

# **Satin Island Study Guide**

## **Satin Island by Tom McCarthy**

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# Plot Summary

Note: This study guide specifically refers to the paperback First Vintage Books Edition, January 2016, of *Satin Island* by Tom McCarthy.

“*Satin Island*” is a contemporary avant-garde novel by Tom McCarthy in which anthropologist, U., attempts to write a report about humankind at large, and the great truths that he believes are behind everything. When the novel begins, U. is at Turin airport in Italy, waiting on a delayed flight. U. works for the Company, a consulting firm based in London, and now one of countless organizations working on the Koob-Sassen Project, about which U. says he cannot say much but that which he says has affected the reader’s daily life in countless ways. While the reader may not notice the Project, it would indeed be noticed in its sudden absence. U.’s primary job at the Company is to analyze information about people, trends, patterns, and target audiences so that products, policies, and other items may be specifically or generally tailored.

U. finally returns to London where he is encouraged to continue working on his Great Report, the very first assignment he ever received from the Company’s boss, Peyman. The Great Report will be U.’s crowning achievement at the company and as an anthropologist, in which he will study the behavior and beliefs of humankind to discover deeper and connective truths. U. struggles repeatedly through the course of the novel to begin writing the Great Report, but has no success. All the while, U. is assigned to work on the Project as well.

At the same time, U. is dating a woman named Madison, who herself was once delayed in Turin. For much of the novel, she will not say why she was there. U. repeatedly attempts to get her to tell him all the while he struggles to work on the Great Report. Additionally, U. takes great interest in the case of a parachutist who fell to his death, and whose death is ruled a murder when it is discovered by authorities that the man’s parachutes had been tampered with. U. becomes obsessed with the case, but no suspect is ever taken to court and convicted. U. plugs away at the Project, though his specific work cannot be relayed to the reader. However, he manages to parlay his distractions into his work. When Peyman’s right-hand man, Tapio, asks why U. is studying parachutes, U. explains that parachutes, like the Project, are meant to convey someone from Point A to Point B, and that the important part is not Point B, but the transition between the two.

U. eventually learns from Madison that she was in Italy to protest a G8 Summit with her then-boyfriend, at which time she experienced police brutality and was essentially kidnapped. At an unknown villa, she was made to pose in classical ways while being shocked with a cattle prod by an unknown late-middle-aged man before being released. Madison then went on to the airport in Turin to fly home. U. ultimately has a dream where he flies over a place called *Satin Island*, where trash is being burned in the center between abandoned factories. U. has no idea what the dream means, but wants to find out. U. learns the Project has been a huge success, and he is praised publicly as one of its engineers. Meanwhile, he abandons his Great Report, believing it can never be

written. He is assigned to speak about the Project in New York, where he contemplates taking the ferry to Staten Island to see if there are any similarities with Satin Island, and if there is any truth behind the place and his dream. Just as U. is about to board the ferry, he decides not to.



# Chapters 1 – 3

## Summary

### Chapter 1

1.1 – U. explains that things like the Shroud of Turin are foundational myths on which order and reality are built, and that people are always looking through a shroud, never seeing the precise truth. Though some testing dates the Shroud to the thirteenth century, the faithful are not concerned.

1.2 – U. is stuck in Turin because a private jet ignored ground control regarding its flight, and using the time to look things up online.

1.3 – U. looks up the Shroud of Turin during this time, comparing the Crown of Jesus with jutting thorns to the hub of the Torino-Caselle hub airport. U. then looks up splines and ratchet mechanisms.

1.4 – U. has a memory of coasting down a hill on a bike as a child, pedaling in the opposite direction which gave him a sense of vertigo and slight nausea, a feeling he now has waiting at the airport.

1.5 – U. looks at the screens around him, from phones to televisions, and sees everything from sports to the news, including an offshore oil rig breakdown.

1.6 – U. receives a text message from his boss, Peyman, saying they have won a company contract for a project for Koob-Sasssen, which they have been seeking to secure for a while. Peyman explains he is currently stuck in Vienna. U. then receives another text message from Peyman's right-hand man, Tapio, celebrating the winning of the contract.

1.7 – U. receives a Skype call from Madison, a woman he previously met in Budapest, who uses the screen name JoanofArc. Madison asks when U. will fly back to London.

1.8 – Madison explains to U. that she needs ethnological attention, but the connection causes the Skype video to freeze with Madison looking half-conscious.

1.9 – U. spends his time watching the screens around him, moving from one to the next.

1.10 – A man beside U. says it is a tragedy that people are so absorbed in their screens. U. explains that the word tragedy comes from the ancient Greek custom of driving out a tragos, usually a black sheep, to atone for a city's crimes. The man is not satisfied with this conversation, and heads off.

1.11 – U. continues watching the screens for hours until the flight is cleared. On the plane, U. dreams that a film of oil is over everything.



## Chapter 2

2.1 – U. directly addresses the reader, saying the Koob-Sassen Project is immensely important and affects the reader's life on a daily basis, although readers may not realize this. U. explains that he cannot speak of the Project directly, because of legal reasons, but he can say that the Project was linked to many other projects.

2.2 – U. explains he is an anthropologist, employed as an ethnographer for a consultancy U. explains he will call the Company. The Company helps others contextualize, nuance, brand, re-brand, and above all, narrate. Peyman always tells others the company deals in narratives.

2.3 – The Company is located in London. The building is primarily glass and steel, but U. works in the basement which is brick-and-plaster.

2.4 – U. is located near the ventilation system, from which he can hear voices and fragments of conversation from elsewhere in the building. U. considers these hints to a larger structure or truth.

2.5 – Back from Turin and back at work, U. seeks a meeting with Peyman. Tapio explains that Peyman has not gotten back yet, and that U. should seek a meeting with Peyman the following day. Tapio's attitude stings U., who feels disconnected.

2.6 – U. leaves work early to visit Madison over in Westbourne Grove. On the way, he reads a story about a suspicious death wherein a young but experienced parachutist plummets to his death.

2.7 – U. has known Madison for two months. Madison believes U.'s work is exciting, but U. believes otherwise. He reflects on anthropologists who lament they have arrived too late to study a pure group or culture, and notes that purity is simply a state and a mystery that vanishes the second the anthropologist arrives to study with his frames of comprehension, interpretation, and analysis. This is the sort of thing that Claude Levi-Strauss wrote about, U. explains.

2.8 – U. and Madison have sex, after which she reveals she had been in Torino-Caselle, waiting for a plane.

## Chapter 3

3.1 – Peyman's flight delay is so bad he travels straight to Seattle to keep up with his schedule. The Company is anxious without him after winning the contract.

3.2 – U. explains that anthropologists working for businesses "purvey cultural insight (23)." This includes understanding a people down to their beliefs and behaviors. This information is then analyzed, interpreted, and passed along to make business and policy decisions.



3.3 – U.'s claim to fame as an anthropologist comes from his study of the 1990s rave and club culture, when he was in his mid-to-late twenties. He used the study to write a book that also included his meditations on current ethnographic methods and their quandaries.

3.4 – One such question U. pursued in his book was the difference between field (where one goes to study) and home (where one sorts and transforms one's study into something meaningful), and just where home ends and field begins.

3.5 – U. recalls the book brought him onto Peyman's radar.

3.6 – U. works in an office beside Daniel, who is a visual-culture guy, formerly an avant-garde filmmaker. When U. steps in to say hello, he sees Daniel is watching overhead footage of the city of Lagos and its traffic jams, made possible by mass public transportation and an unfinished and horribly-constructed road system.

3.7 – U. meets up with his friend, Petr, who works for a big IT firm, who is due to have his thyroid goiter removed. Petr explains his firm, like hundreds of others, are working on the Project, which Peter calls the Grand Metamorphosis and describes as network architecture. Petr asks how U.'s Great Report is coming along. U. explains it is finding its form.

3.8 – On the way home, U. picks up a free newspaper, which reveals the death of the parachutist was indeed murder. The police are now committing to solving it.

## Analysis

When Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* begins, U. is a contemplative, brilliant, but somewhat disinterested man. This can be seen most clearly in the airport. U. is like Plato's cave dweller who recognizes that everyone else is watching the shadow, or in this case, their phones, and is unable to break free to see what is going on around them. While it may seem as if the passenger who leaves U. does not want to handle the truth, it becomes apparent that the passenger has already broken free of the screens, and broken free of the philosophical cave, freeing himself from the shadowy (or in this case, pixelated) images before him. The passenger leaves because he knows the truth that screens can take away from human interaction. U. is more interested in what people are watching rather than why. U. thinks he has the total truth when he ironically speaks of the origin of tragedy, but the tragedy is that U., who thinks he is free at this point, is not free. It is he, and not the man who leaves, who remains to watch others watching the screens.

U.'s eventual leaving of the airport is to be seen as his decision to pursue the truth, though he withholds much of the truth from the reader. Anything particular or specific about the Project and the Company are left out, accordingly for legal reasons. Here, one of McCarthy's thematic arguments appears in that the truth is often hidden for one reason or another. Other truths – at least their pursuit – are made known to the reader. The truth, for U., will be to get to writing his Great Report following his discovery of



humanity's greatest secrets and truths (the reader will learn much more about this in upcoming chapters). Already, who U. was at the airport is not who U. is now back in London. The experience at the airport has been enough to jar U. into actively pursuing truth. It should be noted that U. had already been interested in truth, but his failure to ask why was undermining. Now, he is asking why.

The reader should also note that McCarthy argues that not everything is always as it appears. The airport scene was not merely a scene, but a symbol of transition between U.'s disinterested interest, and passionate commitment to pursuing the truth. The reader should note that U.'s morbid fascination with the parachutist is not merely filler for the book, but that it presents a mystery that U. wants to get to the bottom of because the death of the parachutist is not as it first appears. Neither is humanity at large. This can also be seen in U.'s hero worship of Claude Levi-Strauss, who, as it will later be learned, believed there was a deeper truth connecting everything in the world together but which always continued to evade him because he did not have all the clues and evidence at hand.

The absence of this truth confirms McCarthy's thematic contention that the truth may not always be known. As noted recently, this may be in part because the truth has been deliberately hidden away; or it may be that some things may simply never be known, period. The reader should also note that U. has dreams of oil, in which the truth and reality of everything is obscured. This can also be seen reflected in the Lagos aerial footage that U. watches with Daniel, in which numerous dead-ends along the road system can be seen as dead-ends for truth, for mysteries never solved by the way of roads never taken and journeys never completed. This is a warning to the reader that the journey now being embarked upon in the novel may not have the desired end at truth. This is nowhere more clear than the road system, and U.'s own withholdings. Even U.'s office – in the basement where nothing can be seen such as through the glass walls above – denotes an obscuring of truth. The ventilation system should also be seen as symbolic by the reader, wherein U. hears bits and pieces of truth but can never wholly assemble them into something larger (such as a conversation). This further underscores the thematic contention that the full truth may never be known, and serves as yet another warning to the reader.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is U. so insistent on discovering truths, but so reluctant to reveal any truths of any kind to the reader? What does this have to say about the novel itself?

## Discussion Question 2

What may account for U.'s disinterested interest early in the novel? What helps motivate him toward a passionate pursuit of the truth? Why?





## Discussion Question 3

What symbols appear in the novel so far which serve as a warning to readers that readers may not complete the journey to truth in the novel? Explain.

## Vocabulary

supine, discernible, ciphered, idiosyncratic, incongruous, splines, aesthetically, ethnological, asymmetric, opined, expiate, exegesis, anthropologist, monotone, quandaries



# Chapters 4 – 6

## Summary

### Chapter 4

4.1 – U. explains Claude Levi-Strauss is his hero for his travels, studies, and knowledge. U. reveals that Levi-Strauss saw a deeper truth to the world, one which he sought to discover but which always seemed hidden or withheld because it could never be viewed in one single part. For example, Levi-Strauss saw the different tribes as one larger tribe of all of humanity.

4.2 – U. recalls his first assignment at the Company as having to do with jeans for Levi-Strauss, so U. studied the ways in which jeans were worn: ripped, creased, folded, and so on. U. explains he always uses his work to feed ideas and information from the left side of the political spectrum into the business world.

4.3 – U. originally considers his work in business as also trying to extract deeper truths, like a miner seeking gold. U. also considers his work not just about improving profits, but transferring meaning and reality to the millions of people who consume products from the companies the Company consults for. While most people might not realize the meaning U. has conveyed, it could be noticed if he had stopped.

4.4 – When not working for clients, U. is allowed to pursue his own interests. This allows him to study everything from Japanese game avatars to newspaper obituaries and shark attacks.

4.5 All of U.'s studies and reports – his dossiers – he has arranged around his office, with lines and notes connecting them like a pattern, with the thought that they might all somehow turn out to be related. U. compares himself to a detective in a film noir, seeking to see how all the clues align.

4.6 – Waiting for Peyman to return, U. begins studying oil spills. He watches the current oil disaster unfolding through underwater cameras.

4.7 – A particular clip of a diver pulling up oil catches U.'s attention since he knows the oil that spills on the floor will never assume the same formation twice.

4.8 – U. arranges a meeting with Peyman on Friday through Tapio. U. then gets a call from Petr, saying he has thyroid cancer but has excellent chances of surviving.

4.9 – U. reads more about the murdered parachutist, and wonders what it must have been like to realize his three parachutes were not opening as he plummeted to the ground. U. wonders if the sky can be considered a crime scene.

### Chapter 5



5.1 – Corporations are just like tribes, U. explains, for they have their own rituals, beliefs, superstitions, crafts, skills, talents, and so on.

5.2 – Peyman chooses to take every chance he can to spread ideas and concepts, such as the thought that location is irrelevant in that it does not matter where something is, but where it leads.

5.3 – U. explains that Peyman not only runs the company, but is everything and nothing to the employees. Peyman is everything because he connects everyone and his influence is so wide in the world, and nothing because he is so influential he isn't noticed, or is simply merely acknowledged or taken for granted.

5.4 – Peyman comes and goes frequently, more often away than at home meeting with politicians and other important people. To the Company members, Peyman is like a tribal god who appears and disappears but who sustains the Company.

5.5 – The Company's logo is the giant, crumbling tower of Babel in which Peyman explains the importance is not hubris and defying God's will to speak His language, but the half-destroyed building which made cultural exchange possible, though the tower itself is now useless. Because of this, it excites the mind to wonder about its uselessness.

5.6 – Narrative is key to Peyman, who argues that everything is fiction on some level, and that appearance, rather than truth, can over lead to truth.

5.7 – Knowledge is also key to Peyman, who credits the philosopher Leibniz as being the last man to have a full command of knowledge, from physics and chemistry to math and theology. All knowledge was seen as related then; now, U. explains, the fields and disciplines have gone their separate ways. Peyman sees the future of knowledge of all fields and disciplines breaching their own boundaries and combining in new and important ways.

5.8 – U. heads up to his meeting with Peyman, whose office is the only one with a partition that blocks him from view of everyone else on the floor.

5.9. U. meets with Peyman. Peyman reveals in Seattle, the birthplace of Starbucks coffee, no one wants to drink Starbucks. So Starbucks has begun a series of local chains to see which ones do better than the others, in order to tap into local consumer desires. The irony is that locals are still buying coffee from Starbucks, indirectly.

5.10 – Peyman briefs U. on the Project, the company's role in the Project, and U.'s role within that. There will be a meeting with a Minister in Paris coming up that Peyman wants U. to attend.

5.11 – U. and Madison get together again and have sex. Afterwards, U. thinks about the oil spill and everything being covered by the oil.

Chapter 6



6.1 – The following week, U. meets with a group of civil servants working on the Koob-Sassen Project. U. explains such meetings are pointless because, such as with the Hawthorne effect wherein tribes being studied know they are being studied and alter their practices and behaviors to conform to the suspected conceptions of the observer, so too do those in meetings like the civil servants alter their views.

6.2 – The civil servants do as expected, aware they are being watched. They use certain words many times (such as excitement, challenge, and transformation) but also do their best to look relaxed and happy even though they are tense and uneasy.

6.3 – U. and Petr get together at the pub. Petr explains he is taking iodine for his cancer. The iodine is trained to recognize one kind of cancer, so if the cancer targeted begins to reproduce a variation of itself, the iodine will have no effect.

6.4 – U. pays a visit to Daniel's office, where Daniel is now watching footage of the legs of roller bladers, all heading toward the same spot.

6.5 – Daniel explains he himself shot the footage in Paris, and the bladers are a Manifestations sans Plainte, or a Demonstration with No Complaint.

6.6 – U. thinks about the dead parachutist, which cause U. to reflect on a moment from childhood that set him on his current path. He recalls watching an old 1960s documentary about Pacific Islanders called the Vanuatans, who annually dove head-first off a tower to the ground with their feet tied by vines to prevent them from actually hitting the ground. U. performed a variation of the ritual himself, until a dislocated shoulder caused his parents to step in. It was then that U. decided to become an anthropologist.

6.7 – U. thinks about the murdered parachutist, and wonders at what point in time the actual act of murder occurred – such as when the equipment had been sabotaged. U. comes to think that the parachutist may have died without even realizing he had been murdered.

6.8 – U. tells the reader the Great Report needs explaining. U. explains the Great Report was Peyman's idea, assigned to U. The Great Report is to be a consummate document, a book, the first and last word on the age and people in which secrets will be exposed and the truth behind all known.

6.9 – U. tells the reader that the Great Report was intended by Peyman to be U.'s vision, depiction, and characterization of humanity. U. explains that Peyman believed the university system to be corrupt and no longer dealing in reality, so the Great Report should come from a business such as the Company because it deals with humanity and reality daily.

6.10 – U. explains although he has not yet done anything concrete in the way of the Great Report, it still causes him stress and anxiety.



6.11 – U considers that the dead parachutist has suffered a rare but not unheard of kind of death.

6.12 – U. discovers here are quite a few accidental parachute deaths, and that a string of deaths in the last few months around the world have been left unresolved, with murder suspected.

6.13 – U. travels by rail to Paris where he oversees a meeting similar to the London civil service workers.

6.14 – U. later meets and has sex with Madison. Afterwards, he thinks of a blackened Paris in which he rollerblades. Along the way, everything is covered by black tarmac, including historical places, burying the past and the truth beneath.

## Analysis

As McCarthy's novel, *Satin Island*, continues, U. becomes ever more obsessed by the truth. The full background to the Great Report is revealed to the reader in this section of the novel. As it is revealed, U.'s disinterest in things has largely come about by his inability to begin working on the report, but as noted previously in the airport scene, his disinterest has been jarred into passionate pursuit of the truth. This reconnects U. with his anthropological roots in his hero worship of Claude-Strauss, who saw a deeper, connecting truth to everything in the world – but what that truth is remains elusive. U. now hopes to carry on in Claude-Strauss's footsteps with his own Great Report, but succeeding Claude-Strauss in the ability to discern the truth, much the way that Peyman believes fields of study coming back together will provide even greater truths and significance to the realm of knowledge.

As U. endeavors to pursue truth, he immerses himself in the role of anthropologist. The reader notes that frequent references to anthropology and anthropological theory are now frequent. For example, U. studies how groups of people react when they know they are being watched by way of Project meetings. U. also begins pushing Madison for the truth as to why she was at the Turin airport, both as a question of pursuing the truth and as a matter of better studying Madison. This will later prove to be a point of contention with Madison, but for the time being, it underscores an important point for McCarthy. Previously, U. was disinterested; now, he is detached from his fellow man. U. has assumed that he alone holds the keys to understanding people and soliciting the greater truths of life and humanity –but his assumptions have also separated him from others. McCarthy argues that humankind and life aren't meant to only be studied, but to actually be lived.

At the same time, the reader is exposed to a lot of history – not just relating to Claude-Strauss and his work in the field of anthropology, but relating to U. himself. As McCarthy argues, history is something which cannot be denied. The reader learns that history itself often serves as a great mystery, one which needs study to understand and determine the truth behind. The reader learns, for example, about U.'s original interest



in anthropology – a 1960s documentary on South Pacific island tribes. History is essential to understanding people and life in general, for history is wholly why things have turned out how they have in the present. This is expressly noted in U.'s dream where his journey through Paris is countered by unrolling tarmac which covers the history of Paris beneath it. The tarmac is seen to represent progress, which alone is enough to want to pass over history because progress does not always consider history relevant to the future.

Just as history cannot be denied, neither can the truth be denied. When U. finally meets with Peyman, Peyman explains the time he has spent in Seattle as one of knowledge and learning greater truths. He notes this through Starbucks, whom none of the locals wish to patronize for coffee, preferring instead local chains. The truth, Peyman explains, which has in some cases been hidden from the public and in other cases is simply not known, is that these local chains that are so popular with locals are actually owned by Starbucks. U. believes he will tap into the greater truths of existence by studying people as an anthropologist, but U. often forgets that he, too, is a person. The only thing truly human things about U. at this point include his ambition and his relationship with Madison. U. is denying the truth that he is part of the overall system he is trying to study, even though he acknowledges problems of field and home, and changes in behavior and belief on the part of those being studied.

## Discussion Question 1

Why was U. originally assigned the Great Report? Why is U. himself so eager now to complete it?

## Discussion Question 2

What led U. to want to become an anthropologist? How does this historical fact affect U. in the present? How does history in general affect U.? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

How does U. apply his anthropologist's eye to the Great Report? How does U. apply anthropology to the Project? What are his results in both cases? Why?

## Vocabulary

exogamy, endogamy, transgenerational, nomenclature, undulated, abstractions, lickspittle, aphorisms, ruinous edifice, vagueness, nonchalance



# Chapters 7 – 9

## Summary

### Chapter 7

7.1 – U. wonders about the Project and how all of those working for it fit into it. U. considers it all to be like a building or city under construction.

7.2 – U. keeps this visual of construction with him over the next several weeks. Peyman is always present in the visuals, direction and supervising. It makes U. feel connected to what is going on.

7.3 – U., Peyman, and Tapio meet with the Minister and her staff in Paris. During the meeting, U. notices the Minister trying to do something with her foot.

7.4 – U. realizes the Minister is attempting to undo the buckle on her shoe. She is successful.

7.5 – The Minister spends the next hour putting the buckle back in place as the meeting goes on above.

7.6 – Back a work, U. notes the company is having trouble with bandwidth due to too much information shutting down the servers. U. spends much of his time watching the buffering circle on his screen, patiently awaiting the arrival of information.

7.7 – U. wonders if the buffering circle might represent something that is coming, but may never arrive. U. realizes his expectations of arriving information come from his own experiences in which consciousness needs to make sense of experiences.

7.8 – U. relates that Bronislaw Malinowski, father of modern anthropology, said to write everything down. Early on, U. says he wrote everything down religiously, because as Malinowski noted, even the smallest thing may prove to be important. U. remembers thinking he could be doing something momentous.

7.9 – U. remembers how being with a woman in a bar and noticing everything she had around her – cigarettes, a beer glass, and so on – ceased to be important evidence for writing and all became blurred together with him.

7.10 – U. remembers thinking this blurring, this coexistence, might be part of the Great Report in that the Great Report might actually be lived. U. remembers imagining that this could be an entirely new Order of anthropological experience in which anthropologists place themselves inside situations as they unfolded.

7.11 – U. is frustrated with these memories because the Great Report still has to be composed. He wonders how all the secondary source information he has could be



elevated, and in which anthropologists would deliberately interact with and guide society. U. is thrilled with the concept, but annoyed that it must still be set in motion by writing the Great Report.

7.12 – Petr reports the iodine is not helping, so a new method whereby the cells of other creatures and plants are now being experimented with to see which will neutralize the cancer cells. He will have to travel to Greece to do so.

7.13 – U. considers the future of the Great Report, and of the Project, to be black and indecipherable.

## Chapter 8

8.1 – U. considers the parachutist falling to his death and looking up to see his parachutes peacefully floating above without him. U. considers his own parachute above him, out of reach of where he is with the stress he faces for the Great Report.

8.2 – U. reads an article by a skydiver who writes about how parachutists are a close-knit group, like a tribe. This catches U.'s attention. The article explains that the cords of the parachute pull back the skydiver from death.

8.3 – The skydiver writes about the importance of faith in skydiving – faith in everything from the instructor to the equipment. Dying in skydiving would have voided the faith the parachutist had in everything that had once given his life meaning, such as sailing through the air. It would be like he would have entered another sky, the skydiver asserts. This also catches U.'s attention, who does not believe the different sky the parachutist faced in death was Heaven.

8.4 – Tapio visits U.'s office and asks why the walls are covered in pictures of parachutes. U. explains it has to do with the Project. U. goes on to explain that parachutes operate in transit from Point A to Point B. The Project, like the parachute, is about a perpetual state of passage, U. goes on to explain.

8.5 – U. recalls how Levi-Strauss met with a tribal chief who wanted to maintain his elevated status, pretended to know how to write to fool his fellow tribe members. U. wonders if people will ever be satisfied unless vanity is done away with.

8.6 – U. relates how, during World War II, the Vanuatans closely studied and mimicked the actions and activities of American troops who befriended the Vanutans and built a military airfield on their island. When the Americans left, the Vanuatans continued to build runways and towers in the hopes that the Americans and their gadgets would one day return.

8.7 – These island tribes came to be known as cargo cultists, U. explains, and were initially mocked and derided. Others noted, however, that even contemporary people have their own beliefs, such as that Jesus Christ will come again to Earth. Beliefs must be respected and considered, because they all deal with the Future. The Future is what helps hold society together, including the Company and U.'s own work.





8.8 – Petr returns from Greece and explains a match could not be found for him. The next step will be to flush his system with Jaffa orange juice, from Israel and Lebanon, he explains. U. believes with certainty, but does not say, that Petr will die.

8.9 – On Saturday morning, U. sits down to begin plotting out the Great Report. He prepares his desk for writing.

8.10 – U. loses track of time wondering about the goings-on in his neighborhood instead of writing.

8.11 – At work, U. finds Daniel watching the pilgrimage at Mecca, in which believers move around in prayer anti-clockwise in relation to the heavenly bodies. U. and Daniel watch the fervent belief of the Muslims praying.

8.12 – That night, U. sits down to begin work on his Great Report once more, but is distracted by the news.

8.13 – U. follows news about the oil spill being blotted up by falling snow, and considers his own words will mar the whiteness of the page.

## Chapter 9

9.1 – U. is invited to speak about anthropology and the Present at a conference in Frankfurt.

9.2. – U. begins by saying that the Present is a suspect term because people are always slipping back into the past and the Future is forever elusive, and that the Present is a constantly mutating space that can't be pegged. Studying the present is difficult because the present is not lasting: it is constantly changing. No one likes his talk.

9.3 – U. travels to meet a friend who runs a local anthropology museum, Claudia. She brings him to the place.

9.4 – Claudia brings U. to the huge storage room.

9.5 – Claudia explains that they have more than 50,000 objects relating to anthropology. U. asks to begin with Oceania.

9.6 – Claudia explains the majority of the Oceania artifacts come from the Great Sepik Journey of 1960. It was, during this time she explains, that anthropologists believed they had to gather every single thing they possibly could. One day, they would yield truth and secrets, it was believed.

9.7 – From the 1960s onward, she explains, the new mode of thought was that objects did not matter so much as behavior and belief – what U. practices. Claudia notes the objects are meaningless to contemporary anthropologists, and that returning objects is useless because descendent tribe members don't even remember what the objects were originally for.



9.8 – Claudia points out, however, that some objects – such as dot-encoded dishes from Australia – have been studied and deciphered. The dotted dishes were decoded in the 1940s, and a limited edition of the code printed for use among academics. The books were never widely available and intended to be destroyed so the code of the tribe could remain a secret to the tribe, Claudia notes. Claudia has one such copy of the code in her hands.

9.9 – While looking at artifacts, Madison calls and speaks sexually to U., which in turn sexually excites him.

9.10 – Driving through Frankfurt, U. notices how much of the city is under construction, and how old and new seem to have come together in the present.

9.11 - On the flight home to London, U. reflects on having seen a black mass – rubber in its raw form. This causes U. to think about oil once more, and the masking of truth.

## Analysis

U. continues to work on the Project, but still has repeated false starts with the Great Report. U. considers that the future of the Report is black. Indeed, his inability to even begin the Report frustrates and stresses him to the point that he seeks to hone in on truths wherever else he can find them. For example, the Minister's buckling and unbuckling of her shoe catches U.'s attention, not only because it is a question of human behavior but an easily discerned mystery. U. also continues to seek answers in the death of the parachutist, and considers smaller mysteries such as the objects housed at the museum storage facility in Frankfurt that may never be identified given the passage of time, the Westernization of primitive tribal cultures, and the prevailing emphasis on behavior and belief in anthropology. Indeed, the latter of these mysteries is the most frustrating given that a simple shift in focus could allow research to be done into the mysterious housed objects, yielding even greater truths.

The reader should also note here that the portrait of anthropology is incomplete. To those like Claudia and U., anthropology is either one or the other (objects, or behavior and belief). But a broad and better understanding of anthropological endeavors would be a combination of both schools of anthropology. A greater truth could be obtained from both schools rather than just one. Yet, this does not happen, and reinforces McCarthy's thematic assertion that the truth may never be entirely known, if any truth is known at all. This is especially the case when U. gives his talk, which clearly reflects his evolving conceptions of the Report. The truth about the present, such as would be noted in his Report, is that it is always changing. Here, U. presents a startling truth to people unwilling to hear it. U. has found his way out of the Platonic cave to the sound of silence rather than applause. The transient present is something no one wishes to acknowledge.

What is present is already history by the time it is being effectively studied. Because the present is always in transition, the Report can never actually be written – it must always



be being written. Here, McCarthy strikes upon one of the few actual truths that the reader will glean from the novel: that the present is never always the present, and is not a point in time but a place of transition. As such, the present itself becomes something of a setting in the novel. This is how U. also comes to consider the idea that the Great Report is writing itself, but no one is noticing. He compares it to the Project, which no one notices but would take some kind of software to identify and explain. These thoughts will greatly come to affect his participation in the Project in the coming chapters.

Another rare truth offered by the novel is that faith in the future is what helps hold society together. This ranges from faith in Heaven, to the faith of the future return of American planes of the cargo tribes of the South Pacific, to the faith a skydiver has in the future opening of his parachute. This faith in the future may be laughable to some, as U. notes, but it is vital for people and for society at large to have any kind of faith at all. This underscores McCarthy's thematic argument that not everything is as it appears. To the anthropologists studying the Pacific tribes awaiting the return of the Americans, such beliefs were considered primitive and laughable. But the greater truth is that such beliefs became a part not only of the culture in which they flourished, but helped to enrich and broaden the culture itself by helping to order and sustain society as a whole. U., however, has quickly lost faith in his own future regarding the Report, something which he does not see the greater truth to yet. (The greater truth to U.'s own failure, as he and the reader will later learn, is the contention that the truth will not always be known.)

## Discussion Question 1

What is important about faith in regards to society, the future, and anthropology? Why is faith so important?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the divide among schools in anthropology? Under which category do U. and Claudia fall? How does Claudia feel about this? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is U. having such trouble writing the Great Report, especially as it pertains to the present? How does U. explain this at the conference? Why do you believe his talk is not well-received?

## Vocabulary

amalgam, coalesced, queried, fulgurate, reverie, transmogrified, paraphernalia, metaphysical, counterintuitive, ineluctability, configuration, anathema, empirically, protuberances



## Chapters 10 – 12

### Summary

10.1 – U. thinks about what he should have said at the Frankfurt conference, using the oil spill. But how and why, U. cannot be sure.

10.2 – U. considers that he would say that there is always an Oil Spill happening. An Oil Spill is composed of many parts that add up to something larger.

10.3 – U. works on this imaginary presentation every chance he can. He considers saying that oil is afraid of water, that there is a differentiation between oil and water and their behavior. There is a basic source code for each, just as life is a basic, endless source code of polymers.

10.4 - U. continues on in his imaginary presentation, noting that where water is, oil cannot be, and vice versa. U. argues that perhaps the oil improves upon things.

10.5 – U. notes that the Oil Spill turns wild creatures into noble, tragic beings, and makes places superior to what they were once considered.

10.6 – U. imagines a heckler getting up to shout at him at this point, and imagines it to be his fellow traveler from Turin. U. imagines responding that oil is nature, and that whoever is responsible for such a spill should be considered the true servant of nature, and watching the man dejectedly leave the auditorium.

10.7 – U. imagines gaining the audience in support, going on to say that the oil brings the world backward in time. God created the world, he imagines himself saying, and nature is godlessly undoing itself where everything in the water becomes one through the oil.

10.8 – U. imagines wrapping up by saying that time is like the oil spill: it encompasses everything, including the past, the present, and the future. The oil itself is a measure of time, made from countless prehistoric years of creatures and plants that have died out.

### Chapter 11

11.1 – The police arrest the murdered parachutist's best friend and fellow skydiver, who participated in the same jump that killed the parachutist, and who later served as a pall bearer at the parachutist's funeral. U. learns that the parachutist's wife is helping police with their investigation, meaning she was in on the murder as well.

11.2 – U. studies how Madison has sex with him, notes that she always closes her eyes when she reaches orgasm, and notes that she always seems to be somewhere else even though she wants him there with her.



11.3 – Daniel watches zombie parades.

11.4 – The police release the pall-bearer best friend without filing charges. Several arrests yield no charged suspect. Considerations of suicide reveal nothing, for the parachutist was a happy man. U. then begins studying similar mysterious parachutist deaths elsewhere in the world, with all investigations going cold.

11.5 – U. recounts how Levi-Strauss, living among the Nambikwara, bored out of his mind being trapped inside during rainy season, wrote the beginning of an epic novel about a Roman Emperor and his assassin, so that on one side was science, and the other was art. U. wonders which side of the paper his Report will be on.

11.6 – U. asks Madison how she once came to be at the airport in Turin in 2001. Madison, amused that U. is so curious about it, refuses to say anything about it. She says that the end-all to human interaction is not knowing everything about each other.

11.7 – U. begins to imagine that his Great Report is unplottable and unmappable. U. begins to wonder if the Great Report simply isn't possible. U. becomes angry and sad, and wonders what he is still there for.

11.8 – Christmas passes. U. continues to attempt to begin work on the Great Report, but is unable to begin.

11.9 – U. continues to wonder about his inability to begin the Great Report. He finds himself thinking about the Parachutist, and has a sudden thought. He believes they must have played a version of Russian Roulette in which a sabotaged parachute is randomly thrown into a pile of parachutes and then packed away for use in dives. U. believes this means the coming year will be glorious, and he wonders who to tell about his newfound knowledge about the parachutist.

## Chapter 12

12.1 – By the middle of January, Petr's cancer has worsened so he is admitted to the hospital. It saddens U. and makes him feel like crying, especially because the nursing staff can't even keep the windows clean.

12.2 – U. learns his Russian Roulette theory is not possible as he discovers important things, such as how divers only ever use their own packs to parachute. U. is crestfallen.

12.3 – U. notes that there is not a second of life that isn't documented in some way, shape, or form. As a result, nothing ever goes away. U. realizes that his Great Report has already been written by a neutral system that has given rise to itself, moved by itself, and perpetuated by itself. No one could read or write such a report, U. thinks. Only another piece of software can do this.

12.4 – U. slowly begins to see the Project as evil and dangerous, for it seeks to reset everything people do. Because it is so vague, U. asserts, it is dangerous. Because the Project belongs to no one in particular, it is even more dangerous.



12.5 – U. comes to think about his own part in the Project. He realizes he is both literally and figuratively underground. U. wonders if he can begin undermining the Project given his location and access. U. decides he wants to bring the Project down.

12.6 – U. has visions of bringing the Project down in flames, and sending its workers fleeing before him.

12.7 – U. visits Petr in the hospital. Petr explains he has spent his life figuring out how he would later tell people about the things he did, even during the events themselves. Petr explains that he cannot do this in death, and that if Heaven comes next, no one will want to hear about dying because they have all already died.

12.8 – U. begins putting together an imaginary team of sexy anthropologists who will bring the Project down.

12.9 – U. reveals his Project-wrecking fantasy to Madison. Madison explains such a thing is already going on.

12.10 – U. looks at Madison, dumbfounded. She will not say more. U. then relates that cataclysm for tribes occurs when they have their first contact with outsiders, especially from the West. Traveling around the world, it is explained, brings one into contact with is one's own filth in other cultures.

12.11 – U. has a dream where he is flying above a harbor with an island surrounded by a seawall, with old derelict factory buildings on it. The island is burning rubbish, and is announced as being called Satin Island.

12.12 – U. heads home from Madison's, where he reflects sadly on the aborted Great Report. On a piece of paper, U. writes down "Satin Island."

12.13 – U. cannot shake the dream he has had. He considers that Satin Island might be his mind's way of transforming Staten Island, a dumping ground for New York. He then begins taking down notes and printing things out about anything relating to Satin, Staten, statin, satin, and so on.

12.14 – Tapio tells U. that Peyman wants a meeting on Friday, and that U. should bring everything he is working on. U. agrees, but has no idea how he will parlay his current endeavors into the Project.

12.15 – When U. goes to visit Petr, he considers the dirty windows to be the stuff of the world since everything turns black sooner or later. Petr's skin is blackening, and he looks very sick. U. begins to consider that Petr has already become an angel.

12.16 – At home, U. considers that Satin Island might have something to do with his Great Report. He wonders if he can use this to his advantage.



12.17 – Petr dies two days later. U. learns this from a text message sent from Petr's phone to all of his contacts. U. considers that the text message might well have come from Petr, and considers that text messaging may be the key to immortality.

12.18 – U. heads up to Peyman's office. Peyman is very happy, telling U. his contributions so far have been vital to the Project. Peyman asks that U. go to New York to speak at a symposium about his contributions. This allows U. to explain he has been thinking about New York Harbor for the past few days. Peyman wants U. to speak about the Statue of Liberty in context of the Project.

12.19 – U. attends Petr's funeral. It is full of strange occurrences, such as Petr's funeral home time being partly taken over by another funeral, during which time mourners of both funerals appeared sad and respectful to one another.

12.20 – U. considers the funeral to be even stranger when it starts, for everything said about Petr was false. For example, it is said that Petr found strength in faith at the end, even though U. knew Petr to be an atheist; and how Petr considered his wife a rock when for years, he and his wife had been estranged. U. thinks about interrupting the service to speak the truth, but decides not to.

## Analysis

U. desperately struggles to continue his pursuit of truth to try to make sense out of the present and humanity so that he may still somehow write his Great Report. No matter what he does, he cannot set himself to writing anything at all. U. is so distraught he begins to wonder about the truth behind the Project itself, and whether or not it will be dangerous and evil for mankind. If the Report cannot be written, how can the Project have any hope of success since it is predicated on many of the same things - such as humanity's present condition? U. even considers taking down the Project from the inside, but the idea goes nowhere after speaking to Madison about it. Madison contends such a thing may already be underway, which shocks U. What Madison seemingly means is that something based only on the present will never last because the present is constantly changing. The Project, if only based on the present, will ultimately undo itself. U. later pulls together the idea of the parachute being important because of the actual process of getting from Point A to Point B, rather than Point B itself. With the Project always in transition and process, the Project will never be outside the present.

It is after this conversation that U. has his dream of Satin Island, from where the novel takes its name. U. struggles to find a deeper meaning and truth to the dream but continually comes up emptyhanded. The burning of trash in the center of the island is obviously the elimination of things no longer useful in the present. Abandoned factories are abandoned because they are no longer producing anything of use to consumers elsewhere. The entire purpose of the island then seems to be disposing of things which are no longer useful or relevant. U.'s visit to the island in his dream coincides with his essential abandonment of the Report, and his temporary desire to abandon and turn against the Project since neither are useful anymore to him in his present life. The





reader should note, however, that there may be other interpretations to U.'s dream – including the idea that McCarthy thematically argues that the truth may never be known. This is certainly the case when it comes to *Satin Island*: no clear answer is ever presented.

While some truths may not be able to be discovered, such as with the parachutist and the Report, other truths are denied. This is done, as McCarthy notes, for various reasons. The reader will recall, for example, that U. says very little about the Company and the Project for legal reasons, withholding the truth from the reader for this purpose. U. is presented with the sad truth that Petr – whose cancer has been unstoppable across the breadth of the novel – will die. Petr does not wish to acknowledge this truth, instead focusing on faith in the future and faith in treatment that will allow him to get better. U. recognizes that Petr is wrong, that not all cancer can be treated – but U. does not say anything about this. He feels badly enough for Petr as it is, and does not want Petr himself to feel any worse by challenging him on the truth.

Instead, U. help encourage Petr's faith in the future by visiting and spending what time he can with Petr. (The reader should note an interesting addendum to the screen scene at the airport: Petr confirms the passenger's tragic observation that people are more concerned with screens than with interactions. Petr himself acknowledges this, saying he was more concerned about how he would present the things he did to others than actually enjoying the things themselves.) At Petr's funeral, the truth is again denied, but U. will not intervene. U., once skeptical of faith, considers that faith is crucial – and even goes so far as to believe that Petr is now an angel. U. has lived life with Petr in Petr's final weeks, rather than merely considering Petr from an anthropological standpoint. As Madison notes, knowing everything about someone is not the end-all to them. Knowing is not feeling, and knowing does not mean there has been living and a human connection. Here, McCarthy's argument that life is meant to be lived rather than only studied reaches its greatest height.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does U. come to temporarily turn against the Project? What does he propose doing? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What is U.'s dream of *Satin Island* like? Why can he not understand the meaning of the dream? Do you believe the dream has a meaning? If so, what? Why? If not, why not?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways is faith seen as truth by U., both from an anthropological standpoint, and from a personal standpoint? How does this play out with Petr? Why?

## Vocabulary

vicissitudes, metamorphosis, indignant, bleater, ichthyomancy, littoral, effervescent, visceral, ruminated, decimate, erroneous, imbibe, effluvia, requited



# Chapters 13 – 14

## Summary

### Chapter 13

13.1 – At dinner, U. asks Madison once more what she was doing in Turin in 2001. Madison explains she had been in Genoa demonstrating against the G8 summit. She explains she was, but is no longer, an activist.

13.2 – U. presses for more information. Madison explains her boyfriend at the time had really been the activist, and that a large group of activists holed up in a school. The group was brutally rooted out by the police, she reveals.

13.3 – Madison explains few ever heard about the event because it happened shortly before 9/11. Madison explains she even has difficulty believing it herself sometimes, and that she has no contact with her ex-boyfriend or anyone from the activist circles anymore.

13.4 – The Project is rolled out and applauded. U. receives especial praise for his contributions.

13.5 – U. continues to ask about the protest. Madison explains she was pushed down the fire escape but only bruised. She explains the police put everyone in the courtyard, surrounded them, then took turns beating them.

13.6 – Madison explains it went on for about an hour, all the while more and more protestors were being fed into the middle to be beaten.

13.7 – The police then forced the demonstrators to sing songs they demanded, all the while diving people into small groups until eventually everyone ended up in pairs. Madison reveals she was paired with a German woman, whose jaw had been smashed up.

13.8 – Madison and the woman were then taken to a car where the driver looked at them and ordered the woman be taken out.

13.9 – Madison was then driven by plainclothes policemen to a villa and taken to a room.

13.10 – Madison explains that in the room was a man of about 60, and that the room was a strange kind of laboratory-like place.

13.11 – Madison explains the man was fiddling with a piece of electronic equipment, which he then used to shock her. She realized it was a cattle prod.



13.12 – Madison recalls that the man forced her into various poses for the next several hours, zapping her with the prod every step of the way and then measuring his work on another device. She explains she eventually began hearing children's voices.

13.13 – Madison relates that the poses she was forced into were the kind seen in classical statues and paintings, and that the man did not rape or sexually molest her. All the while, the man moaned non-sexually, with Madison explaining she realized he was trying for tones and pitches.

13.14 – Madison explains that what was going on felt like it was being determined somewhere else. Eventually, she says it just stopped, and she realized the man was also a part of the choreography. The man began to cry when it finished.

13.15 – Madison says the man then handed the cattle prod to her, but that she set it down on the floor. She then looked out through the window at a garden where two children were playing below, noting it was their voices she heard. She then realized some of the sounds she heard were coming from some old equipment that no longer seemed to be working. Madison then recalls that the man seemed to have stopped working as well, sitting limply in a chair.

13.16 – Madison explains she fell asleep leaning against the man's chair, and that when she woke up, he was gone and the machines were all switched off. A man in his thirties then came in and told Madison it was time to get her on her way, advising her to stay clear of the town center where demonstrators were still being rounded up.

13.17 – Madison reveals she then left the villa and appeared in a friendly, sunny suburb where she purchased clothes and took the road for the airport in Turin.

13.18 – Madison tells U. that Turin is where the shroud is from, and where the philosopher Nietzsche lost it when he saw a horse being beaten in the square which rendered him insane.

## Chapter 14

14.1 – U. travels to New York where he speaks with the title of one of the Koob-Sassen Project engineers and architects. The event is press-heavy and well-received.

14.2 – With some time to spare before returning home, U. wanders around New York and finds himself drawn downtown to the very tip of Manhattan.

14.3 – At the end of Manhattan, U. sees signs for ferry travel to Staten Island.

14.4 – U. decides he wants to go Staten Island. He hopes the journey there – which is free by ferry – will help him to better understand his dream.

14.5 – As U. approaches the ferry, he notices that landmarks, lampposts, and other things block his vision of the sign advertising the ferry. As a result, the words Staten



Island Ferry come out in different ways, such as state is err, ten sander, ten is land, and so on. Eventually, U. discovers the combination that spells out satin.

14.6 – U. heads into the ferry terminal where everyday people and families wait to take the ferry. U. notices landmarks in all directions, including the Statue of Liberty, the outline of New Jersey, Governor’s Island, and Staten Island.

14.7 – The bright orange ferry arrives, seeming out of time and place to U. The excitement of the ferry’s arrival also excites U. He feels as if he is to be taken somewhere strange, rich, and miraculous.

14.8 – The 3:30’s ferry arrival is announced. Passengers leave the ferry, and U. finds himself among those heading toward it.

14.9 – U. moves toward the ferry, feeling swept along with the rush of people.

14.10 – U. decides at the last second not to take the ferry, and must push against the movement of people seeking to take the ferry. U. decides to have gone to Staten Island would have been absolutely meaningless. He realizes it would have, in actuality, solved and revealed nothing. U. watches people board the ferry, and the ferry prepares to leave.

14.11 – The Staten Island Ferry heads out as U. watches. For a few moments, only a handful of people are at the terminal. Within a few moments, however, another group of passengers begins to form for the next ferry.

14.12 – U. loses sight of the ferry in the sunlight. He notices a homeless man checking the payphones for forgotten change. U. wonders who uses payphones anymore, then heads back out into New York.

## Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, McCarthy’s flourish comes in the argument that the truth may never entirely be known, if it is known even partially. This is certainly true of the novel. The reader is left wanting the final truth, the final message, the final reality – the answer to the Report, even – but none of this is provided beyond McCarthy’s assertion that one cannot always know the truth. The Report is never written; the Project is a success; and the truth behind both is left unsaid (or perhaps even undiscovered). The entire experience of Madison – seemingly totally out of place in the novel – is written entirely to demonstrate that the truth cannot always be known. Why Madison was tortured and experienced such a strange and horrific encounter is not known, and will never be known. Nothing about it makes sense, but that is the very point of it. This is frustratingly mad to the reader, but once again confirms McCarthy’s point.

The final scene in the novel is perhaps the most pivotal. U. prepares to take the ferry to Staten Island to see if he can figure out something concerning truth in his dream, or if the visit will help him to have better understanding of his dream. Yet, at the ferry, U.



decides not to go at the very last possible second. U. chooses not to take the ferry, considering that the trip would have been meaningless. Anything would have been possible, one way or the other, with or without finding truth on Staten Island. His decision not to take the ferry means that not everything is possible in the pursuit of truth, while on the other hand, his decision not to take the ferry means something else is possible in the pursuit of truth. The journey to truth is not completed.

Yet, in a larger sense, U. chooses to abandon the pursuit of truth by not taking the ferry. He has come to accept that he will never know everything, and that truth of anything may not always be known. He accepts this contentedly, knowing that he knows enough, and knowing that some things are just unknowable. The reader should note that as the novel ends, U. watches the ferry disappear in the sunlight. Traditionally, sunlight (and light in general) is seen as enlightening, providing knowledge, and shedding light on truth. Here, it is used ironically as it obscures the truth. Not only does the sunlight obscure the truth, but rather than trying to see through the sunlight, U. turns away from it and heads back into the City to await a flight home – just as he began the novel. U. is not returning to the Platonic cave, however, because he now recognizes there is a greater truth to things. He merely recognizes now that he may not ever know that greater truth. Yet, he is not giving up a search for other truths. This is embodied by the homeless man checking payphone – which no one uses anymore – for forgotten change. Although it is probably a pointless errand, it may yet yield a coin – just as the pursuit of truth may yield a rare truth. It is possible that the novel itself may form the Great Report, but this truth is never confirmed or denied.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the point of Madison's Italy story in the novel? How does this affect U., especially as it relates to his pursuit of truth?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did U. choose not to take the ferry? Do you agree or disagree with his action and his reasoning for having refused passage? Why? If you were U., would you have taken the ferry? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

What mysteries are left unsolved, and what truths are left unknown at the end of the novel? Why?

## Vocabulary

impotence, assiduously, rigmarole, emblazoned, interrogatory, vertiginous



# Characters

## U.

U. is the narrator and main character of the novel *Satin Island* by Tom McCarthy. An anthropologist by study, trade, and employment at the Company, U., in emulation of his hero Levi-Strauss, wishes to find a greater, deeper, connecting truth behind humankind.

U. is tasked with working on the Project and the Great Report, during which time he considers the nature and meaning of truth, and during which time he pursues a relationship with Madison. The Project and the Report transform U. from a disinterested observer to a passionate believer in truth, but the experience disillusioned U. because truth proves elusive.

U. finally comes to accept the truth that other truths may never be known, and this satisfies him to continue pursuing truth where he can. Likewise, U., who had recently approached all of his human interactions as anthropological case studies in life, is reminded that life is meant to be lived, not just studied. He also comes to recognize the importance of faith in life, and that, through Madison, knowing everything about someone or something is not the end-all to human life.

## Peyman

Peyman is the head of the Company, who first hires U. when he reads U.'s book on clubs and raves from the 1990s. Peyman is a beloved and respected boss who pays his employees well and credits their contributions to the Company. It is Peyman who first assigns U. the task of writing the Great Report, and it is Peyman who allows U. to follow his own interests during work hours provided U. focuses on work when it is to be had.

## Petr

Petr is one of U.'s closest friends. They often meet up together for drinks and snacks at the pub. Petr is diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and is given excellent chances of survival. However, Petr's cancer comes to be particularly aggressive, and cannot be beaten. Petr ultimately dies, and his decline and death help U. to understand the importance of things like faith, and why the truth is sometimes obscured. In Petr's case, it is because he longs for a hopeful future rather than wanting to dwell on his cancer in the present.

## Madison

Madison is the young woman whom U. is dating who reminds U. that knowing everything about a person is not the end-all in human relations or life. Madison's own



story – traveling to protest a G8 summit in Italy with her then-boyfriend which resulted in police brutality and a strange episode of torture by a late-middle-aged Italian man – underscores McCarthy's contention that the truth may never be known. Sometimes, things have to be accepted for what they are.

## Tapio

Tapio is Peyman's right-hand man at the Company. Tapio handles day-to-day operations and supervision of the company. He also checks in with employees while arranging meetings between them and Peyman. Tapio relays progress on projects and the Project to Peyman while Peyman is away on business.

## The Minister

The Minister is a high-ranking French government official who U. meets and studies in a meeting. The Minister fidgets with her legs a lot, which is a quick and easy mystery that U. pursue to find the truth. He finds that the Minister has a habit of buckling and unbuckling one shoe with the other, an act of boredom.

## Claudia

Claudia is a fellow university graduate of U.'s, and heads up an important museum in Frankfurt, Germany. Claudia is visited by U. during a conference U. attends, during which time she reveals that there are tens of thousands of uncatalogued and unstudied objects in the museum's collection due to the shift in anthropological thinking. Claudia values objects over beliefs and behaviors, a school of thought she is clear to let U. know about. The difference between U. and Claudia leads to only half-truths. Only taken together do the two schools of thought present a clear path to anthropological truth.

## The Italian man

The middle-aged Italian man is the individual to whom Madison is brought. The man engages in the act of shocking Madison with a cattle prod while having her pose in classical ways. The man's identity or true purpose are never revealed, symbolizing McCarthy's concept that sometimes, the truth is unknowable.

## The passenger

The passenger at the airport speaks to U. about the tragedy of everyone around them interacting with their device screens rather than each other. The passenger represents the cave dweller of Plato's allegory of the cave, in which one dweller out of many recognizes a deeper truth: the shadows they are watching on the wall are being created behind them by a light source no one has bothered around to find. By seeking the light



source, the individual leaves the cave. By knowing a truth exists beyond the screens of fellow travelers, the passenger leaves the airport.

## **You, the reader**

You, the reader, are also a character in the novel, though only a peripheral character. It is to you that U. directly relates his story. He even directly addresses you at certain points in the novel. You are intended to be a listening ear to understand the generality of what U. is telling you, but he never comes clean about the truth behind the Company or the Project. You are never intended to have the full truth, fulfilling McCarthy's argument that sometimes, the truth is simply not knowable.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Oil

A film of oil covers everything in U.'s dream on the plane, and is symbolic of the difficulty people have seeing through to - and handling - the truth. This is seemingly demonstrated by U.'s conversation with a fellow passenger, in which he speaks about the origin of the word "tragedy." The fellow passenger, not satisfied with the direction of the conversation, leaves to go elsewhere, but in reality has broken away to find the truth which cannot be found among the people only concerned with staring at screens. U. then has a dream where everything is covered by oil, which masks vision and therefore masks the truth of things. It is also later illustrated by U.'s own inability to see through to the truth of things.

## Ventilation system voices

Ventilation system voices are heard by U. while working in the basement near the ventilation system, and symbolize an incomplete truth that can never be attained and thus comes to be reflective of the Great Report. U. only ever hears voices, words, sentences, and fragments of conversations, rather than entire conversations themselves. These bits and pieces of conversation add up to something far larger, which U. can never know.

## The Project

The Koob-Sassen Project is a major project the Company lands, on which U. is assigned to work, and which symbolizes the unattainability of certain truths. This is illustrated firsthand when U. says, for legal reasons, he can say next to nothing about the Project apart from the fact that it affects you, the reader, every day of your life, and that without it, you would notice its absence. U. does note that hundreds of people and companies are working on the Project, and that it defies borders, leaders, and governments.

## The Great Report

The Great Report is U.'s ongoing first assignment at the Company, and represents the unattainability of truth. The Great Report is assigned by Peyman himself when U. is hired, and is meant for U. to find the deeper, greater truths behind and connecting all of humankind at present. U. is consistently frustrated by the report, never knowing how to begin. He comes to realize that the Report is writing itself and would require a program to interpret it, since the present is constantly changing and in transition. So too is the Project, and so too must the Report be. The Report can never be written, U. believes, because it must always be in the act of being written to change with the ever-changing



present. It may be argued that the novel itself forms U.'s Great Report, but this is a truth never confirmed nor denied.

## Lagos road system

Lagos road system aerial footage is watched by U. and Daniel, and demonstrates the failure to arrive at truth. The road system footage shows how the Lagos road system is incomplete: some roads lead nowhere and result in pointless or fruitless journeys. The Lagos road system footage thus serves as a warning to both U. and the reader that the shared journey to find truth will probably lead nowhere.

## Starbucks

Starbucks is a national chain of coffee shops that originated in Seattle, Washington, and demonstrates the reality of truth. Peyman reveals to U. that local Seattle residents do not frequent Starbucks coffee shops, preferring instead to patronize local chains. In truth, the local chains are owned by Starbucks. People are unknowingly drinking Starbucks coffee by another name. This is because they are genuinely unaware of, or do not care about the truth so long as the appearance is different from reality.

## Tarmac

Tarmac is a material used to pave roads, and in the novel, symbolizes the obscuring of historical truth. In a dream, U. finds himself in Paris where a roll of tarmac is covering up the past and denying the truth of history. History is vital to a place and people because it determines who they are in the present, and so cannot be denied. The dream causes U. to consider his own start in anthropology, which serves as a beginning for his own search for anthropological truth.

## Documentary

A documentary dating from 1960 serves to be the source for U.'s decision to become an anthropologist. The documentary dealt with Pacific Islanders known as the Vanuatans, whose men annually dove head-first off a tower to the ground with their feet tied by vines to prevent them from actually hitting the ground. U. attempted the ritual himself, until a dislocated shoulder led to his parents forbidding him from doing it again. It was during this time that U. decided to become an anthropologist.

## Madison's Italian story

Madison's Italian story comes from Madison's own past, and underscores the idea that the truth of some things will never be known. Madison, attending a protest at a G8 summit with her then-boyfriend in Italy, suffered brutality at the hands of the local police,



and was then kidnapped and taken to an villa where she was made to pose classically while being zapped with a cattle prod. By whom and for what reason is never known.

## Sunlight

The sunlight appears at the end of the novel, obscuring the Staten Island Ferry as U. watches it disembark, and symbolizes irony according to the gaining of knowledge. The ferry represents truth to U., while the sunlight hides it away. Traditionally, sunlight has served to bring light to the truth. The sunlight is ironic here because it does not shed light on truth, but obscures it. U. is unable to see the truth either because he has chosen not to pursue it by taking the ferry, or by accepting the fact that the truth of something will just never be known.



# Settings

## Turin airport

Turin airport is where the novel begins, and where U. finds himself stranded on the way home to London. It is at the airport that references to Plato's cave are made where in U. is content to be among those looking at their screens, while the fellow passenger recognizes a tragedy in people being more concerned about their screens than interacting with each other, and leaves. The airport comes to symbolize the transition between disinterested interest and passionate pursuit of truth on the part of U., and which in turn comes to symbolize the ever-changing nature of the present. The reader should also note that the airport is merely a hub, not a terminal. As such, it is part of a journey, not the end. Therein, it is only one step in U.'s pursuit of the truth, not the end of the journey toward truth.

## Basement

The basement is located in the London office of the Company, and is where U. works. While most of the building is composed of glass and steel, easily allowing people to see one another and what others are doing at all times, the basement has traditional walls of brick and drywall. As a result, the basement has obstructed views of everywhere else in the company. This is ironic from an anthropological point of view because U. is unable to study the rest of the people at the company continuously. The basement also comes to be symbolic of the obscuring of truth, and a place from which U.'s attempt to learn the truth and ascend from the obscuring of the basement to full knowledge begins.

## The present

The present is less a physical place than it is a state of being in time. The present – including places, people, and events – is the proposed subject of the Great Report that U. is to write. U. has great difficulty writing a report about the present because he comes to realize that the present is constantly changing. Anything U. writes about the present will shortly be outdated. Because the present is constantly in transition and in process, so too must be the Report. In other words, the Report cannot be written, but must always be in a state of being written to reflect the present. It is these thoughts which help condition the Project to succeed, because it anticipates a constantly-changing present thanks to U.'s advice.

## Satin Island

Satin Island is a place U. journeys in a dream, in which the constantly changing present is representing by the burning of disused and irrelevant things on the island. The island itself is composed of a landmass surrounded by seawalls and water, on which are a



series of abandoned factories. At the center of the island is a pile of burning trash. The burning trash of the island seems to represent the elimination of things no longer useful in the present. Abandoned factories are likewise made abandoned because they are no longer producing anything of use to consumers. The entire purpose of the island is then seemingly meant to be a place to dispose of things which are no longer useful or relevant.

U.'s visit to the island in his dream coincides with his disillusionment and path to abandonment of the Report, and his temporary thoughts to abandon and turn against the Project since neither one are useful anymore to him in the present. Yet, as the reader comes to learn, any interpretation of Satin Island cannot be confirmed or denied, since the truth is never given.

## **Staten Island Ferry**

The Staten Island Ferry is where U. journeys at the end of the novel, and represents the acceptance that not all truth may ever be known. Located at the southern end of Manhattan, U. visits the ferry while at a conference in New York. He considers taking the ferry to Staten Island to see if it will reveal anything deeper about his dream, or lead to a breakthrough truth. U ultimately decides not to take the ferry, knowing it may yield no answers at all. In a sense, he abandons the search for this particular truth, but comes to accept that some things may never be known. As U. watches the ferry (which itself represents truth) pull away, he loses sight of it in the sunlight. There is great irony in this, as sunlight is generally intended to enlighten and shed light on truth rather than obscure it.



# Themes and Motifs

## Not everything is as it appears

Not everything is as it appears, argues Tom McCarthy in his novel *Satin Island*. The truth is often hidden behind appearances, real, imagined, or imposed by elsewhere and for various reasons. In the search for truth, not all things can be taken at face value. The novel presents several relevant examples.

U. becomes interested in the skydiving death of the parachutist early on in the novel. It is a case which U. eagerly follows as it turns out the death was actually murder. At first appearing accidental, the death is later ruled a homicide. As a result, there is a murderer that has not yet been found. Even apparent suspects – several, in fact – are all released without being charged because there is not enough evidence to convict them. Though the truth behind the killing is never revealed, it does not matter for the purposes of the novel, since it provides the needed evidence that not everything is as it appears.

When Peyman goes to, and returns from Seattle on business, he meets with U. and speaks about Starbucks. Peyman notes the apparent truth in Seattle that locals prefer local chains over the national chain of Starbucks, even though Seattle was the birthplace of Starbucks. As it turns out, many of the local chains are owned by Starbucks despite appearances otherwise. Some people ignore this, while many others genuinely do not know.

When U. soars over *Satin Island* in his dream, the appearance of the island – seawall surrounded, populated by abandoned factories, and featuring a burning pile of trash – come to mean everything to U. He desperately seeks every possible way to learn the greater truth behind his dream, but is unsuccessful. As he learns, appearance is not everything, and in this case, may even mean nothing at all (an ironic truth). In its most philosophical and abstract form, the appearance of something true is not necessarily true by way of *Satin Island*.

## History cannot be denied

History cannot be denied, argues Tom McCarthy in his novel *Satin Island*. History is utterly crucial in understanding people, societies, cultures, and places, and therefore cannot be denied because history is wholly determinant of how the present has come to be. This is as true of individuals as it is of mankind in general.

U.'s first real grapple with the importance of history comes through his watching videos of Paris with Daniel. When U. sleeps that night, he dreams of touring Paris, and dreams of tarmac covering up important sites and Parisian places of history. Even though history has been covered, U. still knows it is there. Progress often cast aside and tramples over history in the name of progress; but without the sure foundation of the



past, the present and the future are uncertain because it denies the roots and nature of people and places, and how they came to be where they are.

U.s work on the Great Report, his dreaming of history, and his conversations with Madison ultimately come to get him to think about his own history. He relates to you, the reader, how he came to be an anthropologist, tracing it back to a 1960s documentary about a Pacific Island tribe and their death-defying skydiving stunts. U.'s own attempt resulted in a dislocated shoulder, a lecture from his parents, and the awakened desire to study peoples and their customs. U.'s life has thus been a journey towards learning, towards uncovering truths.

Through most of the novel, U. pressures Madison to tell him about her past, but is denied. Madison herself is trying to forget the past because it makes so little sense to her, and because it has so deeply affected her. But U.'s insistence finally wins out, during which time Madison relates her bizarre story of torture and sudden freedom. Madison keeps a brave face while telling the story, but just because it does not make sense does not mean it should be ignored. U. himself comes to recognize that the truth in history may not always be known or make sense, but they at least must be known about.

## **People are not just meant to be studied, but lived among and appreciated**

People are not just meant to be studied, but lived among and appreciated, argues Tom McCarthy in his novel *Satin Island*. U., as an anthropologist, has dedicated his life to studying people and studying life in general. He almost assumes this place of superiority, having a kind of anthropologically-informed knowledge about people and the world that the rest of the people and the world do not, and so U. looks on others originally as subjects to be studied rather than simply human. By the end of the novel, he has altered his position.

At the airport, U. is more content to note that everyone is watching some kind of screen, than to ask why. Indeed, he goes on to see what is interesting enough to everyone else to watch. As U. truly sets his mind to working on the Great Report, and also begins work on the Project, he reenters a truly anthropological frame of mind, something he has not actually done in years. He begins critically observing and studying the people around him. As he does this, he peppers his narrative with anthropological asides, explanations, and references which help the reader to determine what he is doing.

U.'s anthropological research can be seen firsthand in a number of ways. For example, the idea that a group of people who know they are being watched behave according to their conception of conforming to the watcher's ideas and beliefs is found in meetings U. undertake with civil servants. Rather than actually participating in the meeting and being a part of things, U. is more focused on studying the people present at the meeting. The same is true of his relationship with Madison. U. is so focused on the truth and knowing everything about Madison that he forgets to merely be with her, to enjoy being with her,





and to treat her as a human being rather than a subject to be studied. Even Madison reminds him that knowing everything about someone is not the end-all of human relations. U. takes this lesson to heart.

The best expression of U. changing his approach to other people comes through Petr. At first, U. studies Petr as Petr battles cancer as though Petr were just another subject. As time goes on, U. begins to realize that Petr is a fellow human being who is in the fight not only of his life, but for his life. U. stops studying Petr and simply begins spending time with Petr, providing companionship and encouragement. This makes Petr's final weeks more bearable, and helps U. to, in the end, more fully understand humankind at large.

## **Oftentimes, the truth is deliberately hidden or neglected**

Oftentimes, the truth is deliberately hidden or neglected, argues Tom McCarthy in his novel *Satin Island*. This is done to the detriment of the truth, but also done for various reasons which may prove to be greater than the truth, such as for the sake of humanity. U. learns about this in his own pursuit of the truth.

In the airport, U. deliberately avoids hard questions about truth relating to human interaction regarding his conversation with the fellow passenger about absorption in screens rather than with each other. U., in his present state, is disinterested with the truth because he has not really made progress with the Great Report. The airport conversation and the winning of the Project propel U. into a renewed burst of energy and inspiration related to the Report, which later fades out. The neglected truth in U.'s case comes as a question of exhaustion and disenchantment – and later as a measure of acceptance as U. consents to the idea that the truth cannot always be known.

The truth is also obscured at the Frankfurt museum Claudia runs, and which U. visits primarily as a matter of a difference in opinion rather than anything else. The artifacts at Frankfurt museum storage facilities are largely unstudied and uncatalogued due to a shift in the schools of anthropological dominance. The school that once prized objects has fallen into disfavor and unpopularity, while the school (to which U. belongs) that values behavior and belief has come into popularity and favor. Both schools, when exclusive of the other, deny the whole truth of a people. Taken together, the present a deeper, truer picture.

U also comes to discover the hiding and neglecting of history in other ways as well in the novel. For example, U. has a dream in which Parisian history is ignored, neglected, and trampled over in the name of progress – a reflection of reality given life when U. visits Frankfurt, much of which is under construction and metamorphosis. In the quest for progress, history is being forgotten. U. also considers Peyman's knowledge about local Seattle residents refusing to buy from Starbucks, but that the local coffee chains they prefer are actually owned by Starbucks. Some residents are genuinely unaware of this, while other residents willingly pretend the coffee shops are not owned by Starbucks



in order to frequent them. Madison also presents a case in point, wherein she does not want to speak about her past both because it is painful, and because information about it does not equal everything she is as a person.

## **Not everything will make sense, and the truth behind everything cannot always be known**

Not everything will make sense, and the truth behind everything cannot always be known, argues Tom McCarthy in his novel *Satin Island*. Indeed, McCarthy's entire novel is an exercise in making the argument that not everything can always be known. McCarthy does not deny that there are major and minor truths everywhere, but does argue that these truths may not ever all be known.

When the novel begins, U., by nature as an anthropologist, wants to make sense of everything he can, for it is the scientific mind at work in him. This includes imitating his hero, Levi-Strauss, in the pursuit of the great, deeper truth that binds and connects all of humanity and life together. That truth eluded Levi-Strauss, but U. himself endeavors to succeed where Levi-Strauss could not. U. thus commits to writing the Great Report, where he will write all about humanity in its present state and form. Yet, no matter how hard U. tries to write the Report, he cannot even begin it. He comes to realize that this is because he cannot write about the present state of humanity because the present is ever changing. As a result, a Report cannot be written at all, but must always be in a state of being written to adapt to ever changing circumstances. As a result, the greater truth behind humanity, life, and the present eludes U.

U. himself proves an ironic, perhaps even hypocritical counter, to himself. U. directly addresses the reader to tell the reader that he cannot tell the reader everything about the Company or the Project for legal reasons, thus denying you, the reader, the full truth behind the background events of the novel. U.'s frustration with wanting to know about Madison's past is neither increased nor decreased when Madison finally reveals her experiences in Italy. One truth - about what happened - is learned, but another truth - why it happened - is obscured. U.'s following of the parachutist murder presents another truth that comes to be unknowable - who killed the parachutist, and why.

When the novel ends, U. considers taking the Staten Island Ferry to see if it can yield anything in the way of truth relating to his *Satin Island* dream, but decides not to go at the last minute. He explains this is because he realizes the journey will not yield any truths; but in reality, he has come to accept that some truths are just unknowable. He could certainly take the ferry journey, and attempt to discover truths, but his decision not to is certainly a stand in the vein of accepting that some truths may simply not be knowable. This does not mean that U. abandons his pursuit of any truth at all, just certain truths.



# Styles

## Point of View

Tom McCarthy tells his novel *Satin Island* in the first-person reflective omniscient perspective with stream-of-consciousness aspects from the point of view of U. U. is relating the events of the novel to you, the reader, whom he addresses directly in certain places (such as in Chapter 2) at some unspecified point in time after they have occurred, because, as he notes, the Project has already affected your life and you would notice its absence. U. gives you unique insight into certain aspects of the Project and his own life, though he remains very vague about certain things. He may know everything about which he speaks, but he refuses to share this omniscience with you. This reflects U.'s own frustration and acceptance with never finding the truth of everything. The stream of consciousness aspects of U.'s narrative allows him to reflect on contextual events and information as the events of the novel progress, such as comparing meetings with civil servants to anthropological problems and observations. This deepens the extent of the novel itself, and allows McCarthy the ability to more fully make his points – such as about the nature of truth, and how it may never necessarily be known.

## Language and Meaning

Tom McCarthy tells his novel *Satin Island* in language that is straightforward and educated. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the casual, straightforward language is reflective of the era in which the novel takes place (the 2010s), in which casual, straightforward language is commonplace. This adds both a sense of realism to the novel itself, and a sense of relatability for readers in the 2010s who recognize much of their own language in the novel. Secondly, the narrator – U. – is a college educated man who is brilliant, so it is only natural that some of the language he uses be of a strong and high caliber, especially when he ventures into topics of anthropology. He brings to light ideas, topics, and thoughts that are not considered by the average reader in their day-to-day interactions and lives, such as the Hawthorne effect and its implications. Third, the straightforward aspect of the language of the novel allows McCarthy to clearly, and succinctly make his points where he may, such as when he argues that human life is meant to be lived, and not merely studied. This also allows the rich symbolism McCarthy uses to be strikingly obvious and easily absorbed by the reader (such as oil covering the true nature of things and the Staten Island Ferry boat representing truth).

## Structure

Tom McCarthy divides his novel *Satin Island* into 14 primary numbered but untitled chapters, with each chapter further subdivided into numbered subchapters as though an

anthropology textbook can appear. Each subchapter is only one paragraph long. Some subchapters are only a few sentences long, while other subchapters may last a few pages. Each overall chapter deals with a specific part of the novel, while the subchapters deal with the details of that chapter. For example, Chapter 13 overall deals with Madison's Italian experience, while each subchapter deals with a specific set of situations, experiences or events relating to that overall experience. In much the same way, an anthropological or academic textbook is structured: there are units with specific topics, and subchapters with specific details relating to that general topic. It may be argued that U.'s Great Report has actually been delivered in Satin Island, but this is a truth that is never confirmed or denied.

## Quotes

We see things shroudedly, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen.”  
-- U. (chapter 1.1)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, U. is quick to speak about myths and reality. Myths, he explains, are the foundation of order and reality, and that even then, people never see down to the truth of reality. Things are as they appear, and then things are as they truly are. The pursuit of truth will matter greatly in the novel.

What does an anthropologist working for a business actually do? We purvey cultural insight.  
-- U. (chapter 3.2)

**Importance:** Here, U. speaks about what he does for a living. U. explains that anthropologists study a people down to their very beliefs and behaviors, interpret and analyze this information, and then pass it along to the appropriate people. The information is used in everything from creating narratives to selling products to forming policies.

On Levi-Strauss. He was my hero....  
-- U. (chapter 41.2)

**Importance:** U. explains to the reader that his hero was anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who saw a deeper truth to the world than what otherwise appeared at first glance. Levi-Strauss used his work as a way to explore important questions, and raise other important questions. Because Levi-Strauss was concerned about the greater meaning of his work, this appealed greatly to U.

I want it to come out of the Company. We're the noblest savages of all. We're sitting with our war paint at the spot where all the rivers churn and flow together. The Company, he repeated, his voice growing louder with excitement, is the place for it to come from; you, U., are the one to write it.  
-- Peyman (chapter 6.9)

**Importance:** When U. is hired at the company, he is given the ongoing assignment of writing the Great Report. The report will be a study of humankind in the present age, with connections, truths, and secrets revealed. Because universities have lost their way and no longer deal in reality, the Company is the best place for the Report to come from since it deals with humanity and reality on a daily basis.

This coat was unrolling as I glided forward.... I'd be made half-aware that some historical event, some revolutionary episode, had taken place just there – but even as the knowledge flashed up it was extinguished, buried beneath the tarmac.  
-- U. (chapter 6.14)



**Importance:** Here, U. dreams of Paris being covered in tarmac. The tarmac covers the truth of everything, especially important history, obscuring the past and detaching the present and the people of the present from yesterday. In so doing, the truth is concealed, much the way in the present world the past is glossed over or buried in order to make way for the future. It is the denial of truth, and a tragedy to the human condition that humanity should lack sure foundations.

It strikes me that our entire social organism is... held in alignment, by a yoking to this notion of the Future...

-- U. (chapter 8.7)

**Importance:** U. speaks about the importance of faith, and how it must be respected. He provides evidence of the island tribes in the Pacific who emulate the Americans who once befriended them and occupied their islands during World War II, only later to leave when the war ended. To this day, their societies are largely held together by building runways and towers in anticipation of the return of the Americans and their planes, much the way billions of people around the world await the return of Christ. There is a truth here in that the Future holds society together, and that the Future is predicated on a belief in truth.

The Present is a suspect term.

-- U. (chapter 9.2)

**Importance:** U. is invited to participate in a conference about the Present at a convention in Frankfurt. There, U. calls the Present a suspect term since the Present is always changing, people are always slipping into the Past, and the Future is forever elusive. Here, U. underscores the difficulty of studying anything in the present as though it was lasting because the present consistently changes.

Your school of anthropology.

-- Claudia (chapter 9.7)

**Importance:** When U. visits a friend from university who now heads up a museum in Frankfurt, he is surprised to learn that more than fifty thousand anthropological objects have been put in storage, with most never studied, never cataloged, and never identified. Claudia explains that this is because in the 1960s, the anthropological school of thought which placed importance on behavior and belief over objects and artifacts became dominant. Here, one form of truth was exchanged for another. Absent of the other half, the incomplete truth is had.

This is the basic premise of all anthropology.

-- U. (chapter 10.3)

**Importance:** U. considers the talk he should have given in Frankfurt, comparing anthropology to water and oil. Both are different fundamentally, and behave differently based on their source codes. The same is true of humanity, of life, which is itself an



endless source code of polymers. This implies that behavior is essential to studying, as is belief.

What was I still there for?

-- U. (chapter 11.7)

**Importance:** U. attempts repeatedly to begin work on his Great Report by mapping it out, structuring it, or plotting it out. Each time, he is unsuccessful. No matter what he does, he cannot get started. He begins to believe the Report is simply unwritable. With his primary purpose removed, U. begins to wonder why he is even still around at all.

Write Everything Down, said Malinowski. But the thing is, now, it is all written down.

-- U. (chapter 12.3)

**Importance:** Here, U. notes that in contemporary society, everything people do is documented in some way, shape, or form. The danger is that people are more concerned with documenting their lives than actually living their lives. As a result, nothing ever goes away because everything is recorded somewhere.

Anything seemed possible.

-- U. (chapter 14.4)

**Importance:** U. decides that he will take the Staten Island Ferry to Staten Island to see what he can learn, and if the trip will mean anything to him based on his dream. At the very last second, U. chooses not to take the ferry, realizing the trip would have been meaningless and would have meant nothing. Anything would have been possible, one way or the other. His decision not to take the ferry means that not everything is possible, while on the other hand, his decision not to take the ferry means something else is possible.