

Stone Butch Blues Study Guide

Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg

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Contents

Stone Butch Blues Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	10
Chapter 5.....	11
Chapter 6.....	12
Chapter 7.....	13
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	15
Chapter 10.....	17
Chapter 11.....	18
Chapter 12.....	19
Chapter 13.....	20
Chapter 14.....	22
Chapter 15.....	23
Chapter 16.....	25
Chapter 17.....	27
Chapter 18.....	28
Chapter 19.....	29
Chapter 20.....	30
Chapter 21.....	31
Chapter 22.....	32



Chapter 23.....	34
Chapter 24.....	36
Chapter 25.....	37
Chapter 26.....	39
Characters.....	40
Objects/Places.....	47
Themes.....	52
Style.....	55
Quotes.....	57
Topics for Discussion.....	66

Plot Summary

Butch, according to the dictionary, means "a female homosexual with mannish or aggressive traits." A stone butch has been so battered by homophobia and sexism and the intractable human fear of difference overall that her emotions have turned to stone - she doesn't know how to express the love she does feel, and is terrified of the love that others want to give her. A stone butch has every reason to feel the blues in Leslie Feinberg's critically-acclaimed, award-winning novel *Stone Butch Blues*.

From her earliest memories, Jess Goldberg knew she was painfully different from other girls. She hates wearing dresses. She is happy wearing her Roy Rogers outfit, even in temple. She feels the curious and angry stares as she passes by - the question, "Is that a boy or a girl?" follows her around like a moth follows a light.

The contempt of her parents and the hatred of most of her classmates become so oppressive that she runs away from home and school shortly before her sixteenth birthday. She finds a new family in the coworkers in the factories where she works and the butches and femmes (lesbians who behave in traditionally feminine ways) who frequent the gay bars of Buffalo, New York.

Trying to find a place in the world - working, falling in love, making decisions that will mark one for years to come - is difficult enough as it is. But when one's very existence is against the law - homosexuality in and of itself was illegal in nearly every state in the 1960s and it was still considered a mental disorder - a solid sense of self is hard to find. Jess hides underneath a "stone butch" persona, which doesn't really protect her from trauma and often distances her from intimacy.

Jess learns that she can take male hormones and "pass" as a man. She feels this is the only way she will stop being targeted as an outsider. But "becoming" a man alienates her from the lesbian community and forces her to live a lie in front of everyone else. In the end, Jess sees that the only way out is - be yourself, then speak up for the rights and dignity that every human being deserves.

When one group is oppressed, we all are oppressed; when the transgendered are finally liberated, it will be liberation for us all.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Jess Goldberg, a "stone butch" lesbian (one who dresses and behaves like a traditionally masculine man) writes a letter to her long-lost lover, Theresa. Times have changed since Jess made her first forays into gay bars in the early 1960s - only no one used the word "gay" back then. Back then, the bars were frequented by butches, femmes (lesbians acting in traditionally feminine ways) and drag queens (gay men dressed up as women). Now, in the late 1980s, the violence is rarer, but the enemies come from their own ranks - lesbians teemed in modern feminism, who see tired sexual stereotypes in the idea of butches and femmes.

The bars are home to gays, but unfortunately they are not fortresses. Police raids are common, sudden, and crushing. Like other fraternities of masculine men, police officers take special delight in terrorizing gays. Jess also remembers the care from Theresa after such brutality.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter serves as more than a love letter. It takes the reader back through time for a look at gay history (which is not taught often enough in schools). Twenty-first century readers who think the fight for gay rights is all but won (except for the right to marry) may be startled by the fact that it was once illegal in all fifty states for women and women to dance together. Or that the police could swoop down and arrest everyone in a gay bar simply because it existed. Or that you could be beaten and raped by police officers and you would have no recourse against them because society labeled you a "pervert."

Bad times bring communities together, and Jess remembers how the masculine women ("butches"), their feminine lovers ("femmes") and men who dressed as women ("drag queens") bond together when trouble comes to their haven. No matter how many times they see the inside of a jail cell, no matter how many times the fist or the nightstick comes down, the community stands as one - for to give in, for the butches to wear dresses and grow their hair and act helpless, for the queens to put on pants and get crew-cuts, would be death just the same as a bullet in the head.

Jess also tells Theresa how she saw her helplessness and anger every time she had to bring a battered Jess home. They really were in the fight together, but Jess couldn't say so while she and Theresa lived together. It was because of the stone that had grown inside her as psychological defense against the war she fought each day, just for being herself.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Jess Goldberg grows up in Buffalo, New York, as Jewish girl at a time when open anti-Semitism is pervasive. Jess is plagued by gender identity issues. One day, when her parents are out of the house, Jess tries on her father's suit and tie. Her parents come in before she expects them home, and they see Jess in male clothing. Jess is committed to the mental ward. Jess learns one important lesson: she cannot trust anyone, not even - especially - her own parents. The world is not just unhappy with her; it will destroy her if she is not vigilant.

Jess is hired part-time in a print shop. Here, she can wear jeans and a T-shirt without facing the microscopic judgment she gets at high school. But, for the first time, Jess hears someone call her a "butch." A coworker, Gloria, talks of her brother, who dresses like a woman and goes to a bar called Tifka's in Niagara Falls where people like him gather - men and women wearing each other's clothing.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Jess has a typical gay childhood - the sense of knowing that you are different from other people, the incomprehensible cruelty of other children, the parents who try (in vain) to force your roundness into a square hole. Living with a cloud of shame around you - shame for who you are, not for what you do - warps the normal growing process just as binding the feet mutates the toes.

The entire Goldberg family is under this cloud of shame because they are Jewish. Jews are rare and singled out all across America. But it will soon become clear to Jess that anti-Semitism will not be her biggest problem. Even though some people will hurl ethnic slurs at her for extra meanness, her gender ambiguity is what brings on the hate.

Jess is afraid of other people because they can control what happens to her - from the boys who yank her pants down and throw her in a neighbor's coal bin to her parents committing her to the hospital's mental ward after they catch her trying on her father's clothes.

The scenes in the mental ward are terrifying and not only because an eleven-year-old girl is trapped inside. Security is lax. Jess hears two men come in and urinate on her sheets in the middle of the night. "Therapy" consists of craftwork such as making moccasins and trivets and taking pills that turn a mind sluggish. The only way Jess can get out is to tell the doctor what he wants to hear - that she will try harder to be a good girl, a feminine girl. Lying about who she is is unsustainable; even charm school does nothing but make her difference more plain.

We get a portrait of Buffalo as it was in the 1950s. The housing projects where the family first resides are cold and inhospitable; the roads are paved with gravel because not everyone had cars. Working-class pride runs fierce here. One family, the McKensies, has what is usually a neighborhood popularizer: a television set. But they are ostracized because the father crossed a picket line years ago. That is the eighth deadly sin in this neighborhood. Buffalo is conservative, set in its ways, and unforgiving - not a hospitable environment for Jess.

It's only when she finds a part-time job at age fifteen that Jess finds relief from the hostile world. At work, it doesn't matter much if she wears pants. This job - setting type by hand in a print shop - is also the first of a long list of jobs that are usually done by males that Jess will have. It will also point her towards her future in more than just work experience.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

It takes Jess a year to gather up the courage to go to Tifka's and she finds it to be a bar like any other but, she spots a woman who looks a bit like a man. In the back room, Jess finds what she has been hoping for - masculine women, dressed in men's suits, dancing with other women wearing high heels. When Butch Al comes into the bar. Jess freezes; here is a real butch, the butch Jess wants to grow up to be.

Jess goes to Tifka's every weekend of the summer and spends most of her time with Butch Al and Jacqueline, her femme. Butch Al becomes a mentor to Jess, teaching Jess what she needs to know to survive as a butch. One night Jess is caught in a police raid at Tifka's. The police pick out arrestees for individual beatings and rapes. Jess does what she can to comfort her friends. When Jacqueline posts bail, Al doesn't talk. Jess asks Jacqueline if she (Jess) is strong enough yet. Jacqueline replies that no one - not even Al - is strong enough. Jacqueline wishes that the femmes could do more to protect butches' hearts.

After that raid, Butch Al and Jacqueline disappear from Tifka's. Summer ends, and it's time for Jess to go back to school. When Jess goes back to Niagara Falls during the Christmas break, she learns of the deaths of Yvette and Mona - Yvette is murdered; Mona commits suicide. Jacqueline has become a junkie. No one has seen Butch Al.

Chapter 3 Analysis

We are introduced to the world of the gay bar in this chapter, only it wasn't called such back then. They are the only places where gays can go and be themselves. Every town has one, "one" being the operative word; more than one gay bars could be found only in metropolises such as New York City. Early on in Buffalo's Tenderloin, the gays had only a percentage of the bar, and they held on hard to every square inch. Everyone on the inside knew exactly where to go. Jess is fortunate that Gloria has a gay brother.

When Jess (and the reader) meets Butch Al for the first time, she and the readers are thinking, "Here is a butch." Al has the masculine clothes, strength of form, and aura of command of which Jess dreams. Al and her femme, Jacqueline, teach Jess how to live the life - how to wear a sport coat and tie like a butch, how and when to be tough and tender. They teach Jess about sex, from their two different perspectives, but it's no surprise when Jess's first attempt at seduction falls flat. It takes more than practical knowledge to feel worthy enough for sex.

Though the bars are havens, they are by no means safe havens. At any time, police will swoop in and perform a raid - not to charge them with crimes (cross-dressing was illegal in New York at that time, unless you wore three articles of clothing associated with your biological sex), but to obtain the bail money, usually paid by the femme lovers of the

butches. The treatment that butches and drag queens got in police stations in the 1960s is hard to read. It should be difficult to read about. "Police brutality" was not in the mainstream language; the general consensus was that if the police roughed you up, you must have had it coming. Because homosexuality and cross-dressing were illegal, it was unthinkable for a "pervert" to file a complaint against the police. Gays either had to take their beatings, or fight back and get beat worse; either way, a steady diet of beatings is corrosive to the spirit. In the scene at the police station, Al is beaten and, it is implied, raped one time too many. Her proud spirit collapses, and she rides home in silence with Jacqueline and Jess. Soon after, Al drops out of sight. Jess has seen both the power and the perils of "butchness." Will she be strong enough to handle what is to come? Jacqueline says that no one is strong enough, but butches like Al and Jess cannot be other than who they are - what will happen to them, has to happen.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After her experiences at Tifka's, life as a "normal" high school girl, living at home with her parents, becomes less and less tolerable to Jess. She spends most of her time after school at her friend Barbara's home. Jess meets Barbara in the girls' room for a smoke when Mrs. Antionette, one of the teachers, busts the girls' room. Jess escapes through the door and runs to the football field where she is trapped and gang raped by the football players who also verbally assault her with anti-Semitic and anti-lesbian taunts.

Jess decides to quit high school, packs her suits and ties in two pillowcases and writes a farewell letter to her parents. On her first night on her own, Jess tries to sleep in the bus station, but the cops harass her so she goes to a bar called Abba's which is like Tifka's but the bartender won't serve Jess without ID. Jess finds a place to stay, thanks to a butch named Toni and her girlfriend Betty. Jess is grateful for this vital assistance, but wishes she were staying with Butch Al and Jacqueline.

Chapter 4 Analysis

We have all heard the old adage, "You can't solve your problems by running away." In this case, running away might have saved Jess's life. If she had stayed at school, she would have probably been raped again. If she had stayed at home, her parents may have found out about her double life and sent her back to the mental ward. The fact is that Jess is safer on her own at nearly sixteen than in the supposedly "safe" havens of home and school.

Today's readers may be startled to see sixteen-year-old Jess working by day and sleeping in the bus station at night (until Betty and Toni offer her their couch). It was not uncommon for people to leave home before age eighteen, jumping on the fast track to survival. Even though the rape has scarred her inside, Jess has grit and determination that young people today, snug at home in front of a television or a computer, could find inspiration from.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Jess has been absorbed into working-class, gay life in Buffalo. She is now a regular at Abba's, where the butches, femmes, and drag queens recognize her on sight. She has a job and that important butch accessory - a powerful Norton motorcycle.

One night while leaving a club, Ed and Jess are accosted and frisked by two police officers. The cops lift up Ed's shirt and pull her binder down, exposing her breasts. Jess is outraged at this violation and she and Ed go after the cops with gusto and end up bloodied in the alley. They have two matching gashes over their right eyebrows, which makes them the hit at the bar when they're able to come back. But this is the first severe beating Jess has received from the police, and it makes her realize just how vulnerable she really is.

A short time later the cops make quick, brutal arrests at a drag variety show. At the police station, the cops pull Jess out of the holding cell first. They taunt her and yank at her clothing. Jess is severely beaten when she refuses to perform fellatio on an officer. Jess is then dragged to a befouled toilet where her head is shoved in. Jess throws up and is then cuffed to a desk and raped in both orifices.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter shows what is best and what is worst about Jess's life at this time. She has been accepted as one of the butches, and she joins a group that will sustain her for the rest of the decade.

Where butches gather, so do drag queens. They are the butches' flip side; both groups have to go through the same crap every day. Jess cherishes the friendships she has with the queens and calls them "sisters." The scene at the drag variety show is delightful and funny, and Jess can't believe herself as she entertains the crowd as emcee.

The scene's abrupt turn jolts the reader. This is the first raid that Jess knows she will be treated like any other butch. But neither she nor we are prepared for what happens at the station. Here we see the real tragedy of rape: not so much the act itself but the fact that you are just a thing to your assailants. The cops act like little boys with a rubber ball - ha-ha if it lands into the toilet with the poop. Jess, like many other people who live through ugly events, tries to think of something else, something far away from what is going on now. Denial, at the moment of trauma, can be a form of survival.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

While Jess works at a bar, Toni bursts in, drunk. She thinks that Jess is having an affair with Betty. Jess refuses to fight Toni; she is grateful for being allowed to stay in her home. But Toni abruptly withdraws Jess's welcome. All Jess can do is pack her pillowcases and look for a new home. Angie, one of the pros who is a regular at the bar, offers Jess a place to stay for the night. Angie suggests that Jess get a job at a factory - not in order to grow up, but to stay young. Hanging out at the bars too much will age a person fast.

Angie sees that something awful has happened to Jess. Angie embraces Jess, and Jess feels her emotions come out without words. This is only the start of something larger. Tonight, Jess loses her butch virginity. Angie says it is okay for a butch to ask for what she needs from her femme, that a butch doesn't always have to be stone. Jess understands, but this is another one of those lessons that is harder to practice than it is to preach.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This is the chapter where Jess really loses her virginity - the rapes on the football field and at the police station do not count, for neither of those experiences touched her as a sexual being. The scene is graphic and may be uncomfortable for some readers. Even those who fully support gay rights may not want to think about two women in bed. Yet this scene has a place in this book. How a person expresses oneself with lovers is vital to who that person is. Jess is inexperienced, yet is able to give Angie pleasure. But she is already so stone that it inhibits her own excitement. Throughout the book, it's not clear if Jess ever has an orgasm. The pleasure for the one who wears the dildo is in the partner's joy.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Jess learns the tricks and traumas of factory work. Friendship among coworkers is wary but when camaraderie is present, it's the best part of the day. Workers come in early in order to have communal coffee and rolls before the whistle blows. They talk to each other as much as they can outside the foreman's notice, to prove that the factory only rented their hands and not their minds.

One day Jess joins in a morning song with some of the other women. Jess is terminated before lunch and wonders if this has anything to do with her singing. Management doesn't like a unified workforce. Jess walks home, thinking that all she has to look forward to is lame holiday specials on television. But Muriel, Yvonne, and the other women of the factory come by with food, gifts, and an invitation to a party. The end of the job doesn't always mean the end of the group.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter takes the reader inside the society of a factory of the mid-1960s.

Those who work on the outside have to face the cold for nearly half the year. Frostbite eats away at the tops of exposed ears, at fingers and thumbs. This is the price paid for this job. But if you're lucky enough to have a job, you hold on to it tenaciously, for not working is death.

The factory, on its face, is a dehumanizing environment. It is noisy; the conveyor belts don't waste time, and you've got to be quick. You are nothing but a pair of hands to the management, and if they decide they don't want yours anymore, hands are a dime a dozen out there. It's in management's best interest to keep the workers powerless, and that means keeping them out of the union, whether by discouraging workplace friendships or giving out pink slips just before the 90-day requirement for union membership. The power to strike is important leverage.

If you are lucky, you will have a job in which your mind is at least as valuable as your hands. Barring that, you will need your imagination and your co-workers to pull you through.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Jess usually works in the trimming and folding division at a bindery, where paper is cut and collated for booklets. One day, the foreman Jack takes her off that task in order to learn how to use the folding machine. Duffy, the chief shop steward, pulls Jess aside and tells her the real reason she's being considered for this Grade Five job is that Jack is collaborating with Jim Boney in order to keep the job from Leroy, a black worker, who is the only man in the bindery still stuck at Grade Four - and it's not because of his qualifications.

Jess feels hurt; she knows she deserves this job, too. Duffy convinces her to let Leroy have this one, and he will find another Grade Five job for her when it's available. Union solidarity is more important than ever now. The union's contract with the bindery will expire in a couple months, and worker dissension just puts management in a stronger position. Duffy also promises to get the butches into the union meetings; at the union hall, they are not allowed to go upstairs to attend the meetings, because "that's the way it is." (page 83)

Chapter 8 Analysis

Jess receives a lesson in union solidarity from Duffy. Of course she wants to advance and make herself and the butches proud, but Leroy is a reminder that other people need to have their day - people whose difference can't be covered just by changing clothes. We also get to see that not all masculine-looking women, or "he-shes," fall into the category of butch. Life is hard for any woman who does not appear feminine enough, who doesn't come close to looking like the pink-faced, red-lipped, tiny-waisted dolls thrown out in the media as examples of how women should look.

The men-versus-women softball game is a situation right out of a comedy. The stakes, however, are more than a glove and a kiss. Both sides play for respect, the most important public currency where earnings are relatively low. When Jess wins Boney's glove, it's sweet revenge - one of the small upbeat moments in the book.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

One day Jess is injured on the die cutter machine and after being treated at the hospital, Duffy tells her that she has not lost her finger. Jess gets a prescription for painkillers and Duffy takes her home.

When Jess talks to Duffy next, he says that Jack set her up to be injured. He had the safety device removed and provided inaccurate instructions. Once again, someone has used his power to control her life. Duffy also says he was enraged at the way the doctors talked to Jess - as if she were a freak with no humanity. Jess is amazed that a straight man would stand up for her.

Jess learns that Jan and Edna are no longer together, and that it's Jan's fault. Jan just could not let Edna touch her like a lover. If she could see Edna again, Jan would beg to have her back, but she doesn't know how she can break down the stone inside her. Jess knows how that feels. She fears that her own lovers would leave for the same reason. Suddenly, a figure comes into the bar - a large, flat-chested, leather-jacketed woman with riding gloves and helmet. This is Rocco, a butch legend in Buffalo. Edna and Rocco used to be lovers before Edna met Jan. Jess wishes Edna would look at her the way Edna looks at Rocco. Jan said that Rocco is taking hormones, had her breasts removed and is passing as a man in public.

When the strike at the bindery is on, it's time for the union to stand up and try to keep the scabs out. They shout insults at the strikebreakers. The cops are there to make sure the scabs get into the bindery. When a scab senselessly strikes Frankie with a blackjack, Jan hits him over the head with her picket sign. The cops grab her, as well as three of the workers who jump to her aid. They take them all to the police van. Jess panics; she knows what will happen to Jan at the police station. The strikers surround the police van and rock it back and forth forcing the police to release Jan and the three men.

The strike at the bindery is successful. Duffy asks Jess to bring all the butches from the plant to vote at the ratification meeting. But Grant has interesting news: The steel plant must hire fifty women. How could the butches pass up this opportunity? Steel is a solid job, and its union is powerful. Duffy thinks it's a huge mistake for the women to leave. The steel plant has to hire the women, he says, but they don't have to keep them for the ninety days it takes to get into the union.

The butches wait on a long cold night to be among the first fifty to get in the steel plant. On the first day of work, the foreman gives the women shovels and points to some railroad tracks. Their job is to shovel the snow off miles of tracks. Jess and Jan quit immediately. In the morning, a shamefaced Jess stands outside the bindery and waits for Duffy to arrive. She tells him he was right about the steel plant.

Jess feels guilty about dating Edna and being friends with Jan at the same time, even though she didn't steal Edna away from Jan. Eventually, she tells Edna that it doesn't feel right between them, not because Edna is older, as Edna had feared, but because Jess feels she must mature before she is ready to be Edna's lover, and she doesn't want to hurt Jan in any way. Edna says she sees the same loyalty and honor in Jess that she saw in Jan and Rocco. They part with a kiss.

Chapter 9 Analysis

In Rocco, Jess gets her first glimpse of a person who lives in the netherworld between the sexes. Rocco has moved beyond being a regular masculine female, but is not a man because she lacks the supremacy and unconscious sense of entitlement that goes along with physical maleness. Rocco still gets attacked like any other butch, and she misses the gentle touch of a femme that makes her feel human again.

Jess feels love for Rocco - not sexual love, but the love for an idol, someone who lives the life you imagine for yourself, if everything works out right. Jess sees a possible future for herself in Rocco.

The strike scene shows that factories could literally be war zones. The anger aimed at the scabs is virulent - understandably so because they neutralize the effectiveness of the strike. This book is solidly pro-union, and scabbing is an unmitigated wrong. The readers do not see what makes a person risk crossing a picket line and have to wonder if the scabs feel they have no choice if they want to stay alive and support their families.

Some readers may think the butches made a foolish choice by leaving the bindery and its union to take a chance at working at a steel plant. This proves the complete unpredictability of the future. Life is not a morality play - sometimes, one really doesn't know if s/he made the right choice until the consequences ride in, which may take years.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Ed invites Jess to have breakfast with her and Darlene at a diner popular with butches, drag queens, and pros. Among the crowd, Jess sees a beautiful pro, Milli, who flirts with Jess who offers Milli a brown leather jacket, and they take a ride together, which translates as butch-femme courtship. Milli is a tough stone pro, a thrilling match for Jess's own strength.

Milli stops working the streets, while Jess takes a job at a pipe factory. When Jess loses that job, Milli talks about taking a job dancing at a nightclub. Jess is furious and Milli's responds that nobody tells her how to run her life. Jess counters that Milli is just waiting for her to say one wrong thing about her being a pro so Milli will have an excuse to leave. Milli says that stone pros and butches fit together like puzzle pieces; the world has hurt them the same, and butches are tender in bed in ways that most men are not.

When Milli comes home on a Sunday morning with a swollen face and split lip, Jess is distraught. Milli says that when Jess said she would protect her from danger, it's what anyone in love would say or want to hear. But in the real world, butches and pros can't protect each other no matter what they promise. After a brutal fight, Jess feels she must go to Milli and apologize, even if it means entering the Pink Pussy Kat club. Jess is amazed that Milli dances nude in a cage. But she also knows that coming here was the mistake that will tear her and Milli apart for good. When Milli comes home, she is furious with Jess and packs her bags, but not because Jess came into the club. They were a good couple, but sooner or later they would destroy what was good about them.

Chapter 10 Analysis

What brings butches and pros together—the wounding they both get from the world—is also what tears them apart. People who are battered and/or molested in childhood and young adulthood have an uphill battle in trusting themselves and their lovers. They want their lovers to heal them, but they can't stand it when they get too close.

Why is it a mistake for Jess to go into the Pink Pussy Kat club? That is a question to think about. Perhaps it's because Milli doesn't want her to see her this way; she feels that Jess is just waiting to bust her for once being a pro. Perhaps it's because Jess is invading Milli's other world. Perhaps it's because Jess gets just as aroused as the men in the club. The book is filled with characters making unintentional social errors. It's hard enough figuring out how to make yourself happy, much less someone else - even someone you think you know.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

One day Jess finds Ed at her home dressed for a fine occasion. Ed informs Jess that Butch Ro, the elder's elder in the butch community, has passed away and her funeral is today. All of the old butches are wearing dresses for the occasion to comply with Ro's last wishes. But Ed is not going to and Jess can't because she doesn't even own a dress.

Later at a local diner, Ed and Jess get the cold shoulder from the older butches, who had changed back into their regular clothing. Ro's femme Alice stops at Ed and Jess's table. Despite her own grief, she patiently explains that the old butches thought that Ed and Jess should have been willing to wear dresses, if only to show respect to Ro. It will be a long time before either of them will be welcome around the old butches.

Chapter 11 Analysis

We get a glimpse of the solidarity of the old butch community. Butch Ro is the elder of all elders, someone who was fighting the fight before Jess was even born. It's a poignant scene when the "old bulls" put on their dresses for Ro. This is what friends do for each other. This scene also shows how family, who is often dismayed and outraged at how a butch lives her life, takes back control when she is in no position to fight back. The desires of Ro's family, who never understood her, supersede the needs of those whom she loved best.

Ed is too set in her ways to wear a dress, and Jess doesn't own one and has no time to find one before the viewing, even if she wanted to wear it. The old butches, especially Jan, see this as youthful insensitivity and give Jess and Ed the cold shoulder for a while. It's another example of characters making a misstep that hurts people they care about. Unfortunately, that is inevitable for all of us. All we can do is forgive ourselves, express remorse, learn our lesson, and be forgiving when it happens to us.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Jess and Jan find new jobs at a cannery where Jess spots a striking woman. Jess discovers that her name is Theresa and she starts each day eager for a glimpse of her. Theresa is fired for kicking the superintendent in the shins for trying to grab her breasts. Jess is proud that Theresa defended herself but despondent that she is no longer in the factory.

One day Theresa shows up at Abba's. Jess is overjoyed but plays it cool. Jess and Theresa soon move in together and Jess learns how to be a responsible partner - not only paying bills and cleaning , but saying "I'm sorry" and allowing Theresa to tend to her wounded parts. When they have been together almost two years, Jess buys Theresa a gold ring with a diamond and two rubies.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Jess knows she has found a good woman in Theresa. She wants to be a good lover for Theresa, which involves more than what she does in bed. She is growing up, but still, she can't speak up when she's in pain. Her emotions are trapped because they have been beaten back into her heart and now hide behind stone. Fortunately, Theresa is patient and doesn't pressure Jess into a self-disclosure for which she is not ready. This is a couple who love each other, respect each other, and accept each other at the place they are at now. What they can't do is protect each other from hurt - Theresa can't protect Jess from beatings, and Jess can't protect Theresa from feeling helpless about it. One of the hardest lessons there is to learn is that one can't protect the people one loves all of the time. That is one of the ways love hurts.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

After being arrested in a bar, Jess is severely beaten and drifts in and out of consciousness waiting for Theresa to come pick her up. At home, Theresa gives Jess a bubble bath and clean clothes as usual. What is worse than the physical pain is remembering the horror on Theresa's face. It is easier for Jess to hold in her own pain than to witness Theresa's.

Theresa becomes more involved with campus politics. She says she is learning so much about being a woman. Jess says she hasn't given women's issues a thought because she's a butch. Theresa says that all women could learn from feminism, namely, how to treat each other better.

Jess has been out of work for quite some time, and her unemployment insurance is about to run out. Then Theresa loses her job at the university. Money is short and so are their tempers. When Jess goes to the temp agency, the men blame her and women like her for stealing their jobs.

At the bar, Grant tells about a butch, Ginni, who's on the sex-change program and is now Jimmy. Ed says that she has started taking male hormones. When Jess comes home and tells Theresa what the butches talked about - and that she is considering taking male hormones - Theresa doesn't know what to say. Finally, Theresa blows up; she loves Jess because she's a woman, too. If Jess takes hormones, the woman Theresa loves will go away. Jess says she doesn't know what else to do.

Theresa gives her the real reason she's afraid of Jess taking hormones - she has come too far in accepting her own desires, in being happy to walk down the street arm-in-arm with Jess, to have Jess turn into an ersatz man. Jess pleads that she needs Theresa. But they're in an impossible situation; Jess can't survive unless she changes, and Theresa can't live with Jess after she does. Theresa asks Jess to leave.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The end of the 1960s brings the explosion of the cover that has held back seething rage - of blacks, of women, of gays. Ready or not, liberation is here. Jess is ready to be liberated, too, liberated from other people's pointed fingers, liberated from that tiresome question "Are you a man or a woman?" She makes the most important decision in her life (so far) - she's going to take male hormones so that the face she presents to the world is completely male.

Economic hardships and feminist politics are painting butches into a corner. The tough factory jobs that were their bread-and-butter are disappearing as America mutates from a manufacturing to a service economy. There's no place for the butches in service jobs,

where appearance is at least as important as skill. They can't be "real" women so the only place they can go is to the other side.

This chapter shows the agonizing choice between doing what you think is best for yourself and changing to such a degree that you're no longer the person with whom your partner fell in love. Jess can no longer live as just a masculine woman. Theresa cannot live with someone who society thinks is a man. The rock has collided with the hard place, and it's impossible to move on from that point. Jess's choice means a devastating sacrifice - but the stakes are nothing less than her own life.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

The next morning, Jess sees Gloria, her friend from her first job. Gloria has two young children now, Kim and Scotty. Gloria offers Jess a place to stay until she can find a new apartment. The children look upon her with curiosity. At a pizza shop, Jess is harrassed by some jocks and she is forced to abandon her Norton and start running. When she returns to the parking lot, the Norton is totally destroyed. Jess has to take the bus to Gloria's. Gloria allows her to make a call to Ed and Ed says that Darlene has left her and taken the car, as a gift from Ed.

Jess and Grant go together to the doctor who prescribes hormones. To "celebrate" this life-changing decision, the two go out for drinks. Grant asks a question that Jess had never thought of: Will any woman want to go out with them after the hormone treatment? Grant says her life is a mess, but she has nowhere else to turn. Cryptically, she says that she's not a real butch - what that means, Jess doesn't know. She wonders if Grant is taking the hormones to prove otherwise.

When she is at home alone, Jess stares hard at the syringes. She is afraid to push the needles underneath her flesh. She is afraid that Grant is right; she remembers the tender warmth of Theresa's arms. Then Jess grows angry. This is her decision, and hers alone. Jess injects the hormone. It isn't as scary as she thought it would be. Maybe this is the first step that will let her just live for once and not have to fight for the right to exist every day.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Children react to Jess in different ways - either with cruelty born of fear of difference or with innocent curiosity. Kim and Scotty fall into the latter category. They ask questions about what they see. Jess answers truthfully, but in a way that children can understand. She compares herself to the endangered eagle, flying to someplace that's safe - giving them the hope that she will return when the time is right. The verses from the book Jess reads to Kim and Scotty at the end of the chapter give a voice to her own situation. Where is she going? Where can she go that is safe?

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Jess looks in the mirror one spring morning and sees stubble sprouting on her face. Her body is losing feminine curves and gaining muscle. This is the body she wanted to have before puberty - except for her breasts. Now she can afford breast-reduction surgery. Jess braves a visit to a barbershop out of her normal neighborhood. When the barber calls her "sir," she knows she has passed.

Jess sees Gloria shopping with Kim and Scotty. Gloria pulls Kim and Scotty closer to her, as if Jess were a monster. She calls Jess "sick" and gets away from her as fast as she can, despite the children wanting to see Jess again.

Jess buys a new Harley Sportster and drives up near the Peace Bridge to Canada. She looks at her driver's license with the sex labeled "Female." How in the world can she use this license and risk showing it to an officer? How in the world can she have it renewed with "Male"? How can she open a checking account without accurate ID?

Jess grows a beard that she can effectively hide herself behind in public. She goes in for her breast-reduction surgery. The doctor she has made an appointment with isn't there, and the staff is unhelpful at best and hostile at worst; they do not approve of this doctor's arrangements with "you people." After the surgery, Jess doesn't want to be in this place another minute. She goes home with a handful of Darvon, thanks to one sympathetic nurse.

Chapter 15 Analysis

It's ironic that Gloria, who had been so understanding of her brother's cross-dressing years ago, recoils at the sight of Jess after the hormones take effect and no longer sees her as a fit companion to her children. Of course, a man putting on a dress is a little different from a woman who takes male hormones and has her breast tissue removed. It's like the contributions of the hen and the pig to the bacon-and-egg breakfast: one is involved, the other is committed.

Jess's dilemma regarding her driver's license is a familiar one to the transgendered. What box should she check - the box that matches what she has between her legs, or the one that matches her face? How can a person with a beard explain a birth certificate that says "Female"? Where is the box for someone like Jess on a government form?

Most of the attendants in the doctor's office where Jess has her breast-reduction surgery treat her like a freak. Sadly, this is what transgendered people often go through when they go for medical treatment. Medical professionals treat men one way, women another: when they see someone who doesn't fit neatly into one category or another, or

if they ask for treatment having to do with sex change, they feel free to express their loathing.

Jess sees herself in the book that Ed gave her - she is "two warring ideals in one. . . body" (page 178). She doesn't know if she will have the "dogged strength" to keep herself from tearing apart. Ed, one of the strongest and smartest butches she knew, didn't have it.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Jess is riding on a bus filled with temp laborers. One of the men on board, Ben, is a regular, just like Jess. Ben invites Jess for a drink after work and Jess agrees. Ben starts opens up about his personal life—caring for a daughter with Down Syndrome, being arrested for stealing a car in his youth, ending up in jail at the mercy of brutal guards.

Jess is grateful for the gift of Ben's intimacy. She wishes she could open up to him the same way. Years of societal abuse have made the walls surrounding her heart too tall to climb, from inside or out. How can she tell Ben her one great secret - she's not a man? All Jess can say about herself is "There's nothing to tell" (page 185).

Jess notices Annie, a waitress at the coffee shop near her work, and asks Annie for a date. For the first time, she has public approval for her courtship. Of course, the public sees a man with a woman and so does Annie. Their first date takes place at Annie's home because the babysitter of Annie's young daughter, Kathy, is sick. When Kathy is in bed, Annie says that she can't quite figure Jess out, and "a man you can't figure out is a dangerous man" (page 189). Jess says she's not dangerous, just complicated. All she wants is some comfort. So does Annie. In the morning, Annie invites Jess to attend her sister's wedding. Jess agrees, picking Annie up on her Harley. At the reception, all goes well, until Annie notices a man she's familiar with and calls him a "fag." According to Annie, "queers" molest children. Jess says that a straight man would be more likely to molest Kathy. Fueled by champagne, Annie says that her ex-husband molested Kathy, so she's not letting any "funny men" near her daughter. Jess knows that she and Annie can go no further.

Chapter 16 Analysis

This chapter reveals the price Jess pays for crossing into outer manhood. People she meets for the first time see the man called "Jesse," not the complex past that made her who she is. Ben is a decent man who sees in Jess a kindred wounded soul. It hurts Jess when she cannot tell him her greatest secret the way he told his. To her, it's not fair. Would Ben be understanding if he knew he had been talking to a woman? Would he be able to keep her secret from others? It's true that the fewer people who know a secret, the safer it is.

Annie reminds Jess a little of the "pro" femmes she has known, like Milli - tough and flirtatious, surviving with an iron grip. Unfortunately, heterosexuals who understand gays are a rare breed in the mid-1970s. Words like "fag" and "queer" fall casually and contemptuously from the straight mouth, and gay men are the moral equivalent of child

molesters. This is the only attitude Annie has been taught, and it can't be Jess who shows her otherwise.

Interestingly, Jess says, "We aren't all the same" (page 195). Is this a printing error, or did Jess accidentally say "we" instead of "they"? Either way, Annie doesn't notice.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Jess is at work again and fits in with the men so much that she can go into the men's bathroom and locker room without comment. Instead of hanging a pin-up of a woman in her locker, Jess has a magazine ad for the Norton she used to ride.

Bolt says to Jess that a new worker knows Jess - Frankie, who was with Jess at the bindery. Jess panics until Bolt says that Frankie called her a "good union man." This factory is non-union, but the employees want that to change, and soon. The wages are low compared to union factories; overtime is not paid, and conditions are hazardous, both from the ill-maintained machines and the toxic fumes. When Jess meets up with Frankie again, all is well until Frankie reveals that her new girlfriend is Johnny, another butch who worked at the bindery. Jess can't believe it. How can two butches be romantically involved?

After a worker named George is severely injured on a forklift with faulty brakes, which Bolt had warned management about, it's time for a union organizing meeting. Jess is surprised to see Duffy at the meeting; he is the one who will organize the computer plant workers. The meeting goes promisingly, until Duffy points out Jess and says, "She's proved she's for the union 100 percent" (page 206). That kills her job at this factory.

Chapter 17 Analysis

This chapter shows that conditions for factory workers have not gotten much better in the 1970s. New, high-tech industries bring new problems, including the fumes from chemicals that have not been used before and whose long-term effect on human health has not been thoroughly researched. This is not a union factory, which is increasingly becoming the norm all across America. The workers are exposed to danger, both in dangerous fumes and with badly-maintained equipment. They work on weekends, but get days off during the week, not for compassionate reasons, but to avoid paying overtime at time-and-a-half. Salaries can vary depending on how much the foreman likes you.

Duffy is glad to see Jess, a familiar face that he can count on. But he doesn't know that she is presenting herself to everyone else as someone other than the Jess he knew. When Duffy uses the pronoun "she," it blows her cover. We know Duffy didn't intend to ruin Jess's future at this plant. But once again, Jess has lost control over what happens to her. As she says to Duffy before she leaves, "Which bathroom you think I'm going to use on Monday?" (page 207).

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

One day, Jess sees Edna, Butch Jan's lover, working as a cashier. It has been about twelve years since Jess saw Edna. Then, Jess thought she was too young to be a decent lover to Edna. They meet outside the supermarket when Edna's shift is over and Jess and Edna ride together to the zoo. Jess is so happy to share her motorcycle with a femme again. At the zoo, Edna tells Jess that she is not seeing anyone now. They kiss and make a date for next Friday night.

On their date, Edna asks Jess how it feels to pass as a man. Jess says it's nice to have people look at her as a real person instead of a freak. But passing has also made her invisible; it has robbed her of her history. Edna understands, because she was Rocco's former lover. Edna says that the femmes don't see butches as a homogenous group. Edna calls Jess and Rocco "granite" butches - the ones who are hardest on the outside are also the ones with the most fragile hearts. Edna gives Jess Rocco's leather motorcycle jacket - "armor" for protection. But Rocco's jacket can't protect Jess from falling in love with Edna again. Edna loves Jess, too, but she cannot consummate the relationship, and she has no words to tell Jess why. Jess thinks this is a rejection of her, but Edna says no. The problem is inside her, says Edna, and not even a butch's strength can fix it.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Edna is Jess's last connection to her old group of friends. Years ago, Jess said goodbye to the possibility of love with Edna, saying that she needed to mature first. Jess has matured - in a way that she never imagined - but this time it's Edna who's standing at the edge. Edna is another lover who Jess cannot rescue.

Edna does give wisdom that Jess will remember - butches are not a monolithic group, but have all kinds of personalities and temperaments. Jess doesn't have to count herself out as a butch because of her change. Also, everyone is searching for the answers to life - even legends like Rocco. When we are in awe of certain individuals, it's easy to forget that they struggle with the same issues we do, and that we're really not so different from them.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Jess sees Theresa and her new lover at Kmart. Jess is furious with this butch she does not know. She needs Theresa's love more than any rival could. But going back to Theresa means exactly that - going back. Jess sees that she and Theresa were not on equal terms: she had been the center of Theresa's life, but Theresa had been her whole life. She had needed Theresa so much - but she couldn't give Theresa what she wanted most, a rope to climb the fortress to her heart.

Change happens slowly after Jess stops taking hormones. Jess's face is smooth again like a woman's. She has rounded hips like a woman's. But she also has the flat chest and the deep voice of a man; the voice is something that doesn't come back as it was. She can no longer pass as one gender or the other; she has entered the world of difference for good. Other people don't know what to think.

Jess no longer has a good reason to remain in Buffalo. Her friends have either died or have left her life under bad circumstances. She can find work easily in Manhattan. She will also have anonymity - no one will know who she had been before; the face and body she presents now is all New York City will see. But when no one knows you, no one will pick you up if you fall. It takes the theft of her Harley to convince Jess that she has had it with Buffalo. She hops on an Amtrak train and takes it all the way to New York City.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Jess's decision to stop taking hormones is equally as important as her choice to take them. She knew what would happen after she injected the hormones but not what will happen after she stops.

Her beard disappears and her menstrual cycle returns. But her voice remains deeper than the average woman's - and her breasts are lost to surgery. Jess will live the rest of her life with the characteristics of both man and woman; she is now truly in between the genders.

Jess has spent her whole life trying to answer the question "Are you male or female?" Now she wants to get to the point where it doesn't matter. This is her first step toward coming out from under the thumb of oppression. Not a he, not a she, not a he-she, not an "it" - she doesn't know yet what she will be, but she knows she will be real.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Jess arrives in New York City with \$600 in her pocket, and that will have to get her an apartment, which, she soon realizes, is an overwhelming task. Needing shelter for the night, Jess goes to an all-night movie theater on 42nd Street. The next morning, Jess goes to an apartment rental agency, which finds her an apartment for \$250 a month, plus a security deposit and a finder's fee. The apartment turns out to be a single room—no stove, refrigerator, running water or a door that locks. When she hears footsteps pause outside her door, she knows she can't spend the night in her own apartment.

In order to earn enough to get out of her lockless room, Jess holds two jobs at a time. She washes her shirts at Grand Central Station just like the homeless. Jess moves into a new apartment, this one with a kitchen and locking doors. In time, she paints the walls and sands the floors, and puts yellow calico curtains on the windows, just like the kind Betty had. On the mantle, she adds a china kitten that was a gift from Milli, as well as the ring that Theresa had given her. She finds a couch, a chair, a bed, and a rug. She puts down roots in this apartment.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Moving to New York City is like coming of age all over again. Jess reaches into her past for survival skills: the all-night movie theater serves the same purpose that the bus station did when she was a teenager. This time, however, she doesn't have an Abba's to turn to. She doesn't have anybody here except herself.

Buffalo was cold and dull. New York City is nasty, at least, the part where Jess ends up in. People just want her to shut up and stay out of their way; they're too busy trying to stay afloat themselves. Ironic

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Jess puts her fledgling typesetting skills to work. New York teems with typesetting shops, and the shift that pays best is the night shift. Jess's skills grow along with her salary. In the summer, the shops cut back on their workforce, but Jess still gets a substantial unemployment check. She has money in her pocket and an attractive place to live, but she is lonelier than ever.

As Jess comes home from working out at her gym late at night, she sees water in the street and the spinning red lights of fire engines. An apartment building has become a tower of flames - her apartment building. Everything inside - the ring Theresa gave her, Milli's silly china kitten, the book by DuBois that Ed had signed, Jess's wallet, last paycheck, and the only photo of Theresa she has left - is gone.

Back on the street, worrying over the hard work needed to start all over again, Jess sits on a bench in Washington Square Park. She sees a man juggling torches and wonders what it would be like to have a skill with no practical value, something you did just because of the joy it brought. A man standing next to Jess comments on the performance without words. He is deaf. Jess keeps an eye on him as he juggles imaginary bowling balls, his gestures creating the form of the balls. Jess laughs out loud and cries as well. Her emotions are thawing at last.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Once Jess no longer worries about money and shelter, she can now see the good side of New York City. She finds bookstores with tomes that would be hard to find in Buffalo. Other culture is easy to find, too - classical music rises from the instruments of street musicians. In the anonymity of the big city, Jess is free to explore her intellect away from the influence of working-class peer pressure, which probably would have called this "fancy-ass." Life is more than going to the bar every weekend and drinking beer.

When Jess loses her apartment and everything in it to the fire, it's not just things she loses, it's her history, the remnants of her life in Buffalo, the new beginning she's making in Manhattan. This is why some people are afraid of caring about places, things and people too much; it hurts so much if they are lost.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Jess finds a one-bedroom apartment although she doesn't have the heart to clean it or put real furniture in it. A month after she moves in, Jess finally sees her neighbor, a woman with bright red hair, a severely bruised face and an Adam's apple. The neighbor, Ruth, is prickly at first. When Jess tries to help her carry her groceries, Ruth retorts with, "Where I come from, men don't reward women for pretending to be helpless." (page 248)

Inside Ruth's neat, painting-filled apartment - watercolors of dainty flowers - Ruth tells Jess that she was born in Vine Valley, grape country, about two miles from Buffalo. Knowing Ruth is nearby brings Jess back to life. Once again, she seeks out small good things, such as fresh fruit and jelly and music, this time a Miles Davis concert tape for Ruth. In turn, Ruth gives Jess home cooking and salad tossed with nasturtium flowers. Each of them has found a kindred spirit - a mirror image, reversed yet the same.

In the real world, it is dangerous for Jess and Ruth to be seen in public together, because two of their kind are "double the trouble" according to Ruth. Jess asks why change for them is not coming quickly enough. Ruth reminds her that not too long ago, black people risked their lives for simple rights, such as sitting at a lunch counter. It is not too late for people of their kind, too.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Jess sees bi-gendered people all around New York City. They notice each other but are still afraid to connect - they are a tribe seeking a place to come together. It's a miracle that Jess finds herself living next door to a member of this dispersed tribe.

It's painful to read as Ruth rebuffs Jess's offers of connection. We've all met people who we knew we wanted to connect to at once, people who we think can show us the way to live. Jess struggles to keep her need in check - she wants to be worthy of Ruth's respect.

Ruth decides to let Jess into her life because Jess is complicated. It's often the qualities we don't see in ourselves that make us attractive to others. We often are painfully aware of our faults and blind to our virtues. That's what friends are for - to help us see ourselves as we are.

Food is an important element in this chapter. When we are struggling, when we have other things on our mind, when we do too much, the taste and quality of food falls down our priority list. We forget to eat, or mindlessly stuff fast food into our mouths, by ourselves. That is why Jess cries when she tastes Ruth's salad; this is real nourishment;

this is friendship in a bowl. Sometimes, we need to pause to cook, to find new recipes and share them with those we love.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

It is winter, and Jess stands on the subway platform when three teenage boys, high on drugs and looking for a fight, enter the subway station. Jess turns the keys in her hand into a spiked weapon. She has had enough of powerlessness. If these boys attack her, she is going to do her damndest to take them down with her. She manages to strike two of the boys before one of them hits her, breaking her jaw. Jess gets on the train, horrifying the other riders with her blood-saturated face and stops at St. Vincent's Hospital, inventing an identity as a man with insurance so she will be treated right away. A doctor sews Jess's broken jaw shut with wire, rendering her unable to speak. A nurse says that Jess should stay overnight for observation, and also that she needs to file a crime report as required by law. Jess fears that the police will not only discover that she is uninsured, but that she is a gender outlaw. Jess escapes the emergency room and takes a cab home.

Ruth is horrified and cries when she sees Jess's condition. This is why she had been reluctant to bring Jess into her life because she can ignore her own bruises, but not those of someone she cares about.

Jess remains at Ruth's apartment for days, slipping in and out of consciousness. Ruth comes in and says she has made a terrible mistake. She called Jess's employers to inform that Jess is incapacitated, but used the personal pronoun "she" - just as Duffy did in the 1970s. But it doesn't matter now. Jess asks for a pen and paper and writes this message to Ruth: Thank you for your love. When Jess is able to work again, it is a month and a half until Christmas, and the print shops around town hum with activity. By day, she works out in the gym, expressing her silent rage. For most of her life, fear has kept her mouth shut as surely as the metal wires are doing now.

Jess has earned enough money before the holidays to buy Ruth a special gift - a new sewing machine. She cuts the wires in her jaw by herself. On Christmas Eve, Jess goes to Ruth's and Ruth's drag friends, Tanya and Esperanza, are there, too. Tanya flirts with Jess. Ruth is quite pleased with Jess's gift and has two of her own for Jess - a book about gay American history, which discusses transgender history as well, and a painting of Jess looking up at the stars.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The encounter in the subway is a turning point in Jess's attitude toward street attacks. She is going to fight back, to send a message to them and herself. She does not have to accept this as part of her life.

When her jaw is wired shut, it's a physical embodiment of the way society has shut her mouth. Silence does not protect her; it never has. Keeping suffering hidden within the body is a kind of slow death.

It's a great blessing that Jess has Ruth to help her at this time, instead of having to go home alone. Ruth is there with TLC (tender loving care), and her stories of growing up in the verdant country of Vine Valley keep Jess connected to life. This scene, and the one that follows around the Christmas tree, makes the reader wish for neighbors like Ruth, and her friends Tanya and Esperanza. This is a community based on bonding, education, and self-love, unlike the bars back in Buffalo, where an air of sadness lingered with the smell of alcohol. This is what Jess has been searching for all her life.

Ruth makes the same inadvertent error Duffy made, referring to Jess as "she" to an employer who didn't know her true sex. But Jess is so glad to have Ruth in her life that it doesn't matter. At that moment, she also forgives Duffy. Life is too short to have the little things stand in the way of friendship.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

One day, when Jess returns home, Ruth reveals a surprise - she has painted the ceiling of Jess's bedroom the color of the night sky, with bright stars and the silhouettes of trees. The edges of the ceiling-painting are lighter. Jess wonders if this sky is supposed to be dawn or dusk. Ruth says, "It's neither. It's both" (page 269) - words that can also describe Ruth and Jess themselves.

Asking questions about the distant past gets Jess thinking about her own. She wants to find out what happened to Butch Al. She wants to see Kim and Scotty again, as she had promised. She wants to apologize to Frankie for being upset that she had a butch lover. "I always wanted all of us who were different to be the same," she admits (page 271). She wants to write a letter to Theresa that will express her feelings at last.

Jess calls Frankie to apologize. Frankie is going to be in Manhattan, so they plan to meet outside a lesbian bar in Sheridan Square, outside, because Jess isn't sure that she would be accepted in such an establishment now. When Jess and Frankie reunite, Jess asks what is going on with their old gang in Buffalo. Frankie says she sees Grant a lot, and Butch Jan has opened a flower shop. No sign of Theresa, but Frankie says that Duffy feels horrible about inadvertently sabotaging Jess's job at the computer parts factory. Jess asks Frankie for Duffy's phone number.

Jess says that Frankie taking a butch lover shocked her because butch-femme love was a beautiful thing that mainstream society did not honor. Frankie says that Grant taught her that she didn't have to prove her "butchness." It took a long time for her to accept her attraction to butches - just as some gays take years to accept their orientation in general.

Chapter 24 Analysis

This shows that assumptions, stereotypes, and intolerance are not limited to mainstream groups. Jess just couldn't see butches as lovers together - that was just unnatural; it didn't seem right. Ironically, Jess thought of Frankie and her butch lover the way many straight people think of gays in general. Fortunately, Jess learns in time that love doesn't always follow a formula; what is important is the connection between lovers, whoever they may be.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Jess plans to take a trip to Buffalo to get in touch with her past. She wants to take Ruth with her because Ruth's home is nearby but Ruth is reluctant to go home again. She has as many bad memories of her family as she does good, and she worries about how her family will react to Jess. Jess convinces Ruth to travel with her by saying, "Neither of us wrestle that hard with things we're not ready to take on" (page 278).

In Buffalo, Jess goes first to the apartment building where she and Theresa used to live. Theresa isn't there anymore. Jess calls up Gloria, hoping to keep her promise to Kim and Scotty. But once Jess says her name, Gloria warns her to stay away from her children. Her next stop is the flower shop that Butch Jan owns. She is startled to find Edna working behind the counter. She feels a pang of jealousy; it's obvious that Edna and Jan are lovers again. Jan is in the greenhouse, a little grayer. She recognizes Jess at once and gives her a warm greeting. Jess asks Jan if she knew what happened to Butch Al. Jan replies that Edna knows an old friend of Al's. She also invites Jess for drinks with what is left of the old gang.

Jess sees Edna and Jan, as well as Frankie and Grant. Jess asks Edna where Butch Al is now. Edna says that "some things are better left alone" (page 284). Jess is tired of other people taking away her power. She can't find Theresa, and Gloria is keeping her from Kim and Scotty. She will not leave without seeing Butch Al. Edna says that Al is in the asylum.

Posing as Al's nephew, Jess appears at the medieval-looking asylum. Al is seated in front of a window, white-haired and catatonic. When she uses the name "Butch Al," Al grabs her arm. "Don't bring me back," she warns. Jess sees that Butch Al has gone underground to protect herself from the world, only in a far more drastic way than Jess did. Jess tries not to upset Al too much, but does what she came here to do - to tell Butch Al how much she appreciates and loves her. When the visit is over, both are in tears. When Jess returns to the flower shop, she meets an upset Jan.

Chapter 25 Analysis

This is a poignant return home for Jess. She doesn't see all of the people she was hoping to see - Theresa has moved away, and Gloria is still keeping Kim and Scotty out of reach. They are probably in their teens at this point (their ages were not specified at their first appearance in the mid-1970s). We are left to wonder what impact Jess had on them - did they grow up with the same fear-driven attitudes of the rest of the working class, or did she teach them that "different" is not a synonym for "wrong?"

Most of the old gang in Buffalo has not changed much, especially Grant, who opines against punks the way she would have against hippies. Jess sees that the differences

between her and her old friends hardly matter now. These are the people she grew up with, and she will cherish them always.

Jess has unfinished business with Butch Al, too. When Jess had the encounter in the subway with the three boys, she was at that point so filled with other people's abuse that what they said didn't penetrate her. Other people's abuse has drowned Al. We never regret telling the important people in our lives what they have done for us.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Jess finds her voice at a gay pride rally where she says that as a "he-she," she wonders if she is welcome as part of the gay movement. "Couldn't the we be bigger?" she asks (page 296). If gays and the transgendered raised their voices, it would only make a bigger impact. After she speaks, people of all types, gay men, drag queens, butches come to praise her words.

Duffy is now a union organizer. Jess had not seen him since he inadvertently revealed her true sex and cost her a job. He asks Jess if she would like to be a union organizer, too. It's difficult for Jess to see herself as a leader, but if she can speak out in public the way she did today, anything is possible.

Jess wakes up and sits on the fire escape. Everything she has experienced since receiving the ring made her the person she is today, and for the first time, she has no wish to change the past. In the distance, someone releases pigeons from a rooftop. They beat their wings and lift themselves into the sky — like dreams.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Jess finally taps into the voice that has been silent all her life. Now is the time. Too many of her people are being hurt, killed, even in the supposedly tolerant 1980s, twenty years after Stonewall. Seeing the faces look up at her as she speaks, hearing the congratulations, brings Jess back to community - this time, the larger gay and transgender community across the country and around the world.

Reconnecting with Duffy gives Jess another reason to speak out, this time for the blue-collar workers of America. Duffy sees a great union organizer in Jess - ironically, so did Mrs. Noble so many years ago.

Union membership is falling, but unions are needed in certain industries more than ever. The upper classes reap the benefit of the "greed is good" culture, but real wages for factory workers are falling. The fight for dignity and self-determination is not just a gay or transgender issue - it's for everyone society deems "lesser," and that includes people who make their living with their hands.

At the end of this book, we feel that Jess has found her purpose at last. All that has happened to her, the bad and the good, has made her stronger and more compassionate than most. The past is done, the future worth fighting for lies ahead. Now, Jess can pause and hold her dream close to her heart.

Characters

Jess Goldberg

The protagonist and narrator of *Stone Butch Blues*. The novel is her autobiography from birth to early middle age.

From a childhood of shame and ridicule for simply being herself - a girl with too many masculine characteristics for society's taste - to an adolescence and young adulthood marred with beatings and rapes, Jess is a walking contradiction, a tough and taciturn butch on the outside, frozen with helplessness and terror on the inside. Jess is no coward, but the implicit and explicit messages of hate she receives nearly every day hardens the stone around her heart because of the human reflex to protect oneself. Unfortunately, this impulse is difficult to turn off, even with lovers.

When Jess makes the most important decision in her adult life - taking male hormones in order to pass as a man, it separates her from the Buffalo gay community and from her one great love, Theresa. Jess grieves both of these losses, but she thinks that the hormones are the only way to salvage her life, the only way to stop the everyday battering. As a "man," people will stop wondering about her sex. She'll finally be treated as a human.

Once she begins to pass as a man, Jess is happy to be able to enter the all-male domains of the barbershop and the men's room; finally, she doesn't have to endure dirty looks for going into the women's room. But passing has its price. Jess not only loses her old community but cannot make new friends because now she has to hide the secret of her biological womanhood.

Jess learns that she is in truth neither all-woman nor all-man; she is transgendered. The world, even now (*Stone Butch Blues* ends at the end of the 1980s) doesn't always know how to treat the transgendered, but Jess is through with hiding and lying. She has found her voice, and no matter what lies ahead, she's not letting it go.

Jess's parents (unnamed) and younger sister Rachel

Jess's mother and father had hoped for a life above the ordinary. When they marry and have their first child, their lack of imagination makes them drift into the roles they dread most - factory worker and housewife. They are scared and furious with Jess's gender "deviance" and react with bewilderment, rejection, punishment, and banishing her to ineffectual psychiatric treatment. Rachel is the "normal" daughter, who dreams of growing up to be a teen queen in a poodle skirt. When Jess runs away from home shortly before her sixteenth birthday, her parents don't come after her, and neither they nor Rachel appear again in the narrative.

Mrs. Noble

Jess's high school English teacher. She sees the poetry in Jess long before Jess herself does. She is saddened when Jess announces she's going to drop out of high school. She knows that Jess is smart enough to go to college, but to Jess that is a financial impossibility.

Gloria

Jess's friend at her first job. She has a brother who dresses in women's clothing. When she says there's a bar that her brother goes to in Niagara Falls, Jess wants to know the name of that bar. By telling Jess about Tifka's and later Abba's, Gloria introduces Jess to a community of butches and femmes, which sustains Jess throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Years later, when Jess moves out of Theresa's apartment, she temporarily stays with Gloria and her two kids, Kim and Scotty. Jess falls in love with the kids, but when she starts changing due to the hormones, Gloria wants Jess to stay away from her family. Ironically, Gloria felt sympathy for her brother, and said "it's not his fault he's that way" (Chapter 2, page 26) - an enlightened attitude for the time.

Butch Al

The first real butch Jess gets to know. Al is the alpha butch at Tifka's, and everyone knows (except Jess when she first comes in) that no one asks Butch's Al's femme, Jacqueline, to dance. Butch Al becomes Jess's first mentor, and her main lesson is to "toughen up." That is a necessary lesson for a butch in a world where a fist or a nightstick might come crashing down on your head at any moment. Al also teaches Jess the use of the dildo, though Jess has never seen one before and knows almost nothing about sex—either gay or straight. When Al and Jess are caught up in a police raid, Jess is shocked at Al's appearance after the police drag her back into the cell. Al is disheveled, bloodied, silent. All Jess can do for her is give her an embrace. Soon afterwards, Al disappears from Tifka's. Near the end of the book, Jess reunites with Butch Al in an asylum in Buffalo. Jess can now tell Butch Al how much she appreciates her. Butch Al can barely move due to a stroke, but she still hears. And remembers, even if just a little bit.

Jacqueline

Butch Al's femme, a "pro" (prostitute). She is also a role model for Jess in that she is the perfect description of a femme - long nails, high heels, and a sweet demeanor. Butch Al teaches Jess about the dildo, but Jacqueline says it's not how you use it that counts, it's the thought behind it. A butch must be careful with the feelings of a femme. But femmes are the strength behind butches, too; no one is strong enough to handle the streets alone. After Al disappears, Jacqueline ends up as a heroin addict, proving her lesson.

Bobby

The leader of a gang of football players who gang-rape Jess on the football field. This is Jess's first experience of sex, and it is more like "making hate" than making love (Chapter 3, page 41). The rape is one of the factors that leads to Jess dropping out of high school; soon, most of the kids know about it, and it is certain to happen again.

Karla

Jess's friend at high school. When Jess sits down at Karla's table at lunchtime, everyone in the cafeteria freezes. Why? Karla is black, and the cafeteria is strictly segregated - that's the way most students want it, and that's the way the principal, Mr. Donatto, wants it, too. Jess is suspended for one week simply for sitting on the black side. Of course, Karla gets suspended for two weeks. This injustice, along with the rape, makes Jess decide that she can no longer stay in this school another minute.

Ed (Edwin)

A strong, proud black (not Negro) butch. Ed takes politics personally - it's impossible not to when centuries of racism and injustice finally raise the fist of Black Power. Ed is a target of discrimination on three fronts - as a black, female, and lesbian. Ed gives Jess *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, which describes the dual citizenship of black Americans - a parallel to Jess's dual "citizenship" as male and female. Ed is one of the butches who takes hormones, and it has a devastating effect on her life. Her longtime lover, Darlene, leaves, and Ed feels even more distant from society as she straddles the line between male and female. Tragically, Ed ends up shooting herself. As with Butch Al, life can take down the strongest of butches.

Butch Jan

Another of Jess' butch friends in the Abba's crowd. Like Jess, Jan is a good-hearted woman, who has built up stone walls around that good heart. Jess looks up to Jan as an elder, but their relationship is complicated because of Jan's femme, Edna. Jess develops a powerful attraction to Edna after Edna and Jan break up. But Jess is afraid to go too far with Edna because she doesn't want to hurt Jan. Near the end of the book, when she goes back to Buffalo, Jess reunites with Jan at her flower shop. Jan is angry with Jess for having an affair with Edna more than a decade before. Jess is angry with Jan for being with Edna now. But it's all just water under the bridge now. Jess and Jan end up agreeing that love - and friendship - are rare gifts in a cruel world, no matter where you find them.

Edna

Butch Jan's femme. Edna's departure from Jan breaks Jan's heart. When Jan says that Edna can seduce any stone butch love, it awakens Jess's sexual interest in Edna. At first, Jess can't get together with Edna - she feels she's too young, and she's concerned about how Jan will feel. Years later, after Jess starts taking hormones and drifts away from her old crowd, she meets Edna at a supermarket. Both of them are lonely, and they fall into each other's arms. Edna can't fully give herself to Jess. She's in an emotional "deep freeze," just like many butches and femmes are. Jess wants to beg her to stay, but knows it won't work. Years later, Jess comes to Buffalo to see about old friends. She finds Edna at Jan's flower shop - they are lovers again. Jess can't believe it - was it really her that Edna had rejected? But Jess realizes that life is too short to let jealousy interfere with the greater good of reconnecting with the Buffalo community.

Angie

Jess loses her butch virginity to this femme. When Jess sees the dildo in Angie's hands, she's so grateful to hear these words from Angie: "I'll show you how." (Chapter 6, page 71). Contrary to Jess's expectations, it's her inexperience that excites Angie the most. Angie is another "pro," who has seen the back side of life, and she advises Jess to get a job and not spend too much time in the bars because that is the path to aging before your time.

Grant

Another of the butches with whom Jess works and hangs out. Even though Grant is outside mainstream society like the other butches, she is hardly progressive; after her brother is killed in Vietnam, she says the U.S. should just drop an A-bomb on it. She has a dust-up with Ed over Dr. Martin Luther King. Her bravado is fueled by alcohol; when she is drunk, she might say anything, including that she's not a "real" butch; perhaps, as Frankie hints, because she fantasizes about being with butches herself.

Frankie

One of the younger butches in Buffalo. Frankie stuns Jess when she says that she's involved with another butch, Johnny. Jess can't believe it - two butches together are as inconceivable to her as a same-sex couple would be to many heterosexuals. Jess asks Frankie, "What makes you think you're still a butch?" (Chapter 18, page 207). Years later, Jess knows she was wrong and apologizes to Frankie. Jess and Frankie agree that femmes have their own language for their feelings, and sometimes, only a butch can know butch feelings.



Peaches, Justine, Georgetta, Tanya and Esperanza

Men who dress as women - if they are gay, they are called drag queens - appear throughout the narrative. Drag queens go to the same bars where butches go. Even though they are the polar opposite of butches, the two groups stand up for each other. The queens can teach baby butches a thing or two about femme psychology. Non-cross-dressing gay men do not play a significant role in this narrative.

Duffy

The chief shop steward at the bindery in Buffalo, the first and only place (so far) in which Jess is a member of a union. Duffy is a man of consummate fairness. He believes that everyone has a right to work with dignity and safety, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Jess learns how to be a good "union man" with the example of Duffy's loyalty. Duffy also learns from Jess that justice can't wait. If he had tried to get the butches into the bindery union meetings, maybe they wouldn't have left to get jobs at the steel plant.

Those who are against the union and/or dislike Duffy's attitude toward minorities spread rumors that he's a Communist - a major liability in the Cold War 1960s. Is it true? At the end of the book, Duffy says that it depends on how you define "Communist" - a word, like "racist" or "liberal," that is defined by the limits of one's anger.

Rocco

A giant, leather-clad butch who comes into Abba's like an apparition out of time. Rocco takes male hormones and can pass as a man and is the first person Jess meets who has taken this step. Their meeting is brief, but Jess carries Rocco's example with her for years to come. Rocco is Edna's former lover, and Edna says Jess and Rocco have much in common - weariness, loneliness, and a secret vulnerability. It's the tough ones who hurt the most. Edna bequeaths Jess Rocco's leather jacket, which was her "armor."

Milli

A "pro" femme, the first lover with whom Jess lives. Milli is sexy, yet tough; Jess knows it when Milli gets behind Jess for a ride on the Norton shortly after they meet. Jess feels super-protective towards Milli, especially after she is beaten by an off-duty cop. But when Jess objects to Milli dancing in a nightclub, Milli makes it clear that no one tells her what to do or where to work. Milli says that she has more solidarity with the other dancers in the clubs than with the regulars at Abba's. There's a difference between a woman who turns tricks to pay the rent and a stone pro who's into the life. This relationship cannot last, because, as Milli says, she and Jess can't protect each other, and they would end up breaking everything, including and especially each other.

Theresa

The one great love of Jess's life. Theresa has everything that Jess wants and needs - beauty, femininity, and a gentle healing touch when Jess comes home battered. For the first time, Jess enjoys true domesticity at the apartment she and Theresa share. When Theresa gets a job at the local university, it introduces her and Jess and the Abba's crowd to the new feminist movement, which has no place for butches and femmes. It pains Jess that she can't fully express herself, even with Theresa. But it's Jess's decision to take male hormones that tears them apart. Theresa has worked too hard to develop self-respect as a lesbian to pass as heterosexual by being with a woman who's passing as a man. Losing Theresa is the most grievous wound in Jess's life. It takes years before she can write a letter to Theresa, the letter which begins the book.

Kim and Scotty

Gloria's two young children. Scotty is too young to notice Jess's gender, but Kim has many questions - like how can two "girls" be married, and why did the man at the zoo call Jess "sir"? Jess teaches the children that people should be free to be who they are and love who they love. The purity of these children's love is the one bright spot in Jess's life. But when Gloria sees that Jess has taken hormones, she tells Jess to stay away from the children - on two occasions, years apart. Jess made a promise to Kim and Scotty to see them again - whether or not she will see them again is one of the novel's unanswered questions.

Ben

A guy who rides with Jess on a temp worker bus. He has a history with a few dark paths, including time in prison. Ironically, Jess cannot open up with this man who is opening as few men do because of her greatest secret: She's not the man that Ben thinks she is. Her experience with Ben shows how taking the hormones has further alienated her from people, even people who don't know her from before.

Annie

A waitress and single mother who becomes smitten with Jess. Like Ben, Annie thinks that Jess is a man. Jess knows that this is a dangerous relationship for her, but she is so starved for touch that she takes the risk. A darkened bedroom and a dildo help Annie to believe that she has made love with a real man. Jess knows this is only an interlude, a fact underlined when Annie rants about "faggots" at her sister's wedding. Jess isn't angry with Annie; she just doesn't want to be just another one of the betrayers in Annie's life.

Ruth

Jess's next-door neighbor in the third apartment Jess has in New York City. Like Jess, she lives between two genders. She is tall and big-boned, yet she has bright crimson hair and is gifted in traditional feminine arts such as cooking and sewing. When Jess meets her and offers to help with her grocery bags, Ruth insists she is not weak. She keeps distant from Jess while Jess wants to be her friend more than anything. They finally connect over a harvest moon - Jess learns that Ruth is from upstate New York, like she is.

Ruth introduces Jess to the small joys in life, such as colorful nasturtiums over salad and elderberry pie. And the big joys - such as learning from a gay history book that the transgendered have a long and honorable history. Ruth shows Jess that it is possible to live between genders and accept who you are without waiting for validation from family or society. She's the friend we all wish we had.

Objects/Places

The Butch-Femme Dichotomy

In the lesbian world of 1960s Buffalo, at least as Jess saw it, the women came in two categories: butches and femmes. Each group had its own look and behavior. The butches were masculine. They wore men's suits and ties and kept their hair short. They behaved in masculine ways — slapping each other on the back as a form of affection, riding motorcycles, and referring to female anatomy with crude slang. (This usually happened when butches were in a group). The butches hid their breast underneath girdle-like binders and used dildos (artificial penises) to simulate the man's role in sexual intercourse.

The femmes kept their hair long, wore high heels and long fingernails (the signifier of females who didn't have to do manual work; however, many of the Buffalo femmes were also prostitutes), and were sometimes financially dependent on their butches. The dividing line between these two groups is as thick and definite as the line between men and women in the greater population. Butches mated with femmes, and vice versa - no question about it. One of the most stinging insults a butch can fire at another butch is to call her a "femme." Jess is shocked when one of her butch friends, Frankie, falls in love with another butch - who in that relationship plays the masculine role?

In the late 1960s, the new feminism looked back on defined gender roles and called them oppressive, in both the straight and the gay worlds. College-educated lesbians thought that butches were no better than leering, arrogant male chauvinists and femmes were their brainwashed playthings, and they didn't hesitate to say so. As happens all too often, the new paradigm sweeps away the old rules and then writes a new list of rules that is just as stifling.

Stone Butch Blues is not a critique on masculinity and femininity per se - as long as they arise from an individual's true self. The wrong is when a force from the outside attempts to enforce gender, or a genderless neutrality, on an individual. No one can be free unless everyone is free.

Jess' Rings

The narrative contains three important rings. The first is the ring that the Dineh women gave to Jess shortly before she left her first home in the desert. It is a turquoise and silver ring, which depicts a sexually ambiguous figure. Jess wonders if this ring will give her the answers she needs to live her life. She takes it with her when she runs away. This ring is an integral part of her wardrobe until it is taken by cops after a raid on a drag show.

Jess gives her lover Theresa a gold ring with tiny precious stones on Valentine's Day, after two years together. Theresa wants to give Jess a ring, too, but Jess is afraid that

the cops will take it like they took the turquoise ring. Theresa says that "If you're afraid to lose what you love, you'll never be able to let go and feel it" (Chapter 12, page 133). Same-sex couples couldn't marry, but they could honor their love with rings.

Jess wears and keeps her ring long after she and Theresa break up. That ring is lost when Jess's apartment building burns in New York City. The building owner couldn't sell the apartment, so he burns it with no warning to the people who made it their home. Jess has lost so much at this point that her tears have frozen.

Bars

When Jess first hears about a place where "mannish women" congregate, she wants to go there right away. That place is Tifka's, a bar in Niagara Falls, about twenty miles from Buffalo. When she first steps into Tifka's, she feels the shock of joy — here are masculine women just like her, meeting and mating with the kind of beautiful feminine women that excited her in the adult movie theater.

The bars are the locus of gay social life. Up until the late 1960s, before the groundbreaking Stonewall riots in New York City, official organization of gays was impossible due to the illegality of same-sex love. Staying in the closet was not just a matter of shame, it was necessary for survival. In the bars, gays could socialize with their own kind and meet potential sexual partners. They can get this message: "Be proud of what you are" (Chapter 1, page 7).

How did gays find out about the right bars in their vicinity? Jess finds out by accident, when her friend Gloria mentions a place where her gay brother went. Jess learns about Abba's, the gay bar in Buffalo, by asking Gloria outright if there was a bar in Buffalo like Tifka's.

Gays found the same problems in their bars that straights found in theirs - misfires of sexual attraction, loud and bitter arguments and drunken brawls. But it was the gay bars that the police invaded, backing vans containing dogs right up to the doors to prevent escape. A night at the bar could end in the police station, where the cops unleashed the worst of their aggression.

Ironically, Jess no longer feels welcome in gay bars after taking hormones, then going off them, leaving her caught between the sexes. She feels she will no longer be accepted as a butch lesbian. By this time, she no longer needs bars to connect with her own people - she can find gay and transgendered community anywhere, next door or out in the park. Still, the bars are where she found her "butchness," met good friends and never-to-be-forgotten loves.

Clothing

In *Stone Butch Blues*, clothing is a signifier of character. Jess is happiest in pants, ever since childhood. One of the promises she makes to herself when she leaves school is to never wear a dress again - a promise she keeps.

The butches wear suits and ties, cutting their hair in the tight DA style (shaped like a duck's behind, thus the initials). They even go so far as to wear BVDs (a brand of men's underwear). Buying appropriate clothing is a butch ritual, and not even the glares at the department store will stop a butch from trying on a sports coat that reveals and conceals the right parts, or from finding the perfect black tie (the color you can't go wrong with, according to Butch Al).

Clothing sends a message even when it's contrary, as when the elder butches wear dresses at the viewing for their late friend, Butch Ro. These husky, tattooed women look bizarre in old-fashioned, lacy dresses, but they do it to honor their friend's request, to look presentable in front of Ro's family (who bury her in a pink dress).

Individuals as well as groups use clothing to define themselves. Rocco wears a leather jacket as "armor," according to her former lover Edna. Rocco left her jacket to Edna to protect her and, perhaps, because she has given up on life.

Motorcycles

Jess, like many other butches, chooses a motorcycle as her set of "wheels" as soon as she can afford it. On the seat of a cycle, Jess is not oppressed, hated, or afraid; she is free, free as the wind. "It was my joy and my freedom" (Chapter 18, page 209).

The motorcycle is also a form of foreplay. Femmes like butches with big bikes, and they like to hold on tight on a tandem ride.

When Jess loses two of her cycles - once by vandalism, once by theft - she grieves as if she has lost a friend. The last time she loses a bike, she takes it as a sign that it's time to leave Buffalo and go to New York City - a place where it will be hard to keep a bike, where there is no open road where you can ride 200 mph and back. It's a different brand of freedom that she seeks in the big city.

Books

At various times in her life, Jess finds books that awaken her to issues in her own life. Some of these books she finds, some are gifts from loved ones:

Norton's anthology of poetry (Chapter 2, page 22)

The Ballot and the Bullet by Malcolm X (Chapter 5, page 57)

A biography of Mother Jones (Chapter 9, page 102)

The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. DuBois (Chapter 12, page 129)

Various women's studies books (Chapter 21, page 239)

Gay American History (Chapter 23, page 266)

Labor's Untold Story (Chapter 26, page 300)

Books do not cost very much; sometimes they don't cost anything at all. But their value is everlasting, especially for a woman who never got the chance to go to college. The books that Jess receives and finds connect her with voices from the past, voices that tell her she is not alone and that she's not the only one who's had to fight unearned contempt. They answer for her the questions she cannot yet ask out loud.

Dildos

A dildo is an artificial penis, usually made of rubber. Butches attach dildos to themselves with harnesses in order to simulate the male role in sexual intercourse. As with men, good sex does not come instinctively to butches. Butch Al teaches Jess the "Popular Mechanics" version of dildo work, but it's Al's femme Jacqueline who teaches her that it's not what she does with the dildo that is most important, but where she's coming from. As long as she listens to what her femme says with mouth and body, and remembers to always come from a "gentle place," whether the sex be rough or smooth, Jess has all she needs to know to be a good butch lover.

Apartments

Ever since Jess runs away from home and finds a helpful couple (Toni and Betty), who allow her to use their garage apartment, she lives in a series of apartments. Sometimes, she lives with a lover; most of the time she is alone. Because she dropped out of high school, Jess relies on her hands to earn her living. The job market for those who must use their hands to work is precarious in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unstable employment hinders the ability to save for a down payment for a home or to have good credit. Coupled with her already-outcast role in society, Jess finds permanent housing elusive. When she can stay a while, she's happiest when she can make it seem like home, adding decorations such as curtains, flowers in small vases, colorful paint and furniture that is solid and secure.

Food

For Jess, as with most working-class people, food is nothing more than fuel for the long day (and sometimes night) ahead. Simplicity of preparation is key - a bologna sandwich and a bottle of soda from the machine can make a meal.

Food is a different creature when love enters the equation, as when Theresa invites Jess for dinner for the first time. Besides steak and mashed potatoes, Theresa puts something on the plate that is unfamiliar to Jess - spinach. Jess usually doesn't eat vegetables, but for love of Theresa, she tries it and finds out that spinach isn't too bad when topped with butter and salt. From then on, home-cooked food means love for Jess.

Years later, when she's living in New York City, Jess relies on fast food for nourishment. The big city has a plethora of food choices, but after she loses her first real apartment to a fire, she's afraid to get too attached to anything, and food is just fuel again.

That is, until she experiences the aroma of cooking coming from her neighbor Ruth's kitchen. A salad with balsamic vinegar and nasturtium flowers on top is enough to make Jess cry. Ruth's food and friendship help bring Jess back to life, back to a point where she risks the joys and pains of caring again.

Public Restrooms

When Jess smokes in the girls' room at high school at the beginning of Chapter 4, it is the last time we see her have a normal experience in a public restroom. Once she leaves home and dresses as a butch, public restrooms become humiliating battlegrounds.

Most of us use a public restroom with nary a thought - we automatically open the door with the stick figure wearing a skirt or the one wearing pants. For the transgendered, deciding which door to open can mean disgusted looks and comments from other users in the mildest scenario (the best scenario is to be alone, but that rarely happens unless it's an individual-use room). Or it can mean arrest. Or worse.

The two major justifications for segregating restrooms by sex are modesty and safety. Most people are embarrassed about excreting too close to the opposite sex, and women fear male predators. The second reason isn't too viable when you remember that violence can come from the same sex, too. Some transgenders "hold it in," or cut public visits short, just to avoid the problem of the bathroom. This is a major reason why Jess is pleased with the results of hormone therapy; she can use the men's room and no one will notice.

According to author Leslie Feinberg, single-occupancy toilets are the best solution to the bathroom problem. Barring that, we can all educate ourselves about transgendered people, and try to understand the unique struggles they face and that the bathroom question is not a joke to them.

Themes

Being Different

Jess and her lesbian/transgendered friends are different from what the greater society says they should be. The butch women do not wear dresses or skirts and do not hold back their physical strength in order to sooth men's egos. The femmes choose butches as their mates instead of legal marriage to men. The drag queens reject pants, short hair, and the dull blues and grays of traditional male dress.

Because these people choose to express the difference on the outside that they experience on the inside, society's reaction is swift and severe. At best, butches, femmes and drag queens get looks of disgust. At worst, they are raped and beaten to the point of death.

When you are battered on the outside, it cannot help changing you inside. With every attack, the stone around Jess's soul becomes harder. Even among her dearest friends and the love of her life, Theresa, she keeps her secret self hidden behind that stone - it's the only place where it is safe. As a result, she cannot completely feel the love that others give her.

Jess thinks that taking male hormones and having breast reduction surgery, which allows her to pass as a man will make her life easier. She is wrong. Her changed appearance alienates her from her old friends and makes it impossible to connect to new ones, for how can she tell people who know her as "Jesse" her birth sex? Hardest of all, Theresa cannot be with the hormonally-altered Jess because if Jess passes for male, it would force Theresa to pass as straight, forcing them both into a world of secrecy and isolation.

It is only when she meets Ruth that Jess sees a successful transgender life - "successful" meaning self-acceptance, for which there is no magic formula except itself. Ruth sees that no one has to be "night" or "day" and that in-between contains a world of possibilities.

At novel's end, Jess knows it is her difference and everything that came with it, good and bad that has made her the strong individual she is today.

Work

When Jess gets her first job at age fifteen, setting type by hand in a print shop, she enters a world where, for the first time, she can wear jeans and a T-shirt and not feel white-hot judgment around her. It is the beginning of her relationship to work, which frees her in important ways.

In the mid-1960s, it was easy for someone with just a high school diploma, or even a high school dropout like Jess, to find a job in industry that provided at least enough income for food and modest shelter. All you needed was a pair of hands and a high tolerance for repetition.

In Jess's circle of friends, work is more than a means to earn money (though that is its primary role). Work gives them the independence to live apart from feminine stereotypes. They do the jobs that men usually do - packing, machinery, shoveling, etc. Some of their male co-workers will jeer and sometimes try to sabotage them, but this is just another test of their strength.

The prize for blue-collar workers was to work union. The union protected workers from unfair dismissal and fought for above-decent wages. A butch who worked in a union factory could be the breadwinner for herself and her femme. It is no wonder that union workers hold fast to their hard-won rights and woe to the "scabs" (replacement workers) who dare to cross the picket line at strikes. An even bigger dream is to work in the steel or auto industries. When her butch friend, Grant, informs Jess that the steel plant is hiring fifty women, Jess seizes that opportunity, even though the cost is her steady job at the bindery. As she says to Duffy, the chief shop steward at the bindery, "You can ride a Honda and work at a bindery or you can ride a Harley and work at the steel plant" (Chapter 9, page 100).

Outside of a union, Jess often finds herself working two or more jobs at a time, sometimes on the night shift. It's a brutal schedule, but for her, it's necessary for survival. The slow decline of America's manufacturing sector begins in the 1970s. Those who made their living with their hands had to grab every opportunity they could with both hands, or they would end up on the streets.

A glancing look at Jess's resume would reveal a long list of jobs that are unglamorous and disrespected by general culture. To walk her employment road today would mean subsistence wages (with more than a little luck), little chance of pensions or benefits, and far less chance of union membership. But think of this: how welcome would a transgendered person be in a white-collar office? Or in the military? Or on the floor of a retail store?

Gender

Stone Butch Blues is a story of the flexibility of gender, as opposed to sex. We are born as one of the two sexes, male or female (except for the very few who are intersex, both with both male and female genitalia). Gender, however - whether we express masculinity or femininity or alternate between the two - is not necessarily linked to biological sex.

Jess Goldberg was born a female. She has a masculine look, though, so much so that many question her sex from childhood on. Acting like a traditional female - wearing dresses, acting sweet and helpless - is a violation of her nature. When Jess wears a

sports coat and tie, she is most herself. In the working-class lesbian terrain of 1960s Buffalo, she falls firmly in the category of butch. As a butch, Jess pursues femmes (feminine-acting lesbians) as sexual partners.

In the late 1960s, the new feminism looked back on defined gender roles and called them oppressive, in both the straight and the gay worlds. College-educated lesbians thought that butches were no better than leering, arrogant male chauvinists and femmes were their brainwashed playthings, and they didn't hesitate to say so. As happens all too often, the new paradigm sweeps away the old rules and then writes a new list of rules that is just as stifling.

Stone Butch Blues is not a critique on masculinity and femininity per se - as long as they arise from an individual's true self. When gender is imposed from the outside, whether it's from parents who want their daughter to be "normal" or feminists who want everyone to present an "equal," gender-neutral identity, it's a form of personal oppression. The best society is where people can express their gender(s) without shame or ridicule. We haven't gotten there yet.



Style

Point of View

First-person POV. Meant to show the reader the world through the eyes of a transgendered person in a way that third-person POV cannot. Also, first-person POV sidesteps the use of gender pronouns ("he" and "she," "him" and "her") which do not correspond with the individual's gender identity. Author Leslie Feinberg prefers the use of gender-neutral pronouns - "sie" instead of "he" or "she", "hir" instead of "his" or "him" or "her," which are rarely used outside of the transgendered community and would be foreign to most readers.

Setting

The setting is mostly in the state of New York — Buffalo, Niagara Falls, and New York City. A small part takes place in the unnamed desert town where Jess is born. No matter where she goes, Jess carries the desert with her, as a peaceful place to which she can "return" in times of stress and sorrow. She calls it "The Land Where They Don't Mind" (page 23). Jess experiences her worst oppression in the conservative city of Buffalo, which is often bitterly cold, unlike her initial, warm desert home. The chill of Buffalo often reflects her frozen feelings, the protective silence that traps her emotions inside. When she travels to New York City, she believes that she will be able to hide in the vastness of that metropolis. The city is a jungle of broken-down apartments and subway predators, gay-bashing cops and buildings that make a person feel small. But New York City is also a city of opportunity for Jess - to go back to typesetting work and master it, to partake in culture, and to meet people between genders as she is.

Language and Meaning

The text is straightforward and conversational for the most part. Jess narrates the way someone without a college education would - short, simple words, sometimes peppered with what movie reviewers call "strong language." She is articulate when describing her loneliness and isolation from the general public and when describing her dreams and trance states (i.e., when she "returns" to the desert when being raped in the police station). To author Feinberg, this story is so important that it must not be obscured with fancy language.

Structure

This book is twenty-six chapters, all except the first describing events in chronological order, like a history book. The first chapter is a letter from Jess to her long-lost lover, Theresa, which she is ready to compose at the end of the book. The other chapters take

Jess from birth to her epiphany at the gay pride rally. In this respect, it reads like a book of history.

Quotes

"I didn't want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: 'Is that a boy or a girl?'" (Chapter 2, page 13)

"How old are you?' the bartender asked.

'Old enough,' I countered and put my money down. A round of smirks rolled around the bar. I sipped the beer and tried to act cool. An older drag queen studied me carefully. I picked up my beer and walked toward the smoke-filled backroom.

What I saw there released tears I'd held back for years: strong, burly women, wearing ties and suit coats. Their hair was slicked back in perfect DA's. They were the handsomest women I'd ever seen. Some of them were wrapped in slow motion dances with women in tight dresses and high heels who touched them tenderly. Just watching them made me ache with need." (Chapter 3, pages 27-28).

"She [Butch Al] was a big woman. I don't know how tall she really was. I was only a kid. But she towered above me in height and stature.

I immediately loved the strength in her face. The way her jaw set. The anger in her eyes. The way she carried her body. Her body both emerged from her sports coat and was hidden. Curves and creases. Broad back, wide neck. Large breasts bound tight. Folds of white shirt and tie and jacket. Hips concealed.

She looked me up and down. I widened my stance. She took that in. Her mouth refused to smile, but it seemed her eyes did. She extended a beefy hand. I took it. The solidness of her handshake caught me by surprise. She strengthened her grip, I responded in kind. I was relieved I wasn't wearing a ring. Her clasp tightened, so did mine. Finally she smiled.

'There's hope for you,' she said. I flushed at how gratefully I embraced her words.

I guess you could explain away that handshake by calling it bravado. But it meant more than that to me then, and still does. It's not just a way of measuring strength. A handshake like that is a challenge. It seeks out power through incremental encouragement. At the point of maximum strength, once equity is established, then you have really met." (Chapter 3, page 29)

"I was already burning with another question. 'Al wants me to be tough. You and Mona and the other femmes are always telling me to stay sweet, stay tender. How can I be both?'"

Jacqueline touched my cheek. 'Al's right, really. It's selfish of us girls, I guess. We want you to be strong enough to survive the shit you take. We love how strong you are. But butches get the shit kicked out of their hearts too. And I guess we just sometimes wish there was a way to protect your hearts and keep you all tender for us, you know?'" (Chapter 3, page 37)



"Do you know what it takes to change the world, Jess?" I shook my head. 'You have to figure out what you really believe in and then find other people who feel the same way. The only thing you have to do alone is to decide what is important to you.'" (Chapter 4, page 46)

"I shook my head. 'I gotta use the bathroom. God, I wish I could wait, but I can't.' Justine touched my cheek. 'Sorry darlin'.'

Peaches drew herself to her full height. 'C'mon. We'll all go in together with her.' 'No.' I held up my hands. 'I'm afraid we'll all get busted.' My bladder ached. I wished I hadn't waited so long. I took a deep breath and pushed the door open to the women's bathroom.

Two women were freshening their makeup in front of the mirror. One glanced at the other and finished applying her lipstick. 'Is that a man or a woman?' she said to her friend as I passed them.

The other woman turned to me. 'This is the women's bathroom,' she informed me. I nodded. 'I know.'

I locked the stall behind me. Their laughter cut me to the bone. 'You don't really know if that's a man or not,' one woman said to the other. 'We should call security and make sure.'" (Chapter 5, page 59)

"Aw, ain't that cute, BVD's,' one cop called out to another. 'Fuckin' pervert.'

I looked at the light on the ceiling, a large yellow bulb burning behind a metal mesh. The light reminded me of the endless stream of television westerns I saw after we moved up north. Whenever anyone was lost in the desert the only image shown was a glaring sun - all the beauty of the desert reduced to that one impression. Staring at that jail light bulb rescued me from watching my own degradation: I just went away.

I found myself standing in the desert. The sky was streaked with color. Every shift of light cast a different hue across the wilderness: salmon, rose, lavender. The scent of sage was overpowering. Even before I saw the golden eagle gliding in the updraft above me, I heard it scream, as clearly as if it had come from my own throat. I longed to soar in flight with the eagle, but I felt rooted to the earth. The mountains rose to meet me. I walked toward them, seeking sanctuary, but something held me back.

'Fuck it,' Mulroney spat. 'Turn her over, her cunt's too fuckin' loose.'" (Chapter 5, pages 62-63)

Angie looked at me long and hard. 'What?' I was worried. 'What?'

She ran her hands through my hair. 'I just wish I could make you feel that good. You're stone already, aren't you?' I dropped my eyes. She lifted my chin up and looked me in the eyes. 'Don't be afraid of being stone with a pro, honey. We're in a stone profession. It's just that you don't have to get stuck in being stone, either. It's OK if you can find a femme you can trust in bed and you want to say that you need something, or you want to be touched. Do you know what I mean?'"

I shrugged. She kept talking. 'I remember when I was a little kid, I saw a bunch of the older kids in a circle in the playground. I went over to see what they were doing.' I got up



on one elbow to listen. 'There was this big beetle. The kids were poking it with a stick. The bug just kind of curled up to protect itself.' She snorted, 'God knows I been poked with enough sticks.' I kissed her on the forehead.

'God,' she said, 'by the time we're old enough to have sex, we're already too ashamed to be touched. Ain't that a crime?' I shrugged. (Chapter 6, page 73)

"It was time to find a factory job. The butches urged me to try to get into steel or auto. Of course I already knew that. I wasn't a damn fool. The strength of the unions in those heavy industries had won livable wages and decent benefits.

But Edwin said there was more to it than that. The trade unions safeguarded job security. She told me that unlike a nonunion shop if she had a run-in with a jerk on the plant floor, it didn't signal her last day on the job. You couldn't be fired just because some foreman didn't like your face. With union protection, all the butches agreed, a he-she could carve out a niche, and begin earning valuable seniority." (Chapter 7, page 75)

"It was always hard the first day I started working at a new factory; it wasn't easy for anyone. It took a while for a new person to be accepted into the community of a plant. Before coworkers invested their caring in you they wanted to know if you were staying. Many workers never came back after the first day, or couldn't make quota. Others made it almost to the eve of the ninety days required to join the union, only to be laid off. . . . Those moments before the whistle blew in the morning were precious because they were ours. Only the kerchunk of the time clock stole the last one from us. We all dragged ourselves out of bed a little earlier in the mornings to be at the plant a quarter hour before we had to punch in. We drank coffee and ate rolls, talked and laughed." We talked all day long too. The owners only rented our hands, not our brains. But even talking had to be negotiated when it was on the bosses' time. If we seemed to be having too much fun, laughing and enjoying ourselves too much, the foreman would come up behind us and hit the solid wooden worktables with a lead pipe while he growled, 'Get to work.' . . . [He] was assigned to keep us under control. That required keeping us divided." (Chapter 7, pages 77-78)

"At that moment the bar door opened and everyone fell silent. Standing in the doorway was a mountain of a woman. She wore a black leather jacket unzipped. Her chest was flat, and it was clear she wasn't wearing a binder. Her jeans were low slung, unbelted. She carried her riding gloves and helmet in one hand. Rocco. Her legend preceded her. . . . Jan once told me that Rocco had been beaten up so many times nobody could count. The last time the cops beat her she came close to dying. Jan heard that Rocco had taken hormones and had breast surgery. Now she worked as a man on a construction gang. Jan said Rocco wasn't the only he-she who'd done that. It was a fantastic tale. I'd only half believed it, but it haunted me. No matter how painful it was to be a he-she, I wondered what kind of courage was required to leave the sex you'd always known, or to live so alone." (Chapter 9, page 95)

"There, around the open casket, were Butch Ro's lifelong friends. All of them were wearing dresses. That's how much they loved her.



These were burly, big-shouldered he-shes who carried their womanhood in work-roughened hands. They could playfully slap you on the back and send you halfway across the room. Their forearms and biceps were covered with tattoos. These powerful butch women were comfortable in work chinos. Their spirit roared to life when they wore double-breasted suits.

Wearing dresses was an excruciating humiliation for them. Many of their dresses were old, from another era when occasional retreats were still necessary. The dresses were outdated, white, frilly, lace, low-cut, plain. The shoes were old or borrowed: patent leather, loafers, sandals. This clothing degraded their spirit, ridiculed who they were. Yet it was in this painful drag that they were forced to say goodbye to the friend they loved so much...[laying] in the casket...in a pink dress and holding a bunch of pink-and-white flowers.

What cruel hand controlled this scene? I saw them just as they saw Ed and me. It was Ro's family - father, mother, and brothers. They saw us the moment we walked in and whispered in the funeral director's ear. In a flash, the director announced the funeral home was closing and we all had to leave. Just like that." (Chapter 11, pages 116-117)

"We got real furniture. I mean, it was Salvation Army, but it was real. Our names were printed inside a heart on the dish towel that hung on the refrigerator door handle. We got it made at Crystal Beach. It was a brave thing to do. . .And there were marigolds in amber glasses on the windowsill, daisies in a green cut-glass vase on the kitchen table, fresh mint and basil growing in a flower box on the porch.

It was a home.

I grew up in leaps and bounds. I learned to reduce the anxieties of life by paying bills on time, keeping receipts and promises, doing laundry before I ran out of underwear, picking up after myself. Most importantly, I learned to say I'm sorry. This relationship was too vital to let dust accumulate in its corners.

I began to realize how emotionally wounded I was, how damaged. But Theresa could always sense when I was about to petrify like stone. She could see it coming by the way I held my body as I walked in the door. She could hear it building up in the stories of life's daily abuses - on the job, at the corner store, on the street. Those were the times she would tell me stories in bed - wonderful, sensuous, tactile fantasies about how your body feels when you're lying on sand in the sun and the ocean's waves are lapping near your toes. Or climbing worn wooden stairs to visit a quaint sunlit room where a lover awaits. The stories were relaxation therapy and sexual fantasy combined, meant to simultaneously calm and arouse me. They did both. Theresa could always melt my stone." (Chapter 12, pages 123-124)

"The police really stepped up their harassment after the birth of gay pride. Cops scribbled down our license plate numbers and photographed us as we entered the bars. We held regular dances at a gay-owned bar, using police radios to alert everyone when the cops were about to raid us. We heard about weekly gay liberation and radical women's meetings at the university, but Theresa was the only one in our crowd who knew her way around campus. It was still another world to the rest of us. Everything was changing so fast. I wondered if this was the revolution.

One day I came home from work and found Theresa stewing in anger at the kitchen table. Some of the lesbians from a newly formed group on campus had mocked her for

being a femme. They told her she was brainwashed. 'I'm so mad.' Theresa thumped the table. 'They told me that butches were male chauvinist pigs!'

I knew what male chauvinist meant, but I couldn't figure out what it had to do with us.

'Don't they know we don't deal the shit, we get shit on?'

'They don't care, honey. They're not going to let us in. . . They're very angry at butches.'

'Why?'

She thought about the question. 'I think it's because they draw a line - women on one side and men on the other. So women they think look like men are the enemy. And women who look like me are sleeping with the enemy. We're too feminine for their taste.'

'Wait a minute.' I stopped her. 'We're too masculine and you're too feminine? Whadya have to do, put your index fingers in a meter and test in the middle?'

Theresa patted my arm. 'Things are changing,' she said.

'Yeah,' I told her, 'but sooner or later they'll change back.'

'Things don't change back,' she sighed, 'they just keep changing.' (Chapter 13, pages 135-136)

Theresa sat at the kitchen table, with her head in her hands. I noticed the level of whiskey left in the bottle. I pulled her head against my belly and stroked her hair. 'I'm sorry,' she kept repeating. 'I'm so sorry.' She lurched to her feet and fell heavily against me. I felt the frustration building in her body like a storm. I heard it in the small strangulated sounds from her throat. She pounded me with her fists. 'I couldn't stop them. They cuffed me so fast. I just couldn't do anything,' she cried.

That's exactly how I felt. We really were in this life together. We might not have the words, but we both knew exactly what we were choking on. There were so many things I wanted to tell her at that moment. Feelings worked themselves up to my throat and then stuck there, clenched like a fist." (Chapter 13, page 137)

"I went downstairs and out into the backyard. I overturned a wooden milk crate and sat down on it. The sky was black and strewn with stars. I felt alone on the planet. I was so scared I could hardly breathe. I didn't know where I was headed. I didn't know what to do with my life. I couldn't even figure out what direction to begin walking.

I sat on that crate all night long, looking up into the sky. Sometimes I cried, sometimes I just sat. I strained to look into my future, trying to picture the road ahead of me, searching for a glimpse of who I would become.

All I could see was the night sky and the stars above me." (Chapter 13, page 153)

"Why did you call him ma'am?' Kim asked.

I shrugged. 'He was being mean to me.'

She wouldn't let it go. 'He didn't like you?' I shook my head. 'Why not? How does he know he doesn't like you?'

'I don't know,' I told her. 'Don't you ever meet bullies at school who are mean to you for no reason?'

She nodded. 'Why did he call you sir? Doesn't he know that you're a girl?'

'. . . He knew I was a girl. He was picking on me because I'm different.' I anticipated her next question. 'I don't look like your mom. I look different from a lot of other girls. Some people don't like that, they don't think it's right.'

Kim knitted her eyebrows. 'Then why don't you wear dresses and let your hair grow

long, like other girls?'

I smiled. 'Don't you like me the way I am?' (Chapter 14, page 166)

"I could see the line of cars at the Peace Bridge. How many hundreds of times had I gone to Canada this way? But passing as a man meant I hadn't been able to cross the Peace Bridge because I didn't have a draft card.

The Vietnam War had just officially ended. It seemed amazing to me that the people of that tiny country had won against such monstrous odds. Maybe all those rallies Theresa had attended helped. President Ford was expected to pardon the draft resisters so they could finally come home.

But I still couldn't cross the border. I had no valid ID in case I was pulled over at customs. I opened my wallet and looked at my ID. Birth certificate, drivers license. They were all clearly marked female. How could I get ID as a male? Getting identification required identification. I couldn't even open a checking account without some form of ID. A credit card was out of the question. I felt like a nonperson. Even outlaws probably had more ID than me.

. . . How could I get a license marked Female renewed as Male? What would happen to me if I got stopped by state troopers on a lonely road in the dead of night and handed them this license? But what if I was caught driving without a license? Either option sounded like a nightmare." (Chapter 15, page 175)

"Ben's voice was as intimate as his smile. 'What about you, Jesse? What made you the way you are? What's your life been about?'

In a world with any justice I would have poured out my life story to him. I would have given him back in kind the trust he'd shown to me. But I was afraid and so I betrayed him. 'There's not much to tell,' I said.

He blinked in disbelief. I wanted him to let it go, but he wouldn't. He was brave enough to bloody his head against my brick wall again. 'Jesse,' he whispered, 'tell me something about you.'

I was frozen with fear, unable to collect my thoughts enough to invent a story that even appeared to reveal a story about me. 'There's nothing to tell,' I told him. I was closed and protected. He was left naked.

The warmth drained from his face and anger rose to replace it. He was too gentle a man to lash out at me. Like a butch, he kept it inside.

I stood up. 'I'd better be going,' I said. He nodded and stared at his beer bottle. I let my hand rest for a moment on his shoulder. He would not accept the comfort or look at me. I wanted to say, Ben, I'm so sorry I hurt you. I only did it because I was scared. I didn't know men could hurt the way I do. Please let me back inside.

But of course, I didn't. Instead, I said, "See you Monday." (Chapter 16, page 185)

"'That fag,' she said contemptuously. I was stunned at the hatred in her eyes. She was glaring at a man in his early fifties. His arm was around the shoulder of one of the many aunts who roamed this reception. 'Who let that queer in here?' Annie hissed.

'Is he really gay?' I asked her.

'You bet. Probably fuckin' all the children in the family.'

'Jeez, Annie.' My blood ran cold. 'How can you hate somebody just because of who they love?'



She looked at me with shock. 'You like faggots?'
I shrugged. 'We aren't all the same, Annie. So what?'
She shook her head and spat on the ground. 'I wouldn't let a faggot near my daughter.'
I thought before I spoke. 'Annie, if anybody was gonna fuck with Kathy it would probably be a straight guy, not a gay man.'
'Yeah?' she yelled. Annie stood up and gripped the champagne bottle tightly at her side.
'Well, I ain't lettin' no funny men around my daughter. I left my own husband cause I caught him molesting Kathy. I tried to kill the man with my bare hands. No fucking fags are coming near my girl, you understand?' (Chapter 16, pages 194-195)

I finally broke the silence with a question. 'Do you think I'm a woman?'
Edna got up on one elbow and looked at me. 'What do you think?' she asked gently.
I sighed. 'I don't know. There's never been very many women in the world I could identify with. But I sure as hell don't feel like a guy, either. I don't know what I am. It makes me feel crazy.'
Edna nestled against my shoulder. 'I know honey, I really do. I don't think I've every had a butch lover who hasn't felt torn up in the same way.'
'Yeah,' I shrugged, 'but it's different for me because I'm living as a man. I don't even know if I'm still butch anymore.'
She nodded. 'It's true that you and Rocco have a tough time figuring out how to be yourselves and still live. But believe me, honey, you're not alone in the feeling that you're not a man or a woman.'
I sighed. 'I don't like being neither.'
Edna moved her face closer to mine. 'You're more than just neither, honey. There's other ways to be than either-or. It's not so simple. Otherwise there wouldn't be so many people who don't fit. You're beautiful, Jess, but I don't have words to help people see that.'" (Chapter 18, page 218)

"But who was I now - woman or man? I fought long and hard to be included as [a] woman along women, but I always felt so excluded by my differences. I hadn't just believed that passing would hide me. I hoped that it would allow me to express the part of myself that didn't seem to be woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a he - a man without a past.
Who was I now - woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked." (Chapter 19, page 222)

"During the long night I realized that if love had been enough, I might never have lost Theresa. But I did. I could say we came to a fork in the road. That was the truth, but it wasn't the whole truth. I knew I had lost Theresa in little ways long before we parted. I had been at the center of her world; she had been my whole world. As my universe shrank, I needed her to be everything for me, and in return I longed to be everything she needed. Neither of us could live up to the expectations." (Chapter 19, page 223)

"I remembered what it was like to walk a gauntlet of strangers who stare - their eyes angry, confused, intrigued. Woman or man: they are outraged that I confuse them. The

punishment will follow. . . I am different. I always will be different. I will never be able to nestle my skin against the comfort of sameness." (Chapter 19, page 224)

"There's a bookstore on practically every corner in New York City. I read the books furtively until I realized nobody cared if I hung out for hours. I only read the poetry and fiction. I didn't want to discover I wasn't smart enough to understand nonfiction. But the Women's Studies section tempted me. By leafing through the books I could eavesdrop on the discussions going on between women without being seen. It turned out to be true that I couldn't understand a lot of the theory. But I felt as though I was rushing into a burning building to rescue the ideas I needed in my own life." (Chapter 21, page 239)

"I saw my next-door neighbor a month later. As I unlocked my apartment, she opened hers. I said hello before she looked up. She didn't answer. Her face startled me. It was badly bruised on one side like a rainbow - yellow, red, blue. Her hair was outrageously crimson. I could tell that womanhood had not come easily to her. It wasn't just her large Adam's apple or her broad, big-boned hands. It was the way she dropped her eyes and rushed away when I spoke to her. Every day I saw others like me in this city - enough of us to populate our own town. But we only acknowledged each other with a furtive glance, fearful of calling attention to ourselves. Being alone in public was painful enough; two could find themselves smack in the center of an unbearable sideshow. We didn't seem to have any of our own places to gather in community, to immerse ourselves in our own ways and our own languages." (Chapter 22, page 248)

"'Why, Ruth?' I stormed around her kitchen. 'Why do heads turn when we walk down the street? Why are we so hated?' Ruth stopped scrubbing the inside walls of her stove. 'Oh, honey. We've been taught to hate people who are different. It's been pumped into our brains. It keeps everybody fighting each other.' I slumped in a chair. 'I used to want to change the world. Now I just want to survive it. . . when I was growing up, I believed I was going to do something really important with my life, like explore the universe or cure diseases. I never thought I'd spend so much of my life fighting over which bathroom I could use.'" (Chapter 22, page 255)

"I looked the leader in his eyes, refusing to show him my fear. Of course we both knew I was afraid. I wasn't ready to die. Oh, I was scared alright. But what I hadn't shown him yet was my rage. I might never get my hands on the powers that twisted and unleashed these bullies on me, but if I was going to die, I was as sure as hell going to try to take them with me." (Chapter 23, page 258)

"As she climbed down from the stage I thought: This is what courage is. It's not just living through the nightmare, it's doing something with it afterward. It's being brave enough to talk about it with other people. It's trying to organize to change things. . . . My legs could hardly get me up on stage. I looked at the hundreds of faces staring at me. 'I'm not a gay man.' My own amplified voice startled me. 'I'm a butch, a he-she. I don't know if the people who hate our guts call us that anymore. But that single epithet shaped my teenage years. . . I know about getting hurt,' I said. 'But I don't have much



experience talking about it. And I know about fighting back, but I mostly know how to do it alone. That's a tough way to fight, cause I'm usually outnumbered and I usually lose. . .

I watch protests and rallies from across the street. And part of me feels so connected to you all, but I don't know if I'm welcome to join. There's lots of us who are on the outside and we don't want to be. We're getting busted and beaten up. We're dying out here. We need you - but you need us, too.

I don't know what it would take to really change the world. But couldn't we get together and try to figure it out? Couldn't the we be bigger? Isn't there a way we could help fight each other's battles so that we're not always alone?" (Chapter 26, page 296)

"Duffy pounded the table with the heel of his hand. 'You've got a power you've hardly used yet. But you can't do it alone. I really think there's people who are ready to stand with you now. I think we can make them understand.'

I exhaled slowly. 'I don't know, Duffy. This hope thing is kind of new for me. I'm a little afraid to get my hopes up too much all at once.'

Duffy shook his head. 'I'm not saying we'll live to see some sort of paradise. But just fighting for change makes you stronger. Not hoping for anything will kill you for sure. Take a chance, Jess. You're already wondering if the world could change. Try imagining a world worth living in, and then ask yourself if that isn't worth fighting for. You've come too far to give up on hope, Jess.'" (Chapter 26, page 299)

Topics for Discussion

This novel shows how being different from what is considered mainstream has a negative impact on a person's life, both as external ridicule and internal shame. Have you felt "different" in your life? How did other people react to it or was this feeling of difference internal? Do you believe that everyone feels different at some point in their lives?

After reading this novel, do you have a different opinion on transgendered people? Why do some people find the transgendered frightening? Do you think that life is easier for transgendered people today?

Jess and her gay friends create a close-knit community. Are communities of friends a sufficient substitute for family? What are the advantages of being part of such a community? The disadvantages? Do you wish you were in a community that close?

Was Jess's decision to take male hormones an act of courage or was it running away from her true nature?

How did Jess's working-class background, separate from her transgendered state, affect the way she lived? How would her life had been different if she had been born in a more middle-class or wealthy family?

How important is it for workers to be part of unions today? Do great benefits (i.e. at Whole Foods Market) make up for the lack of a union? Are there non-material benefits to being in a union - for example, being more connected to your co-workers?

When Jess meets Ruth, she sees someone who she wants to connect with in a way that transcends romantic love, or even friendship - she finds a true "soul mate." Have you known someone whom you felt this way about? What would be the characteristics of your "soul mate?"

What is the best solution to the problem of transgendered people using public restrooms? A change in attitudes? Better surveillance and proactive policing? Single, lockable rooms with one toilet each, as Huntington Beach (CA) has? Unisex bathrooms? Would you feel comfortable using a unisex bathroom?

How have gender roles changed for everyone since the 1960s? Have these changes made life easier or more difficult? Is there any advantage for a society to have highly defined gender roles?

Has this book challenged your assumptions about various kinds of people - butches, femmes, cross-dressers, the transgendered? What did you learn that you hadn't realized before?