

Straight Man Study Guide

Straight Man by Richard Russo

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Plot Summary

William Henry Devereaux Jr. is an exasperating man, going through an exasperating time in his life. Railton College, in Pennsylvania is where Devereaux is the temporary chairman of the English Department. Budgetary constraints have made it very tense on campus, within all the departments. Rumors abound that the Dean is having all the chairs draw up lists of the staff that is expendable. Devereaux thinks that the rumors are normal. April always brings fear of downsizing, but with a new computer center being built on campus, Hank truly believes that the funding will come through.

The only child of academic parents, Devereaux has followed in their footsteps. Married to Lily, a teacher at the local high school, day to day life is passed in the halls of the local college. A published author like his father before him, Hank runs the English department with a sense of sarcasm and dry humor, as it's not something he wants and wants to make sure that all those around him know it. When a television crew is on campus for the groundbreaking at the new computer center, Devereaux takes the opportunity to take a stand and demand answers about the budget. Standing beside the lake in a fake nose and glasses, he holds a goose by the throat, threatening to kill a duck a day until his department has a budget. The resulting uproar among colleagues and friends convinces some that Devereaux is crazy and others that he is a hero. When ducks start dying, Hank is even more of a hero to the masses, though he is not the one killing fowl.

Throughout the novel, Hank is troubled by problems urinating, a fact his doctor thinks might be in his head; but Hank disagrees, as kidney stones run in the family. Hank is afraid that many things run in the family, including infidelity. His father had left he and his mother years earlier and had spent his life leaving one woman for another. Now, forty years later, his father has returned, something that Hank's mother feels is vindication. Hank feels, perhaps strangely, nothing at all.

Hank is forced to face his past and his current life at the same time, and by having to deal with both at the same time, he is overwhelmed. Realizing that he isn't happy is a shock to him. Hank had been traveling the same road for so long, he was unaware that there was another path to follow, or that he might want to leave the road he was on.

Discovering that changes are not the dreaded things that he thought, Hank embraces his life for what it is and becomes a happier man. His wife Lily is also happy, as she has the man she married back. She had been worried about Hank, fearing he had become lost somewhere along the way. The death of his father is a relief to Hank and his mother. They are finally finished with a very long chapter of their lives, and the unresolved issues that had been created so long ago.



Prologue

Prologue Summary

Nine year old William Henry Devereaux Jr. is the only child of academic nomads. His father, a noted author and academic opportunist, moves his family from university to university every few years, teaching a light load of classes and writing. His mother teaches a full course in order to earn her way. Henry, as he is called by his parents, is an exasperating child. He is not a bad boy, but needy, full of energy and questions. His father rarely listens to him, so it falls to his mother to see to his wants, and what Henry wants most is a dog. His parents do not want a dog, and for all Henry knows, no pets are allowed in the housing provided by the university. However, he sets himself to the task of getting one, despite his parents denials. He speaks of nothing but dogs, borrows books from the library about dogs to leave around the house, and spends his allowance on an expensive leash and collar. His mother relents, saying a dog must be earned. What she wants most is for Henry to stop slamming the door, and he makes the effort to at least do that.

Finally, his father disappears one day and Henry waits impatiently for the arrival of his dream, a cute romping puppy to arrive. His hopes are shattered when his father returns with an aging Irish Setter that is barely mobile. In the house while Henry and his mother stare in horror at the dog, his father asks what they should name him. Henry points out that the dog is in fact female. Proving that he doesn't listen, his father asks again, what they should name him. Disgusted, Henry leaves, allowing the door to slam behind him like a gunshot. Henry hears a crash from the kitchen and returns to find the dog dead, his parents standing over the body. His father borrows a shovel from a neighbor and buries the dog. Standing at the graveside Henry names the dead dog Red, drawing a look of incredulity from his father.

Prologue Analysis

Henry Devereaux seems to be a lonely child, trying to live up to the expectations of parents that are ill-equipped to deal with raising a child. His parents may be brilliant academics, but dealing with their own child seems to have its problems. Henry mentions that his father doesn't listen to him, and that his mother is frustrated by his father's lack of participation in dealing with him. Though he realizes as an adult that this is just one of the underlying problems with their life, at the time he feels that he is responsible for the eventual break-up of their marriage. At the graveside of the dog, he senses his father's disappointment in him, that the boy that carries his name will never live up to the name he has been given.

The fact that the novel begins with a story about Hank's youth and a dog is important, as he will have a dog when he is older, and when his father returns to his life.



Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 1-5

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 1-5 Summary

William Henry Devereaux Jr. is the interim chairman of the English Department at Railton College in Pennsylvania. His life is complicated by colleagues demanding information regarding the budget of the department, and what it will mean for them and their livelihood. Rumors are rampant that each department chair has been asked to draw up a list of expendable staff, and the whole of the English department is waiting to see if Hank will do so.

Straight Man begins with Henry Devereaux being driven home by his colleague and the former chair of the English department, Teddy Barnes. Hank is injured, his nose having been impaled on a notebook during a meeting of the personnel committee by Gracie DuBois, another member of the department. Suffocating on the overwhelming scent of Gracie's perfume at the meeting, Hank could not help himself from goading her over her status as a poet. Teddy drives him home through Railton, past the sight of the suicide of William Cherry, a retired Conrail employee. Upon their arrival at Hank's home in Alleghany Estates, Teddy is greeted by Lily, Hank's wife, and Occam, Hank's overenthusiastic white German Sheppard. Teddy tells Lily the story of Hank's injury, and leaves, having a brief discussion with Lily outside the house. Devereaux watches, wondering if his wife is having an affair with Teddy, yet knowing that she loves him and that it isn't true. Hank wonders why when most men his age are having fantasies about sleeping with other women, he is having fantasies about his wife sleeping with other men.

That evening, Hank goes for a run, though his wife cautions him that he should not, as he has a cold. Devereaux chalks his use of antihistamines up to the fact that it is spring and things are in bloom. Jogging into Alleghany Wells, Hank arrives at the home of his daughter Julie and her husband Russell. The house is an exact replica of his home in Alleghany Estates, and Hank wonders at what it means that his daughter wants to live in a home exactly like that of her parents. Julie arrives and they enter the house to find Russell. Hank senses tension between the two and is uncomfortable, wishing Lily were there to fix things. Hank uses the bathroom, having felt a strong urge to do so, but once alone can't seem to accomplish anything. He fears he has a stone, like his father and grandfather before him. Lily calls, telling Julie that Hank needs to come home, as Billy Quigley is calling and refuses to believe that Hank is not at home to take his call. Julie drives Hank home, questioning an interview that he mother will be having in Philadelphia, and whether her parents are getting divorced.

Arriving home, Hank takes a call from the very drunk Quigley. Quigley refers to Hank as 'peckerhead,' demanding to know the status of the budget and information about the rumored cuts to the English department. Devereaux calms him as best he can, knowing that Billy most likely wont remember the conversation in the morning. Lily asks Hank if



he has been asked to make a list of possible dead weight within the department, and tells him not to if he is. Hank agrees with her, as usual.

The following morning Lily drives Hank to the campus, worried that she should cancel her trip for the interview and to check on her father. Hank convinces her not to, though she is worried that he will wind up in the hospital or in jail. Lily offers him the advice of being himself, the man she married, when meeting with the dean regarding the budget cuts. Hank is not sure if he is still the man she married.

In the office, Hank meets briefly with his secretary Rachel, an aspiring writer with low self esteem. It is Rachel who has helped Devereaux spend the past year frustrating his colleagues as acting chair. He had been chosen for the position because he seemed least likely to cause any upheaval, yet Hank being Hank, has set out to cause as much upheaval as possible. Meeting Billy Quigley in the hall outside his office, Hank is proved right, Quigley does not remember the conversation that took place the night before.

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 1-5 Analysis

At 49 years old, Hank Devereaux has been in the same place, doing the same thing, for over twenty years. The acting chairman of the English department at Railton College, Hank is married to Lily, a teacher at the local high school, and the father of two daughters, Julie, who lives nearby in Alleghany Wells with her husband Russell, and Kathy, who lives in New Haven. Hank believes he has been content to live his life exactly the way he has been, but events take place over a period of days that force him to take more action than he has in years.

Lily is traveling to Philadelphia for a job interview and to check on her father, a retired police officer. She does not really intend to take the job, but is going on the interview to push the Board of Education into appointing her principal next year. Julie is extremely worried that her mother and father are getting divorced, perhaps projecting the troubles of her own marriage onto them.

The troubles in the English department, in every department, regarding the rumored budget cuts are the central focus of most of the characters in the novel, and as acting chair, Hank is drawn into the mix. Hank does not believe that there is anything to worry about. Every April there are rumors of drastic budget cuts, which eventually die down and everyone can go back to normal in the fall. Hank tried to convince everyone who approaches him, but no one is as sure of things as he seems to be.

Lily wants to cancel her trip, in order to stay nearby and keep an eye on Hank. She is concerned that he has been drifting along for too long, and that things are going to come to a head soon. The fact that Hank thinks he has a bladder stone is revisited throughout the novel, an illness that is hereditary according to Hank, a blockage of epic proportions. Hank seems to be blocked over many things.



Book One, Occam's Razor; Chapters 6-10

Book One, Occam's Razor; Chapters 6-10 Summary

Hank Devereaux walks through the campus, on the way to the cafeteria in the student center. Along the way he passes the future sight of the Center for Technological studies is to be constructed. Hank wonders if the giant hole in the ground doesn't look more like a mass grave site, a location to dump the bodies of tenured faculty fired due to budget cuts. He finds it hard to believe that there can be budgetary issues when so much money is being spent on this new building. Near the site is a pond where thirty or forty ducks and geese live year round. Devereaux has a brief conversation with Finny, a goose he's named after Finny Coomb, a member of the English department. Leo, an aspiring writer from one of his classes finds him there, happy that Hank is talking to a goose instead of himself.

In the cafeteria, Hank finds Meg, the beautiful daughter of Billy Quigley. They have been flirting with each other for quite some time, ever since Hank had to pick Meg up after she had passed out in a bar and take her home. They discuss the budget rumors and the fact that Billy wants Meg to return to school to get her PH.D. Hank then meets Jacob Rose, the dean for a meeting over lunch at the local bowling alley. Rose informs him that the funding for the new chairman of the English department will not be coming and that a new chair will be chosen from within the department. Hank asks for some promises, so that he can in turn make some promises, at least making some people feel more comfortable with their future. Rose is unable to provide them.

From the bowling alley, Hank goes to visit his mother, who is preparing for a trip to pick up his father. He runs into Mr. Purty, his mother's landlord outside setting up his monthly tag sale. Mr. Purty gives him a set of gag glasses with attached nose and mustache after he sees his injured nose. Mr. Purty will be driving Hank's mother to New York to pick up his father, who divorced her when Hank was in his early teens. In his mother's house, Hank has a sandwich and discusses whether he is prepared for the return of his father after nearly forty years. He tells his mother that it was his departure he was not prepared for and has not given much thought to him since then. Before he leaves his mother asks him to retrieve a suitcase from the basement. Hank does so, and finds the fancy dog collar and leash that he had purchased so many years ago for the dog of his dreams. Feeling dizzy, Hank wonders if he had blacked out for a minute in the basement. His mother thinks he may be coming down with something as he's white as a ghost.

Hank meets his friend and colleague Tony Coniglia for a game of racket ball, and they discuss the fact that Jacob Rose asked Tony to perform an internal review of the English department. According to Tony, the college is planning to dismantle things, as the department and the people that make it up are nothing but problems. After the game



as they walk across campus, Tony and Hank come across a TV crew preparing to film the groundbreaking of the new technology center. The crew is having difficulty with the background noise provided by the ducks and geese squawking for food. When Finny the goose nips Hank and sticks his bill in jacket pocket, a tug of war ensues over the glasses and nose. Hank wins, and puts them on. Grabbing Finny the goose by the neck, Hank loudly decrees that he is tired of the games about the budget. He states that he will kill a duck a day until there is funding for the departments. If the money is not on his desk in unmarked bills by Monday, a duck will be killed every day until the budget has been resolved.

Book One, Occam's Razor; Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Hank meets Meg Quigley, a woman who he has safely flirted with over time and discusses the budget and her father. Hank feels some sense of responsibility for Meg, as she is an adjunct in the English department, a fact that is revealed when he meets with Jacob Rose and asks for some funding, at least to make the adjuncts feel more secure. Rose is unable to provide a promise of funding; in fact suggesting that he is looking for a new job, and will take Hank with him if he were to find one. Hank doesn't want a new job, stating that he is having too much fun where he is.

Visiting his mother later in the afternoon, Hank is confronted with the fact that even though his father left them more than forty years ago, his mother is still waiting for his return, as she has all along. Mr. Purty, her landlord has a crush on her, one she finds slightly disturbing, since he is an uneducated man. At his mother's, Hank experiences a moment of unease while retrieving her suitcase from the basement. He decides that it is simply a loss of equilibrium due to being in the dark. His mother suggests he might be coming down with something. Hank is unsure, thinking he may have blacked out for just a minute, after seeing his mother look down at him from the lighted kitchen.

Meeting with Tony Coniglia for a game of racket ball, Hank finds out that Tony has been asked by Jacob Rose to chair an internal review of the English department. Having just found out that day that the funding for a new chair from outside the department would not be coming, Hank is slightly annoyed. When walking across the campus with Tony, the events of the day come to a head for Hank. The distress over the budget, the return of his father, the fact that he still can't urinate comfortably, and the unease he felt at his mother's collide, resulting in grabbing Finny the goose and making the threat to kill a duck a day until the funding for the departments are provided.



Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 11-15

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 11-15 Summary

Hank is at The Tracks, a bar popular with the local media, waiting for the 11 o'clock news with Missy Blaylock, the TV reporter, and Tony Coniglia. While waiting for the broadcast, Hank tries to call Lily at her father's house and is unable to reach her. He then calls Meg Quigley and advises her to watch the news, and call her father and tell him the same. He then calls Rachel, his secretary, and tell her to watch the news, and take the next day off. Making a trip to the bathroom, Hank once again tries to go to the bathroom, trying to imagine himself in bed with either Rachel or Meg, but can't accomplish either anymore than he can manage to go to the bathroom. At the table, Tony and Missy are eating raw clams and flirting. When the news comes on, Hank is overwhelmed with applause, however he begins to realize that maybe the situation is not as comical as everyone else thinks. Teddy and June Barnes join the group, happily celebrating Hank causing the scene that he had. Hank then leaves with Tony and Missy, going to Tony's house and sitting in the hot tub. After Missy passes out, Hank leaves, but has to walk home, as he had ridden with Tony. Along the way he stops to try and urinate again, and is startled by a girl walking in the rain who is acting confused. She states, 'You aren't him' and continues on her way. Hank is very unsettled.

The next day Hank has his meeting with Dickie Pope, the chief executive officer on campus. At his office before the meeting, Hank is confronted with many messages and mass confusion, the result of his broadcast demands the night before. Even Paul Roarke, a man who finds Hank utterly unamusing seems to have liked the show. Billy Quigley stops Hank on his way to the meeting, telling him that Finny Comb is threatening a vote to recall Hank as chair and that Billy will vote with Finny if Hank doesn't do as he wishes. Billy wants Hank to tell Meg that he can not re-hire her in the fall, so that she will be forced to leave town and move on with her life. Hank also runs into Cambell Wheemer, the only member of the department without tenure, who would like Hank's advice on whether to buy a house. Hank tells him that he has no idea, and that things can change any day. Wheemer states that he won't be at Railton forever, and Hank can barely contain laughter, pointing out that everyone on the English department staff had thought the same thing at one point of another.

Meeting with Dickie Pope, Hank is told, finally, that the rumors about the budget are in fact true. Pope tells Hank that all department heads are being asked to draw up lists of expendable staff, in order to cut costs by twenty percent. Pope is quick to point out that the cuts may never come to pass, but that Hank drawing up the list would be better than someone else doing so. When asked what he means, Pope points out that if someone who didn't like Hank were to draw up such a list, Hank might be on it. Hank leaves, taking with him a copy of his book 'Off the Road' which he had found on the shelves in Pope's office. The book had been a gift for Finny at one time, and Hank is not happy



that Finny had given it away. The book had been a gift for Finny when he received tenure, an act that prompted Hank to go for full professorship, which he received.

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Hank is confronted with his actions at the campus and his threats to kill a duck a day when he watches the broadcast. He has been elevated to hero status by those around him, though he is uncomfortably aware that Lily would not feel the same way if she were there. With Tony and Missy, Hank is at a loss, the third wheel in a romantic flirtation for the two of them. Tony takes pictures of the sleeping naked Missy in the hot tub, and Missy presents one to Hank as a memory of the evening. Leaving Tony's house Hank is confronted with a confused woman who is apparently looking for someone. Hank is concerned that she might need help, but she seems unable to ask for any, and goes on her way.

Twice more, Hank is in the bathroom, convinced that he has a kidney stone that must be passed. He considers the fact that he is stricken with the same ailment his father suffered from. If his father suffered with this problem because of some cosmic retribution for his philandering ways, was Hank suffering in turn by just thinking about other women? Was he suffering because of his thoughts of his wife, Lily, having an affair?

Speaking with Wheemer, Hank is confronted by the teacher's youth and his future still stretching out before him. Wheemer's comment that he will not be in Railton forever, makes Hank think back to his own youth, and wonder when he became settled into his life, living day to day, with no more thoughts of the future, just existing. At Dickie Pope's office, Hank is a bit shocked to learn that the rumors are true regarding the budget. He is angry, yet surprised at himself because he is angrier at the fact that Finny has given his book away. Hank feels that Finny is partly to blame for where he is in life. If Finny hadn't gotten tenure before Hank, then Hank wouldn't have put himself up for professorship, essentially tying himself to Railton.



Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 16-20

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 16-20 Summary

Hank finds Bodie Pie, the chair of women's studies in her office, in the basement of the Social Sciences building. Bodie is a lesbian, though she is one of the women that Hank feels he is half in love with, though he is sure that it is his wife he loves most. Bodie asks him about his meeting with Dickie Pope and how Hank responded to Dickie's warning of the approaching budget cuts. Bodie suggests that Hank has to side with the union, and by siding with the administration he would be losing not only his friends, but his integrity. Hank tells Bodie that he feels the same about both the administration and the union, that he lacks respect for both, which seems to appease Bodie for the moment. Hank asks Bodie how things are going in her love life and Bodie makes a comment that her mind is occupied by someone 'not even on her side of the fence.' Hank immediately has a vision of Bodie and Lily having sex, and his mind wanders. Upon his return to the present, Bodie, it turns out, is speaking of Tony Coniglia, and tells Hank that Tony should watch his back.

On his way across campus, Hank is stunned to find the pond surrounded by animal rights activists organizing a protest against him, the duck killer. The TV crew is back, and Missy, looking much the worse for wear, tells Hank that she would like her picture back. Hank wisely leaves the scene before the activists can catch him. Hank again stops to try and use the bathroom, and considers that the mind wandering he is experiencing is the same thing that used to happen to him when he was writing his novel. While waiting to relieve his bladder, he considers that the tingling he feels in his hands might in fact be his body trying to get him to write. He informs Rachel that he might write another book when he returns to his office. Rachel tells him that Julie called and sounds like she might have been crying. He calls her back and she asks him to come to the house. Before leaving Teddy and June catch him in his office and inform him that Finny is indeed trying to get him recalled as chair. June becomes angry at his lack of caring, and leaves. Teddy is flustered; he realizes that Hank is trying to get himself recalled. Hank admits that he has been trying since he was voted in as chair a year ago.

Hank drives to Julie's house and finds her sitting in her bathrobe in the early afternoon. When she turns he sees that she has a black eye. Julie informs him that Russell pushed her and she fell. Julie wants him out of her house. Hank suggests that she come stay at his house for a few days and she agrees. At his house, Hank finds Herbert Schonberg, the union representative, as well as Paul Rourke and his wife. Herbert wants to discuss the pending issues with the budget. The union wants to know if they can count on Hank to vote with them. Herbert also informs Hank that all other members of the English department have already sided against his usual path, so it would be in his best interests to vote with the union if he wanted to keep his position.



Hank calls Lily, and discusses Julie with her, as well as the situation at the college. Lily is concerned about Hank's behavior, and wishes he'd take a leave of absence, rather than keep trying to get fired. She informs him of problems with her father Angelo, which have forced her to postpone her interview, as well as her return home. Before returning to class, Hank runs into Leo, who informs him that one of his stories has been accepted for publication. In class, Bobo, one of Hank's students asks if he will in fact kill a duck a day. Hank assigns the class to write an essay by Monday, to persuade him or dissuade him on the matter.

Book One, Occam's Razor: Chapters 16-20 Analysis

Once again, Hank is having visions of his wife having an affair, this time with Bodie Pie the lesbian head of Women's Studies. Hank and Bodie are good friends and she is very concerned that he will align himself with the administration regarding the twenty percent cuts proposed. While he doesn't state that he won't do such a thing, Hank doesn't state that he will side with the union either. Hank does not like the union, as he feels it promotes laziness. Teaching staff should be paid by merit, not just because the union says they should.

Finding his daughter with a black eye, Hank is stunned. When he asks where Russell is, Julie asks him if he wants to check out her story. Hank feels bad, but is in fact shocked that Russell would do such a thing. Upon speaking to Lily later in the day, he is also shocked to hear that things have been brewing between Julie and Russell for a while. When he asks his wife why he didn't know this was the case, Lily points out that perhaps he needs her to tell her when things are happening. Hank wonders if he is an inattentive father, like his father before him.

Between meeting with Herbert Schonberg and talking with Teddy and June, Hank begins to realize the seriousness of the budget and the unrest it has caused. The fact that Finny could in fact be the person to make the list of cuts is not just a small chance. If Finny succeeds in having Hank recalled as chair, it might well be the case. No one would be safe if Finny were to make the list, especially Hank.



Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Prologue

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Prologue Summary

Hank has been receiving letters about the last article he wrote about his father for the newspaper. Many people have taken the side of his poor father, feeling horrible for the poor man that was forced to bury the dog he brought home for his son, and that his son had managed to kill within two minutes of its arrival. Hank writes another article, describing his father accepting a position at Columbia University. William Henry Devereaux Sr. was a formidable man, and a famed teacher. The faculty and students at the university were very surprised when he was unable to teach, though none of them were more surprised than Hank's father. Devereaux Sr. would stride into a lecture hall, prepared to deliver a moving speech, and lose every thought in his head as soon as he was finished calling the roll. It didn't matter if he memorized it, or wrote it down, the lecture would leave him as soon as he tried to deliver it, and there was nothing he could do but let an associate teach his class. In the halls and at parties, Hank's father was able to communicate with no problems at all, even making fun of himself for the problems he was having in class. As the university was becoming more and more concerned with the situation, Hank's father discovered that if he began speaking in the hall before the class, he could continue into the room and not have a problem at all. It seems that by not calling the roll and by speaking before he entered a room, Devereaux Sr. had solved his problem, to the happiness of the university and to the secret bitterness of some of his colleagues.

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Prologue Analysis

Hank seems to want and be sure that his father is portrayed fairly in print, his mother having accused him of casting him in a poor light when he has written about him previously. Having received letters from readers that have sided with his father in the case of his boyhood dream for a dog, it seems only fair to write more about his father and his overcoming adversity, to triumph once again.

Throughout the novel, Hank has alluded to his father and his infidelity, as well as the fact that his mother has been loyal to his father for decades, simply awaiting his return to them. While his mother is pleased that this has finally happened, Hank is strangely non-committal.



Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 21-25

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 21-25 Summary

Hank receives a phone call on Monday morning from Lou Steinmetz, the head of campus security, requesting that Hank come to campus because of an incident that has taken place. Teddy calls immediately after, asking if Hank had actually 'done it.' It seems that someone has indeed killed a duck, or in reality, a goose. Hank pleads the fifth with Teddy, who informs him that this act could sway the members of the department that will be voting to recall him as chair this afternoon.

Hank drives to the campus, driving by Julie's empty house along the way. He had discussed the situation with Lily over the weekend, and well as the situation with her father, Angelo. It seems that Angelo has been in jail for the past week, for discharging a weapon in the city and for public endangerment. A black man had refused to leave his property after Angelo had answered the door with a shotgun. Hank is sure there is more to the story and looks forward to hearing it from Angelo himself. Hank has always liked Lily's father, and Lily had always liked Hank's father, ironically, since neither Hank nor Lily really liked their own fathers. Hank runs into Mr. Purty at the diner, with a U-Haul attached to the back of his truck. He informs Hank that his mother and father are back at his mother's house, and the trailer contains all of his father's books. Hank's mother had given Mr. Purty directions to Hank's house with instructions to put the books in Hank's garage. Hank is furious at his mother for taking advantage of Mr. Purty's good nature and the crush he has on her. Mr. Purty tells Hank that if his mother is happy, then he is happy. He also tells him that his father is taken to fits of crying, and doesn't look well. This is not the image that Hank has of his father, and he is confused by the information.

Hank runs into Meg Quigley on campus and they talk about her plans for her PhD and whether she even wants one. Meg asks if her father will even have a job in the next year. When they are parting, Meg tells Hank that she will call Julie that evening. Hank, who was unaware that his daughter and Meg even knew each other, is surprised that they do, and that Meg already knows about their marriage problems.

In his office, Hank is confronted by his secretary. Rachel is in a state of distress, as Hank's agent has called and wants to publish her stories. Hank reassures her that this is great news. Rachel also lets him know that it takes three/fourths of the department to recall a chair, not two-thirds, as Finny believes. The TV crew arrives outside the office for an interview. Hank tells them that he has no idea who killed the goose. True while he had not received his budget, no one else had either. When informed that Dickie Pope has stated that he believes Hank to be innocent, Hank asks how he could know unless he committed the crime himself. Perplexed, the interview is ended. Missy once again



tells Hank that she has to talk to him about Tony and a strange thing that happened after Hank left the night they were all in the hot tub.

At the office of Jacob Rose, Hank finally calls his doctor. Before discussing symptoms, his doctor, Phil Watson tells Hank that he is still needed on first base this season, though he knows that Hank prefers the outfield. Hank tells Phil about his symptoms and requests an X-ray to see how big the kidney stone is. Hank meets with Jacob, who informs him that while his trip to Texas went well, he has received another job offer as well. He also asks Hank to be his best man when he marries Gracie. Hank is stunned. Gracie and Jacob had an affair over twenty years ago, but he had no idea that they were still seeing each other, considering that Gracie is still married. Jacob informs him that her divorce will be final in a month. When asked if Gracie would move to Texas, Jacob says that she would, but that he thinks the other job offer is better. The two men discuss the budget cuts and Hank is told that not only are the twenty percent cuts likely, but that they may even be as deep as thirty percent.

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 21-25 Analysis

A goose is killed, as Hank has promised, but Hank is not the one that has killed it. Hank is even more perplexed by the fact that this act could somehow work out in his favor with the members of his department who are planning to meet this afternoon and recall him as chair. Speaking with Lily has Hank a bit worried about the situation with her father. Lily does not like her father, but cannot help loving him. Angelo had raised her alone after her mother died when she was young, and they were very close, however after she had gone away to college Lily realized that her father's views were not her own, and they had very little in common. Angelo also did not think that Hank was good enough for his little girl, a fact that had not stopped Hank from liking him. Lily in return, thought of Hank's father as charming, and while Hank agreed, he didn't feel any love at all for his father. Husband and wife had agreed to disagree about their parents years ago.

Hank is disgusted by his mother's behavior regarding Mr. Purty. He feels that she has taken advantage of the man's good nature, using him in order to get what she wanted, the return of Devereaux Sr. Hank is also upset that his mother has assumed that his father's belongings would be welcome at his house.

Meeting with Jacob is even more perplexing. The fact that Jacob had been looking into another job had been a surprise, even more surprising when Jacob tells him the reason is that Dickie Pope had fired him in October. Now, Jacob is breaking the bad news of his firing with the good news of a new job offer, as well as the astonishing information that he will be marrying Gracie DuBois in June. Hank feels that while his life hasn't changed much in many years, it is now changing faster than he would like it to, and it is changing not as a result of his own actions, but because of those around him.



Book Two, Judas Peckerhead: Chapters 26-30

Book Two, Judas Peckerhead: Chapters 26-30 Summary

A visit to the doctor's office reveals that Hank does not have a stone to pass, neither a kidney stone, nor a bladder stone. Phil tells him that he may have an enlarged prostate and does blood work to rule out cancer. A third possibility is that the problem is actually phyco-symatic, caused by problems that may seem overwhelming. Hank denies that he is having any problems out of the ordinary.

Driving back to campus for his afternoon class, Hank almost runs over his mother, who is on the side of the road with a real estate agent. She is looking at a large, old, Victorian house, with plans of moving closer to campus with Devereaux Sr. Hank's mother scolds him for not helping Mr. Purty unload the U-Haul, and Hank reminds her that she should be ashamed of herself for using someone the way that she has. Mrs. Devereaux is not in the least bit ashamed. Hank leaves, but is momentarily blocked from entering because there are several police cars blocking the entrance. Hank at first thinks they might be there to detain him, but sees a young woman in the back seat of one cruiser, and she looks vaguely familiar.

In his office, Hank falls asleep, only to wake up and find that he has wet his pants. Elated he calls his doctor and tells him that he has finally passed the stone. His doctor reminds him that he had no stone, and they are waiting for test results to find out what is actually wrong with him. Hank is angry that Phil can't just admit that there was a stone and he was wrong. Hear voices outside, Hank panics, not wanting anyone to find him in the condition that he's in. Billy and Meg Quigley try and enter the office, but have to retrieve the key. When the return, Hank has hidden in the ceiling, climbing through a hole left by the team of men hired to remove asbestos from the building. Billy and Meg leave, but Hank stays in the ceiling, hearing voices. He crawls down further and finds himself over the meeting to vote him out as chair. After much arguing among his colleagues, a vote is taken to remove him. All move to leave when Quigley makes the announcement that they do not in fact have enough votes to oust Hank.

Leaving campus, Hank is found in his car by Russell his son-in-law, who would like to talk to him. Russell follows Hank to his house and after Hank cleans himself up, Russell tells Hank what happened between him and Julie. Julie had come home with yet another purchase, and Russell had had enough. Being out of work and unable to support his wife or complete the house they were building was hard on him, and Julie kept buying more things. Russell gave her an ultimatum, either the chair she has purchased or him. Julie, it seemed, chose the chair. Russell packed a bag intending to leave. Julie started to cry, realizing that she had hurt him, but by that time, Russell was trying to hurt her. When Julie refused to move away from the door, Russell tried to move



her, and she fell over his bag in the hall, hitting her eye on a cabinet. Hank, while not happy with what his daughter is going through, is relieved that Russell had not hit her, that it was in fact an accident. Russell informs him that he has been forced into action, has found a job in Atlanta, and intends to make things right, whether his marriage is saved or not.

Tony Coniglia arrives and discusses with Hank the merits of human affection and how much is too much or on the other hand, not enough. The two men decide to go into town or something to eat and wind up at a restaurant where half of the faculty is already eating. While having a discussion with Teddy Barnes, Hank notices that Tony is getting more agitated. Tony finally snaps, telling Teddy to let his wife know 'he never touched that girl.' Bodie Pie is leaving and she tells Hank that she had warned him about a pending situation with Tony.

Book Two, Judas Peckerhead: Chapters 26-30 Analysis

Hank has yet to see his father, is indeed avoiding it, a fact that his mother is not happy about. At the house she is considering buying; Hank realizes that it is the same type of house his family had lived in growing up. He can sense that this is exactly why his mother is considering the purchase. Hank knows that his mother is not just happy that his father has returned, she feels vindicated. His last girlfriend has left him penniless, and broken, and Devereaux Sr. has been forced to return to his first wife after all these years.

Dreaming and waking, Hank finds that he has finally been able to go to the bathroom, though not in a way he would have liked. The release makes him feel 100 percent better, and he is convinced he was right about having a stone all along, even though his doctor disagrees. Having to hide in the ceiling is not something Hank enjoys, but finds useful, as he is a witness to the failure of his colleagues to recall him as chair. Hiding and listening reminds Hank of when he was younger, listening to his parents argue through the old heating system in the house they lived in at the time. It was the first time that Hank realized that people might have lives they keep hidden from others.

Meeting with Russell provides Hank with some relief regarding his daughter, but he still wishes that the two of them would work things out. Speaking with Tony after Russell leaves, Hank wonders if Julie and Russell love each other enough, and if they will be able to work things out at all. At the restaurant, Hank is congratulated by Teddy, who is confused by Hank's aggressiveness. Hank asks Teddy if perhaps voting for Hank to stay on as chair might not have been what Hank wanted. Teddy and June leave after Tony confronts June, and Bodie Pie again asks Hank if he has any idea of the trouble that Tony is in.



Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 31-36

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 31-36 Summary

Tony tells Hank about Yolanda Ackles, a patient at a local institution that has been mainstreamed into the community. She had been encouraged by her counselors to attend classes at the university and had done so. Yolanda had also been reminded to stay on her medication, which she had not done. Yolanda claims that she hears Tony's voice coming out of the walls in her room, and that she is pregnant. Tony swears that he has never even touched the girl, who has now become a stalker. It was Yolanda that Hank had seen in the police car on campus. She had turned up at Tony's house on the night that Hank was there with the reporter about twenty minutes after Hank had left. Tony leaves the restaurant and Hank follows in his car. The snow that had been predicted had arrived and the slippery roads and Hank's drunken condition combine for some deep thought. Outside the rail yard where William Cherry had killed himself, Hank remembers his youth, after his father had left them. In the basement of a rental house, Hank had intended to kill himself, his mother coming upon him while he was contemplating the best way to go about it. Her words 'we shall forget this' ring in his ears. He wonders if William Cherry suffered from something he could not forget, and that is why he laid down and let a train crush him.

A police car arrives and the officer takes Hank to the station, as he is drunk. His one phone call is to Tony, who does not answer. In the holding cell, Hank discovers why, since Tony is sleeping on the only other occupied cot. In the morning they are released and Hank drives toward home. The road is blocked by media, and Hank turns instead into Alleghany Estates II, and stops at the house of Paul Rourke. Rourke informs him that yet another duck had been killed, and that a list has been drawn up after all, and that Hank is on it.

Hank drives to Julie's house to use the shower. He tells her that she should call Russell but she still doesn't seem ready to do so, even though she knows he is not the only one to blame. Hank showers and calls the number Russell gave him. It is the number for Meg Quigley. Hank drives to her apartment and meets her on the stairs on her way out. Meg tells him that even though Russell is a nice guy, she's friends with Julie too and would like him to leave. The sex isn't a big deal, but she feels weird about lying to Julie. When Meg realizes that Hank is in fact very angry he informs her that maybe sex is a bigger deal to him. In the bedroom, Russell is surprised to see Hank, and shocked that Hank looks so funny, almost violent. Hank tells him to shower, pack his things and takes him to the airport for a flight to Atlanta.

Hank goes to his mother's to see his father. Hank is shocked in the changes in Devereaux Sr. His mother and Mr. Purty leave to pick up more boxes that have arrived



and Hank and his father take a walk through the neighborhood. Hank's father speaks about his own mid life, and remarks that he might have sinned against Dickens, not taken him seriously enough. Hank is floored, that after all these years; the only thing his father feels guilty about is wronging a long dead author.

On campus, Hank conducts class, but Leo who never misses a class is late. When Leo does arrive he is followed by campus security. Leo is the person who has been killing the ducks and geese, perhaps thinking that it will make a good impression on Hank. Class lets out early and Hank heads to Jacob Rose's office for his meeting about the list. Hank finds Jacob in a great mood, which is confusing to him. It turns out that Jacob had put Hank on his list for a reason. Jacob had been offered Dickie Pope's job, and intended for Hank to become the dean of liberal arts. Hank declines and Jacob responds angrily. Hank feeling ill stumbles from the office with Jacob following; demanding to know what it is that Hank Devereaux could possibly want? Hank responds that he wants to pee, and staggers to the bathroom. Jacob follows and finds Hank laughing in delight and hysteria, because he can in fact finally pee.

Hank passes out and wakes to find Lily beside him in the hospital. He has a headache, as he had hit his head in the bathroom when he fainted. His father-in-law, Angelo is outside in the hall. He is going to be living with Hank and Lily for a while. On the way back to their house, Angelo tells the tale of firing his shotgun into the porch ceiling when a man who claimed to be the brother of his paperboy refused to leave without money. Angelo is perplexed by this. He cannot understand why a strange black man could expect to get money from someone just by demanding it. Angelo is going to stay with Hank and Lily as part of his promise to follow the rules. Upon arriving home, Hank finds Finny on his porch crying. Having been to visit his ex-wife Marie, Occam had run out in front of his car, and Finny had killed him. Hank reflects on how no one knows his own story, or how it will end.

Book Two, Judas Peckerwood: Chapters 31-36 Analysis

The revelation that Hank had contemplated suicide when his father had left them explains the feelings of dizziness and nausea that Hank had experienced while retrieving his mother's suitcase from her basement. It is also easier to understand why Hank was so interested in the suicide of William Cherry, a man who supposedly had everything to live for. Upon seeing his father for the first time in a decade, Hank is shocked by his appearance, but may be privately pleased. His father, a man with an enormous ego, has returned a broken man. Hank feels he deserves this. Upon finding Russell in Meg Quigley's apartment, Hank is angry, and justifiably so. His father was a cheating man, and now his son-in-law is doing the same thing to Hank's daughter. Hank runs him out of town, but does tell Russell to call Julie. Hank knows that Russell is a different man than his father, and things don't have to remain the way they are.

Upon hearing news that he is on the list of people to be fired, the only thing Hank feels is relief. It seems that he has spent the entire novel trying to get himself out of the



position that he was forced into, and now he is finally free. Upon meeting with Jacob Rose, Hank becomes sick, possibly because his freedom is short-lived. Jacob accuses him of not caring about anyone but himself, and Hank has to wonder if he's right. Turning down the chance at dean, Hank is finally able to go to the bathroom, relieving himself, breaking past the mental blockage that had been preventing him all along. The death of Occam is tragic, yet ironic, as the story began with the death of the dog he had dreamed of. Red was not what he had expected, and Occam had not been expected at all, yet he had turned out to be the dog that young Hank had dreamed of as a boy.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Hank is happy and content. On sabbatical from the university, he will be teaching in the fall. Jacob had submitted a grant that Hank and Lily had written years ago, to follow promising young students from high school through college, providing books and tuition if they keep their grades up. Julie and Russell moved to Atlanta and are working through their issues. Hank's other daughter Karen is happily involved with a music professor and will be having a baby around Christmas. Hank's health is fine, it seems the issues he was having trying to urinate were in fact all in his head. Hank's father died quietly and painlessly, and this fact did not devastate Hank's mother as he feared it might. She seemed almost to be more alive, released from the duty she might have felt she had.

Before Tony Coniglia leaves on a year long sabbatical in Pittsburgh, his friends gather at his home to see him off. Hank takes Russell with him, and introduces him as a computer wizard. Those present follow Tony to the room where his computer sits, unused, no one has ever been able to figure out how to work it. Russell tries, yet he can't even get it to perform properly. The group of men laugh, and then realizing that they are all in a small room try to leave. The door is closed however and they have all, collectively, blocked the exit. Amazingly, this group of educated academics cannot accomplish what a group of blue collar workers would have been able to. Step back, together, and exit as one.

Epilogue Analysis

Hank has struggled, but managed to overcome his mid-life crisis. The blockage he had been experiencing throughout the novel was mental, not physical at he had feared. Hank had worried through his life that he would wind up a man like his father. Not even aware that he was experiencing a crisis, though the people around him did, Hank struggled and overcame the obstacles that were in his path, though most were imagined, and had been placed in his way by Devereaux himself.



Characters

William Henry Devereaux Jr.

William Henry Devereaux Jr is the protagonist in *Straight Man*. A 49-year-old professor, Hank is unhappy with the path his life has taken, yet seems to be the only person who is unaware that he is unhappy. Confronted with the return of the father who left him when he was a boy, coupled with an upheaval on campus about the budget, Hank forces the hand of those in charge by threatening to kill a duck a day until the English department gets the budget that they have been promised. Ducks do indeed start getting killed, but Hank is not the one killing them.

Hank has trouble urinating throughout the book, a problem he decides is due to a kidney stone, an ailment his father suffered from as well. Hank feels that his father deserved to suffer, due to his infidelity, and wonders if he is suffering the same fate simply by thinking about other women. Hank has been married to Lily for many years, and loves her. He knows that she loves him as well, yet can't seem to stop imagining her having an affair instead of him.

Lily goes away for a weekend, and it is during this weekend that events combine to overwhelm Hank. The budget, a problem with his daughter, and the return of his father bring everything crashing down around him, bringing back the memory of his father leaving, and Hank's plan to commit suicide. Hank struggles to understand how he has come to where he is in life, and wonders if he is where he wants to be at all. Hank does change his life, stops struggling to remain where he is, and accept that change is what he needs.

Lily Devereaux

Lily is Hank's wife. Lily worries that Hank is unhappy, and struggling with mid-life crisis. Lily encourages him to relax and tries to make his life easier. A teacher at the local high school, Lily has to leave for the weekend, leaving Hank alone to work his way through the problems he is facing. It is a weekend of awakening for Hank, and Lily returns to find a changed and happier man.

Teddy Barnes

Former chair of the English department, Teddy is an extremely careful man. Married to June Barnes, another member of the English department, Teddy is a good friend to Hank, and has a crush on his wife Lily. Teddy has informed Hank that he does not believe Hank loves Lily enough, and though Hank knows in his heart that he does love Lily, he begins to wonder what amount of love really is enough.



Julie Devereaux

Julie is one of Hank and Lily's daughters. Julie is married to Russell, and is as different from her parents as she could possibly be. Julie's life becomes more complicated when she has a fight with her husband the weekend her mother is away. Her personal problems are one more thing that Hank is forced to deal with, and he is forced to step into the role of Lily, who is always the one in their relationship who handles conflict an difficulty.

Phineas (Finny) Coomb

A member of the English department, Finny convinces the others in the department to vote to recall Hank as chair of the department.

Cambell Wheemer

The only untenured member of the department, Wheemer is reportedly having an affair with Teddy's wife June. Cambell is also referred to as "Orshee" because he always reminds everyone that a position can be held by 'he...or she!'

Jacob Rose

The dean of liberal arts, Jacob is a friend to Hank and the person who finally draws up the list of expendable staff. Jacob winds up chief executive officer, and wants Hank to be dean, an offer that Hank turns down. Jacob is marrying Gracie DuBois

Gracie DuBois

A member of the English department, Gracie is the person who hit Hank in the face, piercing his nose with the binding of her notebook. Gracie is marrying Jacob Rose when her divorce is final.

Tony Coniglia

A professor in the biology department, Tony is embroiled in a scandal. A mentally ill woman has decided that Tony is the father of her child, and she claims to hear his voice coming from the walls of her room at night. Tony is one of Hank's closest friends and is also worried about Hank's state of mind.



Mrs. William Henry Devereaux

Hank's mother, the first name of Mrs Devereaux is never revealed. This may be because she has always identified herself as Mrs. Devereaux, despite the fact that Hank's father left them and divorced her when Hank was young. Mrs. Devereaux is vindicated in her beliefs, when after years of philandering, Hank's father returns home, a broken man.



Objects/Places

Railton Campus

The campus where most of the story takes place. Hank is the temporary chair of the English department.

Occam's Razor

The belief put forth by William of Occam that the easiest path is the correct one. There is no need to complicate things with more detail than necessary. Whatever is, is the way it is, simply because that is the way it was intended to be.

Alleghany Estates I

The community where Hank and Lily live. A subdivision outside Alleghany Wells, approximately fifteen minutes from the campus

Alleghany Estates II

Across the street from Alleghany Estates I, and the home of Paul Rourke, a member of the English department. Alleghany Estates II appears to be cursed, as nothing goes well. The buildings are faulty, the drainage is bad, and even the plants and trees don't seem to thrive.

Alleghany Wells

The small town where Hank's daughter Julie is building a house with her husband Russell.

Philadelphia

A city in Pennsylvania where Lily travels for an interview and to check on her father, Angelo

Railton High School

The local high school, where Lily is a teacher, and eventually principal



Railton

The town where the campus is located. Once a thriving community, the town has suffered through hard times, now that the railroad is not as important as it once was

Conrail Train Yard

The location of the suicide of William Cherry, a supposedly happy and content man, who laid down on the train tracks to die.



Themes

Mid-Life Crisis

Hank is suffering a mid-life crisis, though he does not recognize the fact. Concerned that he is stuck in a place that he never expected to wind up, Hank's main symptom is his inability to urinate. Throughout the novel, the fact that his urinary tract is blocked seems to be directly related to the fact that he is blocking out the problems in his life. Hank's father is returning after nearly forty years. His father had left Hank and his mother when Hank was a young boy, and his return seems to have brought about thoughts of infidelity in Hank. Though Hank believes himself to be a bit in love with several women, he knows he loves his wife. Strangely, Hank's thoughts of infidelity are centered on Lily, his wife, and her having affairs with different men and women. Hank tries to understand what he is going through; however, other events conspire to bring things to a head one weekend when Lily is away. His condition continues to worsen, to the point of illness.

The return of his father also brings back memories of Hank promising himself that he would never grow up to be like his father, yet he has in fact become the Sr. Devereaux, or so he thinks. Hank is also a published author, though nowhere near as famous as his father. Hank also becomes an English professor, as his father was before him. Hank's way of dealing with these facts is to try and sabotage his own career, perhaps in the belief that if he fails, he will not turn out like his father after all.

Loyalty

Hank is very loyal to his friends and family, a trait he believes strongly in, due to his father's disloyalty in his youth. Because Hank believes so strongly in loyalty, he is shocked by thoughts of his wife being unfaithful, though he knows it is just in his imagination. Hank is also devastated by the disloyalty of his daughter's husband Russell when Hank finds him in the bed of Meg Quigley. Hank is more upset, perhaps because he has been flirting with Meg for some time, though he has never considered having an affair with her.

Hank also demonstrates loyalty when he refuses to draw up a list of expendable people within the English department at the university. Though Hank has his differences with many of his colleagues, he simply refuses to put any of them up on the chopping block. Hank is somewhat surprised when his loyalty is rewarded by his colleagues holding a meeting to recall him as temporary chair of the department. Hank is vindicated in the end, his loyalty rewarded, when Jacob Rose, draws up the list, and offers Hank the position of dean of liberal arts.



Suicide

Suicide is woven throughout the novel. The first mention of it is when Hank comes across the Conrail train yard, where William Cherry, a former Conrail employee laid down on the tracks in front of a train. Though people assume that Cherry was a bitter employee who had been laid off, it turns out that he had just retired with full benefits and had no apparent reasons to be unhappy. Hank checks the newspapers frequently to see if there is any clarification on Cherry's suicide. Though it is unclear why Hank is so interested in William Cherry, it becomes apparent when Hank finally allows himself to remember his own contemplation of suicide. Approximately a year after his father had left, Hank found himself in the basement of a rental house, standing on a chair, considering suicide himself. Hank was maybe thirteen years old, and hadn't remembered his plans. His mother had found him standing on a chair, thinking about the best way to kill himself, and saved him. She stated "We will forget this" and Hank had. Realizing one evening at the train yard, that he did want to live then, and still does, Hank knows that his relationship with his mother was changed that day. He had always been closer to his mother than his father, but had always tried to please his father more. His father's rejection of him was devastating.

Style

Point of View

Straight Man is written in the first person. The narrator is William Henry 'Hank' Devereaux Jr. As the novel is the story of one important weekend in the life of Hank Devereaux, the point of view is important, as the reader can better understand exactly what is happening as it takes place, as well as the feelings of Devereaux.

The story is told in a straight forward manner, as the action takes place with quite a bit of dialogue throughout. There are a few passages of flashback, which provide some back story of the main character, but for the most part, the novel is written as it happens over a period of approximately three or four days.

Setting

The novel is set in Railton Pennsylvania, and takes place for the most part on the Railton campus, where Hank is the temporary chair of the English department. Railton is also the location of Aleghany Estates, where Hank and Lily have built their home, and Alleghany Wells, where Hank and Lily's daughter lives with her husband Russell.

Though periods of flashback take place, the locations are never really detailed. Hank lives on and off campus of many universities while he is growing up, but the exact locations are never revealed. Perhaps this is why Hank has become so settled in his life in Railton, and though he had never planned to stay there forever, that is precisely what he does.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is clear and concise. The narrator, Hank Devereaux is a well educated man, an English professor, and the novel is written from his point of view. The novel takes place over a relatively short period of time, and the language used, tied in with fast paced dialogue keeps the reader engrossed.

Structure

Straight Man is a novel broken down into 36 chapters, and two sections and an epilogue. Each section has a prologue as well. The first section of the book is slightly longer than the second, made up of twenty chapters, with approximately five or six pages. The second section is made up of sixteen chapters of approximately the same length.

Quotes

"No doubt he's right. We will make it. Why this fact should be so discouraging is what I'd like to know. I can't help wondering if William Cherry also feared things would work out if he didn't do something drastic to prevent them." Chapter 1, pg. 5

"Had I allowed him to become our neighbor, proximity would have provided him with a dozen more reasons to hate me. And , living right next door, where he could keep an eye on my comings and goings, he might even have found by this time some way of murdering me and making it look like an accident. Whereas, if he wanted to kill me now, he'd have to cross the street, pass houses occupied by Jacob Rose's ex-wife, the ex-football coach's ex-wife, and other ex-wives who know me. I consider these ex-wives my last line of defense." Chapter 2, pg 30

"My daughter likes television, too, and I suspect that her thought process has been corrupted by advertising. Like many Americans, she no longer understands the meaning of simple words. She sees nothing absurd about the assertion 'you DESERVE a break today' when it's applied across the entire spectrum of society. She believes she's WORTH the extra money she spends on her hair. Several of her friends have big houses. Doesn't she DESERVE one too? Is she WORTH less than her friends?" Chapter 3, pg 36

"For Mr. Purty, listening to my mother talk is not unlike watching a bear dance. It's just the damndest thing. There's nothing and no one my mother won't pass judgment on, and this nonpluses Mr. Purty, who, if he has opinions, keeps them to himself. That my mother has so many and writes them down for publication is the newspaper strikes Mr. Purty as unaccountable behavior. If he were ever to have an opinion, the last thing he'd think to do with it is write it down." Chapter 8, pg 87

"Imagination isn't everything it's cracked up to be." Chapter 9, pg 97

"In truth, the William Henry Devereaux, Sr., of the author photo doesn't look like the type of fellow who'd require a lot of assistance, and that may be one of my father's great gifts-his ability to suggest through a pose, a gesture, that he was himself all he needed." Chapter 15, pg 156

"My own errors in judgment I can forgive, but Finny, the rat, has sold my book, a book I now vividly remember giving him in what I considered at the time to be a sweet, parting gesture, since no man was ever less tenurable than Finny." Chapter 15, pg 157

"Sometime last night it's occurred to him to wonder just who I am, this guy he wants to stab through the throat with an ice pick. I must be somebody, so who the hell am I?" Chapter 15, pg 161



"Just before heading over to see the dean, I'm visited by Orshee. He's been thinking about our department all weekend, he confesses, and the more he's thought about it, the less reason he can see for the sorry state we're in" Chapter 24, pg 240

"I know I can't pee," I tell him. "My father is a certified stone former. You should see all his citations." Chapter 24, pg 243

"And how did she know the right works to whisper as she clutched me to her, her fingers digging in beneath my jutting boyish shoulder blades? How did she know to say that we- she and I- were going to forget this?" Chapter 31, pg 322

"Dad," I finally say, when I locate my voice. "This is what you feel guilty about? You feel guilty about the way you treated Dickens?" He nods without hesitation. "Yes," he says, then again, "yes." Chapter 33, pg 346



Topics for Discussion

Why does Devereaux believe that there is no cause for alarm over the rumored 'list' that the department heads have been asked to draw up?

What is the significance of the blockage that Hank Devereaux suffers from? Is the fact that it is hereditary important?

Why does Hank threaten to kill a duck a day? How do his colleagues react?

What type of relationship does Hank have with his mother? Why?

How does young Hank react to his father deserting the family?

What is Hank's relationship with his wife Lily? Is it similar to the relationship his parents had?

Why is Hank suffering a mid-life crisis? What events of the weekend cause the most anxiety for Hank?