immediately.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Lila's life story joins Doc's story from Chapter 9 and Pat's story from Chapter 10 to complete Doc's puzzle. Pat, enlightened by Eggleston's comments and Hardesty and Madeline's actions, has figured out the broad outlines of Doc's scheme. Although he does not know the specifics, he realizes that Doc's use for both him (Pat) and Lila is nearly concluded and that they are both fully expendable once they are no longer useful. Pat also realizes that Hardesty and Madeline have their own scheme which involves double-crossing Doc at the last moment.

In short, Doc has organized a large scheme which to manipulate the upcoming elections. Doc's political cronies face long odds at retaining their elected positions - as the incumbents they face media criticism for graft and corruption, and the reform party threatens to sweep the elections. Doc organizes a scheme to divert media attention from corruption and focus it on the so-called "Red Scare;" he bribes Fanning Arnholt to denounce the local school system's textbooks as un-American and politically subversive. The resultant media furor will replace the corruption issues and allow Doc's cronies to retain their elected offices. It will also allow other business associates of Doc to reap a large financial reward by selling many, many new textbooks. Doc realizes, however, that his own political influence is nearly at an end - years of corruption and vice have limited his long-term options. He therefore has cached in many political favors to obtain the parole of Pat to execute a personal "scheme-within-the-scheme" which will benefit him personally at the expense of some of his political rivals - namely Myrtle Briscoe. Doc's personal scheme involves discarding both Pat and Lila because their usefulness is limited. Meanwhile Madeline and Hardesty - in on Doc's private scheme - are planning to double-cross Doc at the last moment. Something apparently goes wrong, however, and Arnholt is publicly exposed as corrupt. This causes Doc's careful political scheme to come crashing down - but his personal scheme is still viable and he clearly intends to perform damage control and emerge wealthy and victorious.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

The assembled men move to leave the apartment and begin salvaging what they can of their careers, businesses, and reputations. Pat, still unaware of the particulars of the organization, makes a definitive play and loudly announces that Lila is not Doc's wife. The men seem surprised and generally interested, but Hardesty immediately steps in and diffuses the situation by noting that, wife or not, Lila is currently insignificant. Pat has clearly misunderstood the situation because the men all leave - his announcement, while dramatic, is ineffective.

Hardesty, Doc, and Pat remain in the room. Hardesty and Doc engage in some cryptic conversation - Hardesty is clearly aware that Doc is responsible for exposing Arnholt and is obviously upset by Doc's unilateral decision. Doc ensures Hardesty that their own personal gains will be unaffected, and that he did what was necessary because of other developments. Hardesty and Doc then leave. Pat sits for a few minutes and hopes against his better judgment that Madeline is somehow not as involved as she clearly appears to be. He then goes to Doc's apartment, enters, and carefully closes the door behind him. He discovers that Hardesty, Madeline, and Doc are present. Doc arrogantly introduces Madeline as the "real" Mrs. Luther.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Chapter 27 provides a brief interlude between the climactic developments of Chapter 26 and the novel's concluding scene in Chapters 28 and 29. Pat tries, unsuccessfully, to agitate the men before they disperse. His announcement that Lila is not Doc's wife is met with surprise but also a fair amount of indifference. The men all know more about the situation than Pat, and they all realize that they have slept with Lila and been duped for years by Doc - but at this point in time those facts are insignificant.

It is evident that Doc acted alone by exposing Arnholt - Hardesty is upset because he will lose some amount of money due to the imminent failure of the textbook deal. Doc assures him that the loss of the money is insignificant and that the exposure could not be avoided. Doc reasons that all of their schemes must conclude that evening. In the concluding paragraph of the chapter, Doc confirms Pat's worst fears - Doc's wife is not the beautiful Lila, but the beautiful Madeline.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Pat explains that he has realized for some time that Doc's wife is Madeline and not Lila. Doc then explains to Pat his various schemes. In addition to the textbook scheme, Doc has arranged for ten large life insurance policies on his own life; the policies were arranged by Hardesty and will benefit Madeline. Doc intends to simply vanish and frame Pat for the murder. Madeline will then receive the insurance payouts, assisted by Hardesty, and the three will split the huge money reward. Doc also explains that he recently killed Eggleston for attempting blackmail - Eggleston had discovered that Lila was not Doc's legal wife. Doc concludes by noting that, unfortunately, Pat was implicated in Eggleston's murder. The authorities will soon be looking for Pat and thus to conclude his own private scheme before Pat was arrested Doc exposed Arnholt and concluded all of his nefarious dealings.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Doc's rationale behind explaining the details of his various schemes appears to be based around respecting Pat's right to know why he will be returned to prison for the remainder of his life. It is nevertheless not particularly credible that a man with Doc's experience would commit such a basic blunder. At any rate, Pat and the reader are now fully aware of Doc's plans - Pat has been paroled from prison to be framed for Doc's putative murder. Doc's rationale for exposing Arnholt is similarly fairly thin - whether exposed or not, Arnholt's affairs and Burkman's political future are completely irrelevant to Doc's personal plans. All that remains is Hardesty and Madeline's double-cross and, of course, Lila's implementation of Pat's own plan.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

After Doc's lengthy explanations Pat engages in an explanation of his own. He sarcastically informs Doc that Hardesty also has a scheme. Doc expresses surprise and Pat explains that Hardesty's scheme is very simple - Pat will really kill Doc and then be allowed to take his chances at escape. Hardesty and Madeline will then split the insurance payout two ways. Doc is stunned as Hardesty confirms Pat's declaration. Hardesty takes a gun from his pocket and tosses it to Pat, expecting Pat to execute Doc. Instead, Pat implements his own plan and holds Hardesty, Doc, and Madeline at gunpoint, ordering them to surrender to him. A brief physical scuffle ensues as Hardesty and Doc simultaneously attempt to wrestle the gun from Pat. Pat easily prevails against them and sends both of the smaller, older men sprawling.

As soon as the scuffle ends, the door flies open and Myrtle Briscoe walks in surrounded by policemen. She has been listening at the door since Pat closed it at the end of Chapter 27. Myrtle has been alerted to the situation by Lila who has followed Pat's plans. The police arrest Hardesty and Doc and haul them away. Myrtle then tells Pat that, in addition to being notified by Lila, she was previously notified of the entire scheme by Madeline.

Chapter 29 Analysis

The somewhat trite narrative exposition speech of Chapter 28 is followed by a more believable speech by Pat, where he informs Doc that things are not what Doc would like. Hardesty confirms Pat's announcement and then, nearly unbelievably, hands Pat a gun. Apparently Hardesty naively believes that Pat simply will kill Doc and then go on the run. Hardesty's actions are inexplicable - why would Pat voluntarily proceed to become a murderer and a fugitive from justice? Why not, instead, just take the gun and go to the police - in fact, why not proceed as Pat had arranged? Hardesty's behavior strains credibility and is by far the most serious shortcoming in the novel's plot.

In a final twist that is heavily foreshadowed, Madeline turns out to be one of the good guys - she has contacted Myrtle Briscoe and divulged all of the various plots to her. Myrtle has thus been enlisted to eavesdrop on Doc and Hardesty's announcements and intervene on Pat and Madeline's behalf. Thus, Pat's instructions to Lila and Lila's subsequent execution of them are irrelevant - but appreciated.



Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

In the subsequent weeks and months Pat receives a full pardon and becomes a free man. He gets a real job and works for his living. Madeline obtains a legal divorce from Doc and she and Pat get married. Doc, Hardesty, Burkman, and others are convicted and go to prison for their various illegal activities. Lila is contacted by the media and makes several sound business contracts to sell her life story which results in wealth and fame.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Chapter 30 provides a foreshadowed happy ending all around - Pat and Lila, largely innocent pawns in Doc's huge schemes, are exonerated and free to move forward with their lives. Madeline has apparently not been involved in illegal activities and manages to escape prosecution because of her disclosure to Myrtle Briscoe. She is thus free to divorce Doc and turn to her true love, Pat Cosgrove. As a complement to justice, Myrtle makes a big splash by making various arrests and obtaining numerous convictions of senators and other corrupt politicians.

The character inversions are interesting - the failed petty criminal who has served fifteen years in prison is freed while the successful businessman who has eluded justice for fifteen years is incarcerated. Doc who wondered aloud in Chapter 9 what his life would be like had he been imprisoned is about to find out. Pat, who arguably should not have gone to prison for his juvenile offense, is now free to enjoy a bright future, married to Doc's ex-wife. Myrtle becomes a successful political figure while Burkman falls. Lila is freed of Doc's sexual pandering and becomes famous; Madeline is freed of Doc's influence and finds happiness with Pat.



Characters

Patrick ("Pat") M. Cosgrove (AKA, "Red," "Airplane Red")

Patrick "Pat" Cosgrove is the narrator of Chapters 2 through 30 and the primary protagonist of the novel. In addition, he is the principle focus of all of the scenes in every chapter except Chapter 1. The novel details the experiences of Pat over a period of roughly one month after his parole from prison. Pat describes himself as 6' 4" high, thirty-three years old, and with bright red hair. His birthday is in March, which is just prior to his release from prison.

Pat grew up in a small rural town where everyone knew everyone else. He had been seventeen years old and was going a field for the day. He was down to only two shotgun shells and decided to stop by the bank and make a withdrawal in order to purchase more shells. Instead of making a withdrawal, he impetuously entered the bank with his shotgun and robbed the teller who he knew on a first-name basis. Pat then made his way to the town airport and attempted to hijack a small airplane that was getting ready to take off. The sole occupant was, unfortunately for Pat, the town judge. Pat was quickly apprehended. Instead of being sent to juvenile detention, the angry judge convicted him as an adult and sentenced him to ten-years-to-life in the state prison. Pat's prison nickname is "Airplane Red," a reference to his abortive hijacking and his red hair. Once paroled, Pat is sometimes referred to as "Red."

Pat spent the next fifteen years at Sandstone State Reformatory where he underwent a variety of physically abusive experiences. During his time in prison Pat spent time becoming self-educated and read nearly every book available in the meager prison library. After ten years he became eligible for parole but was unable to obtain a family or professional sponsor. He spent the next five years writing letters of introduction to random firms, hoping to obtain a job. He finally obtained the sponsorship of Doc Luther and was paroled.

Doc Luther plans to frame Pat for murder but Pat, of course, has other ideas. Over the course of about one month, Pat discovers Doc's nefarious plans and manages to manipulate the situation to his own ends. Pat's penchant for observation and his keen insight into human behavior allow him largely to control the situation and avoid unpleasant consequences. Throughout the novel Pat meets and falls in love with Madeline, Doc's estranged wife, and by the conclusion of the narrative Madeline reciprocates Pat's affections.

Doctor ("Doc") Roland Luther

Doc Luther is the subject of Chapter 1 and is a prominent character in all of the remaining chapters of the novel. He is the principle protagonist in the narrative and is a



driving force behind most narrative developments. Doc is described as middle-aged, overweight, and with thin brown hair. He has bulging eyes and wears thick glasses. Doc's upper three teeth protrude slightly so that they usually rest on his lower lip. This gives Doc the appearance of being always slightly smiling. Doc's bulging eyes, thick glasses, and protruding teeth all give him a disarmingly comic appearance which stands in sharp contrast to his keen mind and ruthlessly amoral behavior.

As a younger man Doc had been a psychology professor at a community college. He had conducted a sexual affair with one of his students, Madeline Flournoy. In order to retain Madeline's student funding, as well as his position, they had kept their relationship a secret and eventually married in a private ceremony. Madeline soon became pregnant but hid her pregnancy for as long as possible. Madeline's pregnancy eventually prevented her from attending school and the Luthers' mounting debts and needs made Doc's salary seem ridiculously inadequate. One day Doc visited the registrar's office to discover the registrar out to lunch and the school safe standing open. Doc impetuously stole all of the term's tuition receipts from the safe.

Within a few days he was apprehended, although he claimed that he had already lost all of the money through gambling. Instead, he used the funds to establish Madeline. Doc agreed to leave the school and the town in exchange for avoiding being charged with the crime. He left for Capital City where he established a psychology practice. Fearing exposure for Madeline he communicated with her only twice in the next several months. Madeline baby was stillborn and, convinced that Doc had abandoned her, Madeline was nearly wild with grief. Meanwhile Doc had learned numerous embarrassing secrets of his influential clientele and when his past finally became widely known he was allowed to remain in an influential circle largely because of the political damage his knowledge could potentially create. Doc then sent for Madeline who joined him in Capital City.

Instead of living with Doc, however, the estranged Madeline took up her own private residence. Meanwhile Doc met Lila and, by mentally manipulating her, convinced her to pose as his public wife. Doc has since used numerous unscrupulous and illegal means to gain political influence and make illicit money while entirely abandoning the legitimate practice of psychology. He intervenes on Pat's behalf because he intends to frame Pat for his (Doc's) murder and subsequently collect on a large insurance payout.

Lila Luther

Lila, whose actual surname is not given in the text, is described as a thirty-something-year-old woman with a perfect figure and a beautiful face. She has a flawless tawny complexion and blonde hair and is the kind of woman that most men find irresistibly sexually attractive. She is, however, not very smart.

Lila had been married at a young age to a husband who had become ill. She gave him too much medicine and he died. She sought out psychological assistance to deal with her grief and unfortunately ended up being treated by Doc Luther. Doc convinced the vapid Lila that she had intentionally murdered her husband, and further mentally



manipulated her until she agreed to do whatever he requested so that he would not expose her as a murderer. Under Doc's guidance, Lila posed as his wife and began to engage in numerous sexual relationships with influential married men whom Doc specified.

Doc would subsequently "discover" Lila's sexual dalliances and threaten to expose publicly her sexual partners - all of whom were influential politicians or businessmen. Threatened with exposure, Lila's sexual partners would quickly acquiesce to Doc's demands for political relationships and illicit business deals. Doc thus quickly gained enormous influence with local businessmen and politicians. Lila, meanwhile, was maintained by Doc upon whom she was completely dependent.

Doc's use for Lila is drawing to an end during the period of time detailed by the novel, and Lila gradually becomes aware of this. She is, nevertheless, unable to decide how to proceed. Even though she has engaged in numerous sexual relationships she is without any true friends or acquaintances. She therefore turns to Pat Cosgrove for support and advice and the novel ends with the two character's plans coming to fruition.

Madeline Cosgrove *nee* Luther *nee* Flournoy

Madeline first appears in Chapter 7 and remains an apparently fairly minor character throughout most of the remainder of the novel, although her central role in plot development cannot be overlooked. Unlike Pat, Doc, and Lila, Madeline does not explain her life story in any degree of detail - instead, her salient life events must be derived from Doc's personal history. She is thirty-something and Pat describes her as a heart-stopping beauty, with brown eyes, a small straight nose, shoulder-length brown hair, and a mature, shapely, and "forever young" looking body.

Madeline had been a student in one of Doc Luther's psychology courses when he taught at a community college. She had commenced a secret sexual liaison with Doc at that time which eventually resulted in their marriage. In order to retain her student funding, Madeline and Doc had concealed their marriage - Madeline then became pregnant. As the medical bills began to mount Doc apparently felt overwhelmed by financial responsibility and stole a large amount of cash from the school registrar. These monies were used to establish Madeline and allow her to receive medical care.

Doc, however, was apprehended and agreed to leave town to avoid criminal charges. Madeline remained behind to deliver the baby. Doc apparently did not advise Madeline of his plans, however, for he reports that she came to believe he had simply abandoned her. Her child was eventually stillborn and Madeline went through an understandable period of depression and grief. Several months later Doc relocated her to Capital City where she lived near him but the two characters apparently remained estranged. Doc supported Madeline who worked as his secretary while Doc publicly presented Lila as his wife.



Subsequent details about Madeline's life are not provided in the text. She apparently initially agrees to participate in Doc's life insurance fraud plans and allows Hardesty to list her as the beneficiary on ten policies. The text provides fairly solid evidence that Madeline and Hardesty conduct a long-term sexual relationship which somewhat angers Doc - apparently because he correctly believes it compromises his scheme. Later, Madeline spends time with Pat making out and petting to divert his attention from Doc's plan. Pat falls in love with Madeline even as she continues her relationship with Hardesty.

At some point, Madeline apparently finds herself reciprocating Pat's affections, for she decides to expose not only Doc but also Hardesty. Madeline goes to Myrtle Briscoe and reveals all of the various schemes and plans. This participation apparently provides Madeline with a defense to prosecution for her past and when the novel ends she is not charged with any crimes. Madeline subsequently divorces Doc and marries Pat. For having been married and divorced and conducted at least one extended extra-marital affair, Madeline seems particularly sensitive to Pat's possible sexual involvement with Lila.

Myrtle Briscoe

Briscoe is the elected state commissioner of corrections and the president of the board of pardons for Sandstone State Reformatory. She has held her elected officer for thirty years and has a well-deserved reputation for forthright honesty. Myrtle is five feet tall and has a large amount of very red hair. She is inflammatory in speech and widely known as completely honest and beyond corruption. Although Myrtle's age is not specified, her long term of public service indicates she is likely in her sixties.

Myrtle represents the respectable side of politics and the honest side of the law in the fairly pessimistic novel. Her honesty contrasts Burkman's hypocrisy and her genuine interest in Pat's wellbeing contrasts with Doc's professed interest. She does go out of her way to watch out for Pat's best interests and, somewhat atypically, appears to give Pat the "benefit of the doubt" about his involvement in any illegal activities. She is well aware that Pat's parole will reflect on her administration of the board of paroles - if Pat commits some impropriety or crime, she will be held accountable. She thus has a vested interest in his good behavior, but beyond that she seems to genuinely hope for his success. Although Myrtle is central to the plot, her character functions largely in a *dea ex machina* role, providing Pat with critical information at appropriate moments and then providing the legal force necessary to extricate him from Doc's plans. She is otherwise a largely unexceptional and minor character in the novel.

William ("Bill") Hardesty

Hardesty is introduced in Chapter 3 as a business associate of Doc Luther. Pat describes Hardesty as dark and keen-eyed, a bold-looking forty-year-old man who is rough and handsome. Hardesty is by profession an attorney though he is entirely



corrupt. For many years Hardesty has provided the legal expertise and service necessary to complete Doc's various rackets and schemes. Hardesty has profited greatly from his association with Doc and is apparently the only business associate that Doc trusts completely.

Hardesty, however, has decided that Doc's usefulness has come to an end and he plans to double-cross Doc and have him killed. Hardesty tells Pat of Doc's plans in small pieces in order to, as he feels, manipulate Pat into actually killing Doc. Meanwhile Hardesty carries on a long-term and apparently sexual relationship with Madeline, Doc's estranged wife. At the novel's conclusion Hardesty naively hands his gun to Pat, apparently expecting Pat to murder Doc for Hardesty's convenience. Instead Pat turns the gun on both Doc and Hardesty and turns them over to the police. Hardesty is characterized as a shrewd and insightful man, well-versed in criminal behavior. His miscalculation therefore strains credulity and is best seen as a simple plot-resolution device. Although Hardesty is present in many scenes of the novel, his role as a secondary antagonist to Doc is relatively minor.

Yancy L. Fish

Fish is the warden of Sandstone State Reformatory and views Pat Cosgrove - and apparently all of the prison's inmates - as unreformed criminals. He nevertheless complies with Pat's pardon while simultaneously demanding in kind several small illegal favors from Doc Luther. Fish is apparently uneducated and completely corrupted, and is a minor character in the novel.

Louise Clements Clay

Clay is the governor of the unnamed state which contains Capital City. Clay is apparently somehow beholden to Doc Luther because when Myrtle Briscoe, the president of the parole board, is out of town Clay - temporarily the *pro tem* president of the parole board - pardons Pat Cosgrove into Doc's custody, an action which Briscoe would almost certainly have declined to take. Clay is a minor character in the novel.

Senator Burkman

Burkman is a long-term State Senator. He is described as about fifty years old, short, fat, and very pompous. Burkman is completely corrupted and relies heavily upon Doc Luther's influence to retain his office. Additionally, Doc's principle political influence appears to be inextricably linked to Burkman's successes. Burkman is a minor character in the novel.



Willie and Henry

Willie and Henry are African-American brothers who work as servants for Doc Luther. They are described as slender, clean-featured, and youthful. Although they appear in several scenes they are not involved in Doc's illegal activities and appear to be little more than routine staff members. They are professional but generally nondescript servants and are minor characters in the novel.

Fanning Arnholt

Arnholt is the national president of the National Phalanx. He is apparently corrupt and accepts a large and illicit cash payment from Doc to deliver a series of stump speeches in Capital City to attack the local school textbooks as un-American. Arnholt, however, is duped by Doc who exposes Arnholt's corruption in order to cause an even larger media scandal to divert public attention from an upcoming election. Arnholt does not actually appear as a character in the novel, but is referred to extensively throughout a few of the novel's latter chapters.

Rita Kennedy

Rita Kennedy is Pat's nominal supervisor while he works for the highway department. She is politically connected and operates on her own agenda. At one point she informs Pat that his job will likely end with the end of his benefactor's political influence but offers to allow him to retain his job after the elections if he provides her with inside information. Kennedy is a minor character in the novel and is not involved with the larger political schemes arranged by Doc Luther.

Eggleston the Private Investigator

Eggleston is a private investigator briefly consulted by Pat Cosgrove. Eggleston offers his advice to Pat and then begins to investigate the situation on his own. He eventually discovers that Lila and Doc are not husband and wife and shortly thereafter is murdered. Pat is coincidentally framed for the murder which forces Doc to play his hand a little early, a situation that resolves in Pat's favor. Eggleston's character is gritty, interesting, and amusing, even though he remains a minor character in the novel.



Objects/Places

The Roadside Diner

After picking Pat Cosgrove up from prison, Doc Luther stops at an unnamed roadside diner for lunch. The diner is surrounded by filthy sludge discharged from a nearby petrochemical plant. Doc notes that the diner had formerly been surrounded by pristine wilderness. Later in the novel, Pat returns to the diner and sits thinking and then talks with Myrtle Briscoe. The diner's plight is symbolic of the destruction caused by Doc's corrupting influence in local politics.

Luther Psychological Clinic

Doc Luther opened and operated the Luther Psychological Clinic in Capital City for several years after first moving to the city. While operating the clinic, Doc learned many dark secrets of his influential clientele and subsequently used this knowledge to blackmail them. At the time of the novel's principle events the clinic is long defunct.

Capital City

Capital City is the obscurely-named setting for all of the novel's primary events. It is a large urban area, the capital of the State, and the seat of an incredibly corrupt political structure. Pat observes that the downtown area, including the capital building, is very rundown and appears almost as a slum. The city is otherwise typical in most respects and has all of the expected features of any large urban area.

Sandstone State Reformatory

Sandstone State Reformatory is a prison where Pat Cosgrove is incarcerated for fifteen years. Pat's description of the prison makes it appear to be a typical prison in all respects. Inmate-on-inmate violence is commonplace and expected and Pat bears numerous scars from violent encounters. The prison is under-funded and over-crowded and is run by the corrupt warden Yancy L. Fish.

The National Phalanx

The National Phalanx is a national ultra-patriotic conservative political organization with various local chapters. The National Phalanx is apparently well-entrenched in Capital City where a local chapter holds considerable political influence. The National Phalanx appears to derive most of its political power by promoting "Red Scare" tactics and decrying opposing viewpoints as un-American.



Doc Luther's Apartments

An old two-story house has been divided into several apartments and many of them are rented by Doc Luther. The physical structure of the apartments is not noted in detail - the house features a long central corridor on each floor which apparently opens onto three apartments on each side of the hall, indicating the house has been divided into twelve separate units. Doc apparently rents or owns one side of the entire bottom floor. Doc lives in one unit, Lila lives in another unit, and Pat lives in the third unit. Senator Burkman rents at least one of the upstairs apartments where he either lives or at least conducts sexual trysts. The rooms are noted as being well-appointed with expensive furniture. The occupants of the remaining eight units are not described.

The State Capitol

The State Capitol provides the setting for several of the scenes in the novel. Myrtle Briscoe, Senator Burkman, and other senators have offices in the building and Doc Luther, apparently, also has an office in the structure. Pat and Doc eat lunch at the Capitol cafeteria and several meetings take place within the building or just outside in the parking lot.

Striae

Pat refers to Madeline's stretch marks as "striae - the marks made by giving birth" (pp. 167-168). After being fairly intimate with both women, Pat notices that Madeline has stretch marks while Lila does not. When he recalls Doc's statement that his wife had delivered a stillborn child Pat realizes that Madeline, not Lila, is Doc's legal wife.

Survey Forms

Pat's job at the highway commission involves completing various survey forms - official-looking documents which are, in reality, meaningless. They are just a form of complicated doodle-pad which Pat writes on and turns in from time to time to provide the illusion he is completing meaningful work for his state paycheck.

Pat's Used 1942 Automobile

As part of Doc's plans, Lila purchases a used 1942 automobile in Pat's name, telling the salesman that she is Pat's wife. Doc intends the automobile purchase to be damning evidence for Pat - it would indicate that Pat planned to flee the area after supposedly murdering Doc. Myrtle Briscoe discovers the automobile purchase and notifies Pat who becomes alarmed at Doc's strange behavior. After Pat loses his state job he drives the used automobile and presumably retains it as an unintentional gift from Doc. The automobile is in good condition and is about ten years old when Pat receives it.



Social Concerns

The main character of *Recoil*, Pat "Airplane Red" Cosgrove, is a prisoner in quest of a new life. Imprisoned for ten years to life for a spur-of-the-moment bank robbery committed when he was eighteen, Cosgrove served fifteen years of his sentence. At the novel's opening, he searches for a way out of prison. Because he has no family or friends, and he must have a sponsor and a guarantee of a job in order to gain parole, he sends letters out to several strangers. The man who takes him up on his request for a job and sponsorship is Dr. Roland Luther, known as "Doc." The novel follows the progress of Doc's illicit scheme to use an unknowing Cosgrove to help him rob an insurance company of \$200,000.

Thompson examines the opportunity for corruption in state politics, the manner by which such opportunism may spill over into private lives, those honest politicians who redeem a seemingly hopeless situation, and the part education and literature may play in a prisoner's reform. Once again, Thompson casts a universal glance at the complications involved in distinguishing between guilt and innocence. Cosgrove must determine the meaning behind pieces of a puzzle which he finds difficult to assemble, a difficulty shared by all humans as they experience the puzzle of life.

Cosgrove remains sane during his prison term through self-education.

Thompson emphasizes particular works of literature in his novel. When questioned about what he read, Cosgrove replies everything in the ancient prison library, from Shakespeare to the Rover Boy series to Marx, mentioning seventeen specific works and authors.

This should not surprise readers who know of Thompson's background as director of the Oklahoma branch of the Federal Writers Project. That fine literature may have a restorative and healing capacity is an idea long supported by many writers. Cosgrove's thirst for knowledge marks only one decidedly noncriminal characteristic of the newly released prisoner.

While Cosgrove wonders at the novel's opening as to exactly why Doc agreed to sponsor him, he puts this question aside, hoping that Doc is a rare altruistic individual, willing to afford a convict a second chance. What Pat does not know, the reader does, thanks to a revealing opening two pages in which the reader witnesses Doc "up to something," although it remains unclear exactly what illegality his activity entails. As Cosgrove does as directed, he suspects manipulation but does not know how to discover exactly how he is being used.

Rather than subverting the normal American Dream story, as most of Thompson's other novels do, *Recoil* allows its protagonist to fulfill his long-delayed dream. In what remains an unusual twist for Thompson, he offers his readers a pleasant conclusion to what at first promises to be a disaster. For this reason, *Recoil*'s readers might term it a near-anomaly among Thompson products, one which can be labeled optimistic.



Early in the novel, Thompson emphasizes environmental problems in the state as the house Doc owns is near the sludge remains of oil companies who, Doc notes, have taken a billion dollars out of the field, yet "they can't afford to dispose of their sludge." This allusion to oil wells, along with derogatory remarks regarding the state's penal system, which likely focus upon the infamous McAlester prison, suggests that the novel's setting is Thompson's home state of Oklahoma. Thompson's in-depth experience of working in the oil fields for owners who cared little for the dangerous working conditions their employees had to undergo, formed the basis for his caustic attitude toward those who have much, yet still take from those who have little.

Thompson focuses upon the despicableness of crooked politicians by shaping their graft in the form of a ripoff of the state's educational system through an illicit deal over textbook sales. Somewhat surprising considering the time this book was written, its main honest politician, one who has held office for thirty years, is a female State Commissioner of Corrections who also heads the Parole Board. Although some of its women have questionable characters, *Recoil* sports no purely "bad" women. Cosgrove is allowed to fall in love, and the novel sports a promising relationship at its conclusion, despite what appears to be a false romantic start for the protagonist.



Techniques

In *Recoil*, Thompson uses first-person narration by the protagonist, as he does in many of his novels. Although the majority of Thompson's first-person narrators reveal psychosis and often murderous mania through their thoughts, Pat Cosgrove is a "clean" subject, with unquestionable motives.

Thompson allows Cosgrove pursuit of the American Dream, forcing him to rely upon his wits to achieve it. Cosgrove is sure of his identity, causing little of the frenetic soul-searching often present in Thompson's narrators.

The plot allows Thompson to emphasize faults within the American systems of justice, both on the political and the punishment ends. Not the typical detective/crime novel hero, Cosgrove yet maintains the courage of his convictions, allowing Thompson to emphasize themes of redemption through the quirks of fate. These same quirks defeat and swallow other of Thompson's protagonists, as Thompson felt they had done to himself and his father. As is true in most of Thompson's novels, his protagonist resembles himself in several ways. They share less than perfect childhoods, and both have suffered at the hands of various American institutions. Thompson uses his own experiences to add realism to the novel, although it certainly does not mirror his own life.

Themes

Using a mystery and crime format, Thompson manages to explore themes unusual to that genre. Ever vigilant in his negative attitude toward those who would waste their good fortune by trying to cheat others, the author creates an opportunistic group of characters who use one another in the most unscrupulous ways. The one character labeled a "criminal" by the justice system is the only one who resists temptation. However, judging from the harsh criticism of the state's prison, named Sandstone in the novel, Thompson resists suggesting that Cosgrove's character has been reformed due to incarceration. Instead, he emphasizes the fact that Cosgrove's crime was the mistake of misguided youth, and he gives credit, through multiple literary references, to literature for its mindexpanding effect upon Cosgrove.

Thompson shows that naivety does not equal ignorance. Cosgrove remains the only character whose motives are not questionable.

The focus upon ignorance in the novel allows Thompson to emphasize its many different levels. He contrasts the ignorance of the uneducated with the stupidity of those blinded by greed.

In this novel, the main character begins the book as an unsophisticated thirtythree-year-old who sees the world with the eyes of the teen-ager he was when he entered prison. But, not a stupid man, and one interested in self-survival but not at the expense of others, Cosgrove quickly adapts to the ways of the world outside the prison. When Doc and his cronies are apprehended at the novel's conclusion, it is due to a myopia caused by avarice which has constricted their vision of life to focus only upon material possessions.



Significant Topics

Deductive Reasoning

The novel's central conflict revolves around Doc Luther's plan to frame Pat Cosgrove for murder. Pat has been in prison for fifteen years and has very little practical experience dealing with the world outside of jail. He is repeatedly told by many other characters that Doc intends to use Pat for nefarious ends but Pat finds himself so pleased to be on parole that he doesn't initially question Doc's seemingly altruistic behavior. Eventually, however, Doc's apparently boundless generosity begins to appear even to the naive Pat as somehow suspicious.

Over the course of the narrative, Pat begins to question the normal appearance of things. He quickly discovers that nearly every aspect of Doc's life is not precisely as it seems at first appearance. Doc's associates are not exactly what they purport to be, Doc's goals are inscrutably strange, and Doc himself appears often to be acting out a part. Once Pat begins to suspect he is being manipulated he begins to wonder why. The central theme of the novel involves Pat's prolonged investigation into Doc's plans and Pat's slow but methodical deductive reasoning which leads him to eventually uncover not only Doc's plot, but also Hardesty and Madeline's plans. Pat is fortunate that his relative lack of experience is countered by a keen intellect and a natural ability to judge others' ulterior motives. His deductive reasoning also allows him to enlist the aid of law enforcement and even helps him convince Madeline to turn on both Doc and Hardesty in the final scenes of the novel.

Crime Doesn't Pay

Every bad deed in the novel is punished - even those that are seemingly beyond the law's reach. As a juvenile Pat robbed a bank and attempted to hijack an airplane and served fifteen years in prison. Doc stole money and was forced to abandon his job, family, and life to avoid more serious repercussions. Madeline hid her marital status to manipulate college funding and lost her marriage, her infant, and many years of her life. Many corrupt politicians and even a national personality cooperated with Doc in his illicit business deals and ended up being exposed and imprisoned. Doc and Hardesty broke the law and went to jail.

On the other hand, Pat does nothing illegal and is pardoned from prison and "gets the girl" at the end of the novel. Myrtle Briscoe is beyond corruption and ends the novel by making a startling series of arrests and enjoying public admiration for her honesty. Lila does not participate in Doc's criminal activities and becomes well-known and rich. Finally, the characters in the novel whom are neither dishonest nor particularly honest exit the narrative in largely the same position as they entered it. For example, consider Rita Kennedy - her actions in employing Pat at a false job are not entirely criminal as she was acting under the direction of her elected supervisor. Yet her actions are



certainly not admirable and thus she is neither rewarded nor punished through the narrative.

The simplistic punishment of wrong-doing coupled with the simplistic happy ending for right-thinking individuals delivers a happy ending, but is somewhat at odds with the novel's gritty texture which purports to deliver a true-to-life criminal suspense feel. Nevertheless, the ending is particularly satisfying and thus the novel's theme that crime does not pay is enjoyable even if simplistically moral.

Love Redeems

Two characters in the novel - Pat Cosgrove and Madeline Flournoy - fall in love with each other. The remaining characters in the novel are motivated primarily by self-interest. Pat and Madeline are the two protagonists in the novel and both emerge victorious through trying circumstances. The central theme of the novel's resolution is that love redeems.

Pat Cosgrove is a convicted felon who has served a fifteen-year prison sentence for armed bank robbery and attempted hijacking. His stay in prison is marred by abused typical of incarceration - physical and mental abuse. Pat's body is scarred from numerous violent encounters and his soul is sickened by his experiences in prison. When he is first released, Pat is happy enough to simply be out of prison. He indicated bluntly to Doc that he will do whatever Doc requests to remain free - in other words, Pat the felon is more than willing to break the law on Doc's request.

Madeline Flournoy is secretly married to a dishonest husband. She is employed by him as a secretary and participates somewhat in all of his illegal activities. She carries on an extra-marital affair with her husband's business associate while her husband parades a prostitute as his public wife. Madeline is preparing to bilk an insurance company of a huge sum of money and murder her husband for gain.

However, when Pat and Madeline meet and fall in love, their goals begin to change. Pat remains interested in remaining out of prison, but is no longer willing to be Doc's strongman. Madeline reverses course and extricates herself from Doc's schemes. Both characters eventually resort to informing on their companions to law enforcement and arranging for the police to overhear Doc and Hardesty's plans to defraud insurance companies. This radical about-face is spurred by the desire to love and be loved, and is the most positive aspect promoted by the narrative.



Style

Style

Point of View

The novel's point of view is complicated by Chapter 1 because it is narrated in the third-person limited point of view. The remainder of the novel, Chapters 2 through 30, is narrated in the first-person limited point of view by Pat Cosgrove. This discrepancy is highlighted by the titles of the first two chapters, namely "Chapter 1 Doc Luther" and "Chapter 2 Cosgrove," while the remaining chapters are only numbered. Chapter 1's point of view, an atypical and significant departure from the remainder of the novel, allows the reader to view the novel's principle antagonist without the protagonist's narrative intrusion or judgment. The construction does prove problematic, however - who is the narrator of the text? For Chapters 2 through 30, the first-person narrator is clearly Pat, yet for Chapter 1 the narrator is an unnamed though reliable presence who does not recur in the remainder of the text. All chapters are written in the past-tense.

The point of view utilized is appropriate to the text and allows for Pat's simple but authoritative voice to develop a gritty and textured tone. The Chapter 1 deviation in point of view does not seem warranted by the novel's overall construction and is best viewed as, perhaps, an intriguing but minor point of narrative construction.

Setting

The novel's principle setting is in the fictional Capital City, a capital city of an unnamed State inferred to be within the United States of America, c. 1952. Capital City is the obscurely-named setting for all of the novel's primary events. It is a large urban area, and the seat of an incredibly corrupt political structure. The downtown area, including the capital building, is very rundown and appears almost as a slum. The city is otherwise typical in most respects and has all of the expected features of any large urban area.

The city houses numerous structures which are referenced throughout the text, including the state capitol building, apartments and houses, office buildings, theaters, at least one automobile dealership, a State motor pool, and various restaurants, bars, and diners. The outskirts of the town are dominated by a filthy petrochemical refinery and, slightly further away, the Sandstone State Reformatory. The city is large enough that Pat is able to easily remain anonymous even when he is seen, yet small enough that Pat is able to maneuver throughout the city quite easily and quickly.

Capital City is deliberately named and described in vague terms to create an anonymous setting - this novel could take place in any American city in any American state. Even the time period of the mid 1950s is largely irrelevant, excepting only the references to un-Americanism which dominated national politics during that time.



Language and Meaning

The well crafted language of the novel is simple and accessible. The narrative portions of the novel are related in precise and simple prose that is at once engaging and compelling. Sentence structure is simple and straightforward, and word selection is appropriate. The language of the novel flows well, making the novel enjoyable to read.

Dialogue in the novel includes vocabulary and structure appropriate to the period and the speaker. Uneducated individuals speak with a variety of interesting flavored words while the more educated individuals usually demonstrate their education through developed vocabularies and complex sentence construction. Indeed, the dialogue in the novel is particularly enjoyable and believable. The novel's intended meaning is obvious and accessible - the style is simple and does not obscure details or deliberately suggest multiple alternative interpretations.

Structure

The 178-page novel is divided into thirty brief chapters. Chapter 1 is narrated from the third-person point of view and focuses on Doc Luther, the novel's primary antagonist. Chapters 2 through 30 are narrated from the first-person point of view and focus on Pat Cosgrove, the novel's primary protagonist. Chapters 1 and 30 happen before and after, respectively, the novel's primary timeline, which covers approximately one month, detailed throughout Chapters 2 through 29. Chapter 1 occurs several weeks before the novel's primary timeline begins, and Chapter 30 - properly viewed as a summary - happens several weeks after the novel's primary timeline concludes.

The novel is organized in a strictly chronological order. When events transpire before the novel's primary timeline they are related without variation during conversation between two characters or through introspection of the narrator. Aside from Chapter 1, the point of view of Pat Cosgrove is strictly adhered to and nothing is recorded, which Pat does not either witness or overhear. Chapters are short and paragraphing is traditional. Sentences are concise and feature basic and easily accessible construction. Words used are deliberately simple and, overall, the structure lends itself well to an easy reading experience.



Quotes

"He heard Lila's door open, and he paused in the act of removing a shoe. She stopped in the hall, her fur coat over her arm.

"'Couldn't sleep, eh?' he said. 'Well, I trust you've got something arranged. It's a little late at night for a pick-up.'

"She smiled weakly, apologetically. 'After all, Doc, I *am* human.'

"'Interesting,' he said, letting the shoe drop to the floor. 'An interesting if debatable statement.'

"'You - you don't mind my going out.'

"'I don't care what you do.'

"'I need some money, Doc.'

"'I'll get it for you in the morning.'

"'I could take a check...'

"'You,' he said, 'can do exactly what you're told. Exactly. Do you understand?'

"'I understand,' she said, slowly. 'Perfectly.'" (Chapter 1 - Doc Luther, pp. 8-9)

"It is five o'clock in the morning of my second day here and I have been lying awake since one.

"Excited and happy? I suppose. I suppose that, beneath this bleached mask which does duty as a face, I am still shouting with wonder and delight. But a man can only enjoy so much and then comes sleep.

"I wish I had taken nothing to drink on the way here yesterday. I am positive - almost - that I said and did nothing out of the way. And, yet, of course, I cannot be absolutely positive.

"I had nodded agreeably when he explained he never drank while driving; and I expressed my gratitude for his understanding of my need to 'forget.' I drank without urging, and when about a third of the pint was gone, the questions began." (Chapter 2 - Cosgrove, p. 10)

"'This is the young man from Sandstone,' said Dr. Luther. 'Pat, I want you to meet Senator Burkman. The senator was very helpful in getting your release.'



"Burkman widened his eyes, exaggeratedly, and poked a stubby finger at my chest. 'The hell he is,' he wheezed. 'You can't kid me. He's a fugitive from a country Sunday school, that's what he is.'

"Doc gave him a very thin smile. Perhaps no smile at all. Those overhung upper teeth were deceptive.

"'Well!' said the senator, seizing my hand. 'Pat - Pat Cosgrove, isn't it? Glad I could be of service to you. Sorry I couldn't have met you under more auspicious circumstances.' He laughed and gave my shoulder a pat.

"'I hope I didn't disturb you,' said Doc. 'I was afraid you might leave before I had a chance to see you. Pat needs a job.'

"'I thought you were going to give him a job. I've done enough.'

"'I'm sorry you feel that way,' said Doc. 'I wonder if there isn't something I could say to change your mind.'

"He stared at Burkman thoughtfully, the three protruding teeth resting on his lower lip, and Burkman reddened.

"'I'd like to, Doc. It's just that I need every job I've got for my own district. I've got a tight race coming up, man! Why not try Flanders, or Dorsey, or Milligan?'

"'They have tight races, too.'

"'Well' - Burkman hesitated, scowling. 'Oh, hell. I'll do it. Send him around to the Highway Commission tomorrow.'

"'Shall I mention your name to Fleming?'

"'Yes - no. I'll talk to him myself.'

"He closed the door quickly, as if he was afraid of being asked for something else. Doc and I went back down the stairs." (Chapter 3, pp. 15-16)

"She stood up, as we entered, but she didn't offer to shake hands. 'Sit down there,' she snapped. 'No, no! Keep your chairs together. I want you birds where I can watch you!'

"Doc said, 'Really, Miss Briscoe. Is that - '

"'Shut up!' she bellowed. 'Shut your big bazoo and keep it shut until I tell you to open it! Cosgrove, where did you get those clothes? You look like a pawnshop salesman.'

"'Miss Briscoe,' said Doc. 'I will not tolerate - '

"'Will you shut up! Cosgrove?'



"Doctor Luther bought them for me.'

"Why?'

"It's too cold to go without any,' I said, 'And the state fund for buying them seems to be exhausted.'

"So?' She leaned back in her chair, eyes glinting. 'Any idea why it is exhausted?'

"No, ma'am,' I said, 'But I've been in prison for fifteen years.'

"She chuckled sourly. 'All right, young Cosgrove; I stepped into that one. Now, I'm going to tell you the secret behind that non-existent state fund. I'm going to tell you why you don't have any money to buy books at Sandstone; why the food is slop. Why this, one of the richest states in the union, has become a begger among the other commonwealths...'

"I'm sorry, Miss Briscoe,' I said. 'I didn't mean - '

"It's because we're eaten up by rats. Rats, do you understand? That's the only name for them. And I don't give a damn how nicely they dress and talk or how generous - generous, hell! - they are to people who play along with 'em.'" (Chapter 6, p. 31)

"Perhaps I should tell you,' I said, 'Doc warned me I wasn't to see you.'

"Pooley on Doc,' she said. 'Trust him to order people around. Who the hell is he to tell us what to do?'

"Well,' I said, 'He's in a pretty good position to tell me what to do.'

"Yeah?' She looked at me blankly. 'Well, he won't know about it. No one ever comes around here during the day. But no one.'

"She gave my arm an impatient tug, and I went with her." (Chapter 11, p. 65)

"You're making a mistake,' I said. 'It's worth much more than five hundred for me to stay out of Sandstone. I'm afraid I can't tell you how much it is worth to me. I'd have to show you. Now, don't be alarmed, sir...'

"He was alarmed, or beginning to be. But I was smiling, and holding his eyes; and so he stood and watched while I slid out of my coat and shirt and undershirt.

"I heard Madeline gasp.

"He gulped and whistled softly. 'My God!' he whispered.

"You were looking at those welts, sir?' I said. 'Why they were nothing, relatively speaking. A little annoying, perhaps, when you get them full of gnats and salt sweat and rock dust; but nothing compared to those ribs. You should have seen them popping out



through the flesh like splinters bursting through tree bark. You should have seen this arm they day a friend tried to chop if off for me. That's right, sir. A friend. He got thirty days in the hole and I got three weeks in the hospital.'

"'I hope I didn't upset you, sir?' I said. 'I just wanted to demonstrate that I don't and won't have enough to pay you to stay out of Sandstone. Which brings us to our problem. Since I can't pay you what can I do to show you how highly I value your silence? What can I give you...that will last and always be enough? That you'll never want any more of?'" (Chapter 12, p. 71)

"There was a highway patrol car parked near mine, and a state trooper was bounding up the slope, tugging at his holstered .45.

"He almost had it out when Myrtle Briscoe leaped up from the bench and waved her arms at him.

"'Hold it, Tony!' she gasped. Then she got her breath and yelled, 'Dammit to hell, hold it!'

"The trooper paused. 'You sure you're all right Miss Briscoe?'

"'Hell yes!' She let out a snort of laughter, and made brushing motions at her clothes. 'Shook up but all together.'

"The trooper looked from me to her, an expression of sullen disappointment on his swarthy face. 'You sure you don't want me to - '

"'I want you to go back to the car and sit there!'

"He turned and went back. Myrtle sat down, shaking her head.

"'Don't know why it is,' she said. 'Give a guy a guy and he can't wait to use it.'" (Chapter 14, p. 83)

"She shook her head, doubtfully. She was sure Doc wouldn't want to do that. I murmured more thanks, wondering what went on beneath that vapidly beautiful face.

"May and March. The months could easily have been confused. And the present of a car wasn't at all out of keeping with Doc's other acts of generosity toward me. I didn't need one, immediately, but circumstances might change to where I would. What actually was there to be suspicious about?

"I looked up at Lila Luther suddenly and caught a peculiar expression in her eyes. Something that was a mixture of shame and hunger. I smiled at her, and she smiled back; shyly, a faint blush spreading across the tawny cheeks. She felt the blush, too, and tried to fix her face against it. "I put out my hand, and let the fingers trail across her breasts.



"She gasped, but she didn't pull away. She sat and waited, biting at her lip." (Chapter 15, p. 91)

"He didn't say anything for a minute or more. Finally, when I was beginning to think he'd dozed off, he spoke:

"Went to a dentist one time to get a tooth pulled. Knew the one that needed pulling would hurt like hell, so I pointed out another one to him. Looks like you're about as smart as I was." (Chapter 16, p. 95)

"I dropped the glass and stood up, my hands raised. I turned around. She was grinning that cute crinkled grin, and her brown eyes were dancing with gay good humor.

"'Whatsa matter, baby?' Aren't ums glad to see mama?'

"'God!' I said, 'God Almighty!'

"'Poor, poor baby. So sweet and trusting and obliging with Madeline...and all for a little petting. He didn't even get to sleep with her.'

"'No,' I said. 'I didn't. I've got that to be thankful for at least.'

"'Tsk, tsk,' she said, grinning again. 'Sour grapes, don't you think so, Bill?'

"'Very sour,' said Hardesty.

"He had risen from the floor and kicked the glass into the fireplace, and now moved over to her side and put his arm around her.

"She leaned against him, her crisp brown hair brushing against his neck. She took his hand into one of hers and raised it up and pressed it tightly against her breast.

"'There,' she said comfortably. 'Hold the gun, will you, Bill? It makes my li'l fingers tired.'" (Chapter 23, p. 135)

"'I can't explain it now. It would take too much time; it wouldn't make sense to you. But here's something to think about. Since you aren't Mrs. Luther, who is?'

"'Who?' She laughed again. 'Why - well, no one. I mean, Doc just made - '

"'Huh-uh. He didn't make that up. He'd know it would be checked. He was married under exactly the circumstances he said he was, and his wife followed him here after he reestablished himself. He's kept her out of the dirty work - as much of it as he could - and used you instead. And now that the elections are going sour...Well, what do you think is going to happen, Lila?'

"'I...!' She frowned, trying to think and getting absolutely nowhere. 'I don't - Tell me what to do, Pat.'



"You were supposed to pick me up here tonight?"

"Yes. I was supposed to make it look like - like we'd been out together."

"It seemed like the showdown, but I couldn't be positive. And if I jumped the gun, there wouldn't be any proof. I could set the deal up only once, and if it fell through I'd never get another chance."

"Tell me what to do, Pat." (Chapter 26, pp. 153-154)

"I'm wondering," she said. "I'm wondering if I ever will know what went on between you and that dame."

"What went on?" I said. "Surely you don't think I'd...do *that*, Mrs. Cosgrove!"

"Uh-hah. I'll bet you wouldn't!"

"Well," I said, "I don't know of anything I can say to convince you..."

"And you can't think of anything to do either?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I believe I can. You've given me an idea."

"It wasn't a new idea, but it proved to be a very, very good one. Good enough to make Madeline forget all about Lila."

"Good enough, period." (Chapter 30, p. 178)



Key Questions

Thompson's novels always allow for an analysis of the evil common to human nature. Throughout his prose, he offers up for scrutiny, at one time or another, all of the seven deadly evils.

Recoil is no exception, proving an interesting study of greed and corruption.

Because public institutions, such as the penal system, education and politics fall under inspection, most readers will identify with the problems Thompson attempts to showcase. Readers will gain insight into Recoil by comparing this first person narration to one of Thompson's other first person narratives featuring a psychopath, such as the narrator of Pop. 1280 (1964).

1. Discuss the various types of "prisons" featured in Recoil. Why is this a particularly appropriate metaphor for this book?
2. Critics have commented on the fact that Cosgrove's motivations are honest. How might you characterize the motivations of Doc? Lila? Hardesty? Myrtle?
3. Describe the stereotypical hero and heroine of a detective story. How do Cosgrove and Madeline differ from these stereotypes?
4. What does Thompson seem to be implying about the American system of politics through the characters of Doc and Myrtle? Do you agree or disagree with Thompson's implications?
5. How does Cosgrove's prison background affect his actions at the novel's beginning? Does that effect seem to alter by the novel's conclusion?
6. Discuss the plausibility of Recoil's plot, which hinges upon Lila's and Madeline's masquerades.
7. Does the conclusion to the novel seem realistic to you? If not, how might Thompson have resolved the conflict?
8. What do you know about Madeline that convinces you that she could successfully move from Doc as her love interest, to Cosgrove?
9. Judging from the female characters in Recoil, how does Thompson seem to regard women?



Topics for Discussion

Is Pat Cosgrove a believable character? What aspects of his characterization make him seem like a real person?

Imagine yourself in Madeline Flournoy's position - what would you do? Split one million dollars with Bill Hardesty or double-cross him in to be with Pat Cosgrove?

Discuss the super-patriotic and un-American sentiments presented in the text by Fanning Arnholt's group the National Phalanx. How did the real "Red Scare" alter American literature?

Lila Luther is physically perfect and markedly beautiful, yet Pat Cosgrove falls in love with Madeline Flournoy. Why do you think Pat prefers Madeline to Lila?

In the biggest mistake in the narrative, Bill Hardesty hands his gun to Pat Cosgrove and assumes that Pat will murder Doc and then flee the area. Instead, pat turns the gun on both Hardesty and Doc and surrenders both of them to the police. Discuss Hardesty's poor judgment - did he make an error, or was his action simply a plot-development device?

What does the novel have to say about race? Contrast the hard-working and fundamentally honest Willie and Henry to the fully corrupt Burkman and Doc. What does the novel have to say about gender? Contrast the vapid but alluring Lila to the intelligent but physically scarred Pat.

At the end of the novel Burkman and other corrupt politicians are jailed, leaving their elected positions open to be filled by reform candidates. Imagine Capital City ten years after the close of the novel - do you think the turbulent election results made a significant difference in the lives of most of the city's citizens?

The novel presents several minor characters. Which is your favorite character, and why?

Literary Precedents

Strongly resembling a straight suspense thriller, *Recoil* may fit more closely into the detective/crime genre made popular by Hammett and other of Thompson's contemporaries than any of his other novels. While several of its characters might be termed stereotypical, Thompson departs from crime novel tradition by allowing his protagonist and hero to be an ex-convict. Rather than having the crime solved by a detective, Thompson allows the would-be victim to solve the crime himself, thereby redeeming himself in what for a time seems a graceless world.

Related Titles

Recoil relates to several of Thompson's other novels in its scrutiny of guilt and innocence and the problems in determining which of those states applies to which characters. The credo that every man must trust only himself and suspect everyone else creates a common thread with Recoil for such otherwise divergent Thompson novels as *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), and *The Criminal* (1953).



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