

Sutton Study Guide

Sutton by J. R. Moehringer

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Plot Summary

Sutton is a novel by the New York Times best-selling author of *The Tender Bar*, J.R. Moehringer. The story follows Willie the Actor Sutton as he is released from prison after spending forty years on and off behind bars. Sutton tells his memoirs to a reporter and a photographer working for a newspaper that gets an exclusive take on his story. As the reporter and the photographer take Sutton to various points of interest around New York City, Sutton recounts the significance of the location to the reporter and the photographer.

As the novel and the story unfolds, Sutton faces his past, including the people that were involved in his life and the crimes that Sutton was responsible for committing over the years. As the reporter and the photographer put together various clues gleaned from police and FBI files, they conclude that Sutton's story is often quite different from the records.

By the end of his life, Sutton is finally able to publish a few books. The book that he is never able to publish is the one that he wrote while he was in prison. In spite of thinking he would die on Christmas day following his release, Sutton ends up living eleven more years. When Sutton dies, he takes to his grave the truths about his life, his crimes, and his one true love - Bess.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Willie Sutton, a famous bank robber, is sitting in his cell at Attica when two guards come to escort him to the warden's office. When they ask what he's writing on the legal pad, Sutton says it's his novel, but it's really his suicide note. He's been writing it since his parole was denied. When Sutton gets to the office, the warden tells him he's being released.

The guards escort Sutton to Tailor, who measures him for the suit that he'll make for Sutton to wear when he leaves. Sutton returns to his cell to pack up his books, manuscript for his own novel, and his other belongings. Sutton calls his attorney, Katherine. She says she's sold his story to a reporter as an exclusive and they're flying him to New York City. He also calls his friend Donald to ask him if he can pick him up and if he can get an address of a woman for him.

When the guards come for him again, they escort him to put on his new suit and receive two checks from Mayor Rockefeller. Sutton walks out of the prison for the first time in seventeen years. Throngs of reporters, onlookers and fans rush toward Sutton. Sutton gets into Donald's GTO and they drive to a bar for a few drinks.

On the drive, Donald passes Sutton an envelope with the woman's address on it. Donald asks if the woman has anything to do with Schuster, which is a man Sutton is accused of murdering. Sutton says all roads lead back to Schuster.

Donald drives Sutton to the airport. The reporter greets Sutton and escorts him to the plane. Sutton admits that it's his first plane ride. It's 1969 and Sutton is now sixty-eight years old. When they land at LaGuardia, the reporter says they are staying at The Plaza, but that Sutton cannot leave the hotel for the first day, until they have his story down.

Chapter 1 Analysis

It's ironic that Mayor Rockefeller agrees to release Sutton because Sutton is a former bank robber and Rockefeller is a former banker. Sutton walks with a limp because the prison doctor had to operate on his leg. Since he needs surgery on it that Sutton wouldn't allow the prison doctor to do, it foreshadows Sutton dying before he is able to have the book he's written published.

Additionally, the woman's address Sutton asked for must have something to do with his past life. It can be a long-lost daughter he had from one of his previous relationships. It can also be one of Schultz's relatives that Sutton wants to make good with since Sutton is accused of murdering Schultz.



Since the reporter is there for an exclusive on Sutton's story, this also suggests that it might cause a problem with Sutton publishing a book of his story. Since Sutton is counting on making money from publishing his book, this can derail his ability to earn an income if he cannot publish it. At the age of sixty-eight, and the fact that he isn't in great health, doesn't make Sutton eligible to work in many positions as a way to earn money.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Sutton is sitting in his hotel room at The Plaza. He's been up all night smoking Chesterfields and drinking champagne. He's also been thinking about Bess, but he hasn't opened the envelope Donald gave him yet. Sutton thinks he's dying because he's experiencing all of the signs the doctor says he would in the final stages.

Reporter arrives with coffee and bagels. Sutton shows Reporter a map of the route they have to take for him to tell Reporter his story. Reporter starts to say they don't have time for all this, but agrees to it when Sutton says it's all or nothing. They take the elevator downstairs.

They get into a car with the photographer from the newspaper. He's going to be driving them around while the reporter takes down Sutton's story. The reporter shows the photographer the map and tells them they have to go in chronological order. As they drive, Sutton notices the change in haircuts, fashion and the homeless population. The men talk about the astronauts landing on the moon and various other things that have happened since Sutton went away.

During the drive, Sutton feels pain shoot up his leg and all the way to the spot behind his eyeballs. They arrive at the street where Sutton was born in 1901. He tells the reporter and the photographer that everything looks different now. Sutton suddenly hears his brother taunting to him from the window and his mother calling down to him. The reporter and the photographer ask if he's okay.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Sutton is demanding to walk the photographer and the reporter through his story and his crimes in chronological order because it is symbolic of Sutton's life. Sutton is reliving his life one-step at a time. Primarily, Sutton is doing this so he can relive the moments in his life because Sutton knows that he is dying.

Sutton can hear his brother and his mother because Sutton's life is passing before his eyes. He knows that he doesn't have much longer to live so he is relishing each and every moment in his life.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Willie is a small boy again growing up on Gold Street. It's a dirt road and the neighborhood where all of the poor Irish families live. Willie lives with his two older brothers, two older sisters, father, mother, and grandfather, who he calls Daddo. He remembers how poor they were and how grief-stricken his mother was after his baby sister, Agnes, died.

Sutton thinks about his childhood. He recalls how his two older brothers tormented him, including breaking his nose when he was about eight years old. When Sutton returns to the present, he hands the photographer an envelope and starts mentioning Bess when he passes out.

When Willie is ten, he tries to fight back. It doesn't work. Willie stays close to home because this is the only place where his brothers cannot attack him. One day, they do, but Daddo witnesses the attack.

The reporter and photographer manage to catch Sutton before he hits the ground. They settle Sutton back into the car to move on to the next location.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Sutton is starting to see his life pass before his eyes. Since Sutton believes he is about to die, he is recalling some of the major events in his life. His thoughts start back to his childhood.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In 1911, Willie walks in on his mother reading the bible story of Joseph and his brothers to Daddo. When Willie is overcome with emotion, his mother thinks he might become a priest so she enrolls him in Catholic school.

The photographer starts driving erratically. He says they are being followed by a news van. He drives until he is able to lose them. Sutton says one of the reasons he feels off this morning is that he's in the back of a converted cop car without handcuffs.

Willie remembers the two boys he met at St. Ann's—William Happy Johnston and Edward Buster Wilson. Happy is always happy, hence the nickname. Eddie sometimes steals, even though his family is wealthier than most of the Irish families in Irish Town. When Billy Doyle, a boy in their neighborhood is arrested, Billy rats out some of the other boys. All of the people in town shun him for being a rat, so he kills himself by drinking iodine.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The story of Joseph and his brothers is religious symbolism. In this situation, Willie represents Joseph. Willie's mother and Daddo mistake Willie's break down as a sign that he is moved by the Holy Spirit instead of the fact that Willie relates to Joseph because Willie's own brothers are trying to kill him. Sutton is revealing the information about his childhood to provide some background information as to how he initially got involved in crime. A lot of his feelings on committing crimes and not being cooperative with the police stems from Sutton's upbringing and the unwritten Irish code to stick together and keep your mouth shut.

The photographer and the reporter allude to the fact that Sutton is arrested with both Eddie and Happy. Sutton remembers Eddie's first kill, which was a goat acting as if he was a sheep, and rats out the other sheep. Sutton refers to this as Eddie's first kill, which suggests that Eddie kills someone when they get older.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

By 1914, America is in a Depression. After graduating from grammar school, Willie has to find a job to help his family. One brother is working in a factory in West Virginia; the other went off to the Army but is back now helping their father in the shop blacksmithing. After searching for jobs, Willie, Eddie and Happy meet up for a swim in the East River. Even though the river is filthy, they enjoy it.

By 1916, Eddie lands a job in construction. Happy and Willie are working as gophers for a bank. By 1917, the boys are 17 and have all been laid off from their jobs. When the war starts they land jobs making machine guns at a local factory. The boys are making four times the amount they were making so Willie pays his parents room and board. He spends the rest of his money with Eddie and Happy at Coney Island.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The swim in the river is symbolic of a cleansing for the boys. It's as if the water of the river is baptizing them from all of the evil and bad in the world. Sutton takes the reporter and photographer to a few more spots, but some of the places are gone, including the apartment house the family moved to in 1915.

Ironically, Sutton's first job is working at a bank. Later, Sutton becomes a bank robber. Sutton gets his first taste for money when he is moving barrels of money from the bank vault to the teller drawers. After being laid off from work, it foreshadows how Sutton comes up with the idea to start robbing banks.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Next, Sutton takes them to the location of the whorehouse where he lost his virginity to a one-armed prostitute names Wingy. By November 1918, the boys are out of a job because the war is over. The boys are fishing under a bridge when they meet Bess for the first time. She's a blonde-haired and blue eyed girl and she is beautiful. She's carrying a basket of lunch that she's delivering to her father at the shipyard.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Sutton thinks about how the newspapers describe Bess later as an ash blonde. This suggests that Bess somehow gets involved in the criminal activity the boys are about to embark upon. When he drives the photographer and reporter to Beard Street, he reveals that this is the spot where he fell in love with Bess.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The boys run into Bess and two of her girlfriends on the boardwalk in Coney Island a few days later. Eddie hooks up with one of the girls, while Happy takes the other girl, leaving Bess for Willie. They ride The Whip and sing together while Happy plays his ukulele. When it gets late, the girls head home, but Bess and Willie have a date in a few days.

They have ice cream on their first date. They kiss, but when Bess tries touching Willie, he stops her. A few weeks later, Bess professes her love to Willie because of the way he looks at her so lovingly.

Willie tells the photographer and reporter that he needs a drink. They say that it's not a good idea. Sutton says none of this is a good idea.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Sutton is revealing the information on his one true love. This confirms that it is Bess that Sutton asked Donald to find for him. Again, because Sutton believes he is dying, he is trying to wrap up all of the loose ends in his life. Sutton has the urge to apologize and make amends to Bess for whatever it is that he did to hurt her because of his crimes and because of his behavior.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

At the beginning of 1919, Bess takes Willie to her house to meet her parents over dinner. Dinner conversation reveals that Willie's family is Catholic and the Endners are Baptist. Willie's family is from Ireland, while Bess's family is from Germany. Mr. Endner also finds out that Willie has been laid off from his past two job positions. When Bess and Willie meet the day after dinner, Bess tells Willie her father forbid her from seeing him anymore. Willie agrees to talk to Mr. Endner.

Mr. Endner tells Willie that he's not good enough for Bess. He even offers to write Willie a check if Willie signs an agreement saying he'll stay away from Bess. Bess and Willie secretly defy Mr. Endner and have secret rendezvous at Meadowport Arch. They also go with Happy and Eddie to one of the local bars to hang out with each other.

At the bar, the barkeep is very superstitious. Bess loves to open and close her umbrella inside. This causes the barkeep to turn in three circles every time she does it. Willie mentions she's taunting the barkeep but that she is also taunting fate.

Bess keeps trying to talk Willie into ribbing her father's safe at the shipyard. He continuously says no, but eventually agrees to do it. Eddie has a part-time job now, so he can't help, but Happy helps Bess and Willie to rob the safe one night for \$16,000. The trio runs off to Poughkeepsie, New York because that's where the next train out of town is heading. Bess loses her virginity to Willie on their first night in the hotel and they plan to marry the following day.

They spend a week there. They spend money on buying a car, suits, dresses and food. Willie alludes to the fact that they are leaving a paper trail of receipts that are eventually used in a trial as exhibits.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Willie mentioning Bess Taunting fate suggests that something ominous is about to happen. Happy refers to Willie and Bess as Romeo and Juliet. He says they are star-crossed lovers as the Shakespearean characters. Willie points out that the difference is that they both die at the end. This suggests that the ending of the romance between Bess and Willie is not because one or both of them dies, but that something else tears the two apart.

Willie mentioning each of the exhibits used in a trial suggests the three are arrested and tried for robbing the safe.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

On the morning that they plan to marry, the sheriff arrests Happy, Bess and Willie.

While they all spend time in jail, Mr. Endner bails Bess out, while Happy and Willie remain in jail until the trial months later. Bess ends up testifying that everything was her idea and she makes a deal with the prosecutor. Happy and Willie both spend time in jail for the robbery and for kidnapping Bess. At the end of the year, Willie is released from prison but Bess's family sent her to Hamburg to live with her family in Germany.

Eddie gets Happy and Willie jobs at the shipyard where he is working. Willie also gets his own place because his parents are disgraced by his arrest and time spent in jail. When Willie gets laid off from this job, he rations his savings, but this also causes him to cut back on his food intake. Willie gets very skinny. He tries to enlist in the military, but his criminal record prevents him from joining.

Happy and Eddie then start driving beer trucks during prohibition. Eddie quits when happy gets arrested. Eddie finds out about a jewel thief in town that is looking to put together a crew. Eddie takes Willie to meet Doc. Doc ends up hiring Eddie and Willie.

Chapter 9 Analysis

It seems as if Willie is having bouts of bad luck. He can't seem to catch a break in life. Ironically, Willie is very intelligent, but can't seem to find a way to put his intelligence to good work. Even though he always tries to work hard and do the right thing, he continuously gets laid off from his positions. This paints a picture as to why he eventually goes down the road to becoming a lifelong criminal.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Eddie and Willie learn how to crack safes and steal jewels from Doc. Willie becomes one of the most important members of Doc's crew. When they sell a small bag of jewels to one of the socialites, Willie chooses one of the diamond rings and asks the socialite if he can take the ring for his girl.

At one heist, Doc can't crack the safe. It's the first time it's ever happened to him. At this point, Willie tells Doc he's quitting the crew. He says it's time for him to start his own crew. Willie meets Eddie at a diner to tell him it's time for them to go out on their own when Eddie tells Willie Bess is back in town and that she's getting married.

Willie gets dressed and ready for the wedding. He sits in the fifth row at the church. Mr. Endner sees Willie first as Mr. Endner escorts Bess down the aisle. Bess sees Willie and mouths something to him that Willie cannot make out. Willie runs out of the church and all the way to the arch.

Sutton overhears the reporter and the photographer talking about him while Sutton naps in the back seat. Sutton has told them that their next stop is Times Square.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Willie sense that Doc's professionalism is slipping. Willie is scared that this might cause the crew to get busted. One small slip up is all it takes to land all of them in jail. Willie has studied with one of the best thieves in the country. now, Willie feels prepared to go out on his own, with Eddie as his partner, so they can start robbing banks. Ironically, now that Willie is rich and has everything he should be happy. The irony is that Willie doesn't really want any of it if he doesn't have Bess.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Willie chooses his first bank to rob. He also uses the skills Doc taught him about scouting out the location and the need for proper planning.

Sutton, the reporter and the photographer arrive in Times Square. Sutton sees a prostitute. She reminds Sutton of Wingy so he strikes up a conversation with the woman. The photographer buys Sutton a pair of fur-covered handcuffs so that Sutton will feel normal while riding in the back seat of the old converted cop car.

Eddie and Willie make a trial run at robbing the bank. They build the necessary platform and take the necessary tools. They don't steal anything and they even live their tools behind. They aren't afraid of leaving fingerprints because they are wearing gloves. They decide to go to a baseball game. By this time, it is April of 1923.

Sutton recalls these events as he stands in front of the ballpark. He comments on how much it's changed. Reporter and photographer explain it was renovated.

Eddie and Willie are dressed in one of their expensive suits, along with expensive hats at the baseball game. They pay \$200 to a guy in the parking lot for the tickets. As they are enjoying the game and eating their Cracker Jacks, two men come and haul them away. They turn out to be policemen.

Eddie and Willie go to trial for robbing the bank. Even though they didn't steal any money, attempting to rob a bank is robbing a bank. They are sentenced to five to ten years in Sing Sing. Eddie is assigned to kitchen duty at Sing Sing. Willie is assigned as an assistant to Charlie Chapin.

Charlie Chapin is a fellow prisoner and former newspaper man. He's serving time for killing his wife after losing all of his money. Warden Lawes treats Chapin special because Chapin ghostwrites magazine articles for the warden that has been published—some winning the warden awards.

It is Chapin that convinces Willie to read. Chapin tells Willie some of the greatest stories ever told by some of the greatest authors. When Chapin reaches the climax of the story, he stops. He tells Willie he has to read the book to find out how it ends.

One day, while working in the rose garden Chapin has planted inside of the walls of the prison, Eddie comes to talk with Willie. He says he's found a way for them to break out of prison by stowing away on the food trucks. Laws calls them into his office and says someone overheard their conversation. Even though Willie told Eddie he wasn't going to break out, the warden ships them off to a very tough prison near the Canadian border.



When Sutton tells the story to photographer and reporter, they say this is the prison where he met a future accomplice, Marcus Bassett. Sutton says he trusted Bassett because he was a writer, but that he should have known better. He says Bassett was a stickup man, which he refers to as a yegg.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The conversation Sutton has with the prostitute in Times Square makes Sutton realize that some things have not changed over the years that he spent in prison. For example, just as Wingy worked every day of the week trying to make money, the prostitute he meets in Times Square is working, even though it is Christmas Day.

Eddie and Willie getting busted about a month after for the bank robbery is very reminiscent of Willie, Happy and Bess getting arrested one week after robbing Mr. Endner's safe. The indication seems to be that what Mr. Endner said to Willie about him having bad luck in life is true. Very time things are going well for Willie, something bad always happens.

Sutton's description of Marcus Bassett suggests that the two men end up getting caught and serving time for their crimes.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Four years later, Willie's parole is approved, while Eddie's is denied. Willie tries to get a job but can't seem to find one. He goes to Philadelphia to look up one of Doc's old friends. The friend says Doc has been in prison for the last couple of years. The friend hires Willie to kill a little person, but when Willie meets the little person he realizes he can't kill him.

Willie ends up finding a job working for a landscaping company. he is assigned to a crew that works the estate of Greystone. Greystone is owned by a famous and very rich lawyer, Mr. Untermyer. Untermyer takes an interest in Willie after seeing him reading one of Cicero's books on his lunch break.

After Sutton shows the reporter and photographer the home of Mr. Funck, the landscape company owner, they move on to the public library, where Willie spent his one day a week off reading.

Chapter 12 Analysis

In a way, Willie and Mr. Untermyer live parallel lives. While Willie is a bank robber, Untermyer is a bank buster. He works as a lawyer to expose bankers that are crooks and thieves. While many people treat Willie differently after they find out he is a criminal, Untermyer does not. Untermyer sees Willie as an interesting and intelligent character.

Photographer mentions shooting pictures of Willie with ghost prostitutes. The reporter and photographer also don't understand Sutton's one-liners and what he is saying sometimes. This seems to be because Sutton is thinking about his past in his head but isn't relaying the entire story to the photographer and the reporter, as he is with the reader.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

It's July 1929. Willie is in the library when he reads a newspaper headline about Bess having her husband arrested. It says she's accusing him of abuse and the paper lists the address where Bess is hiding from her husband. Willie goes to Bess and they talk about running away together. Bess says she's pregnant and that her husband's family is too powerful—that they'll have Willie's bail revoked. The next day after work when Willie returns to where Bess is staying, the door is open and her belongings are gone.

As the Depression hits again in 1930, Willie loses his job at the landscaping company. He has enough money saved to make it a few months, if he doesn't eat a lot. He's sitting in front of the library when he runs into Marcus Bassett, who he knows from prison. Willie goes back to Marcus's house with him, which is worse than Willie's. Willie also meets Marcus's wife, Dahlia.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Willie running into Marcus Bassett foreshadows the two men returning to a life of crime. Sutton refers to the library as a crossroads in his life. He was destitute as he sat on the steps in front of the public library. While his life could have continued down the path of destitute, it changed when he ran into Marcus.

Sutton rekindling his relationship with Marcus is the spark that sends him off on a new path in life. This is when Sutton starts robbing banks. Ultimately, however, this is also the path in life that leads to a lifetime of prison.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Just as Willie is about to run completely out of money, he can't sleep, so he starts wandering around the city. He finds himself in front of bank as a security guard is arriving at work for the day. As he watches the guard, he gets an idea and runs to Marcus's house to discuss the plan with him.

Willie tells Marcus if they wear uniforms, such as a mailman, delivery guy, or such, that the guard will open the door for them. Once they are inside, they can subdue the guard and then each of the employees as they enter the bank. First, they need money for the uniforms so they decide to rob a jewelry store.

After robbing the jewelry store, they have the money they need to start robbing the banks. Willie spends hours watching the banks, sketching maps, getting to know the employees and the names of the employees' spouses - all the necessary information they need for the day that they will rob the bank.

Willie and Marcus use their money to upgrade their apartments and their lifestyles. Now, Dahlia is pregnant. She also confronts Willie about Marcus cheating on her one night after Willie has dinner at their house. When Willie tells Marcus, Marcus confirms he is cheating on Dahlia. Marcus also confirms that Dahlia knows everything about their spree of burglaries.

Willie arranges to meet with Dahlia at a coffee shop. He continues to assure her that Marcus isn't cheating on her. After she leaves, cops rush the shop and arrest Willie.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Willie continues to make one fateful decision after another. Once again, Willie has gone from destitute to wealthy. Once again, he's also been ratted out by some move or another, which is presumably going to land him back in prison once again.

Willie continues to insist that his need to make the money he made robbing banks was all for Bess. He thinks if he has enough money that he can finally win Bess back. In reality, Willie never gets Bess back. Ironically, even at what seems like the end of his life, the only thing Sutton seems to have on his mind is contacting Bess, which is why he has her address written on the envelope inside his jacket pocket - the address Donald got for him.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The police officers take Willie and Marcus to the station in two separate cars. They tell Willie that Marcus is telling them everything and that he should tell them everything too. Willie says Marcus isn't talking and refuses to talk either. The cops beat up Willie. Later, when Willie sees Marcus in his cell, Marcus doesn't have a mark on him. Willie calls him a rat.

Marcus is sentenced to twenty-five years in Sing Sing. Willie gets fifty years. Willie meets Johnny Egan in prison and the two plan an escape. They escape successfully and have Bess pick them up outside of the prison.

As Sutton relays this story to the reporter and photographer, Willie handcuffs the photographer. The photographer wants to know what it felt like to get beat by the cops while handcuffed so Sutton tries to recreate the experience. Still handcuffed, the photographer gets in the passenger seat of the car, the reporter drives and Sutton returns to the back seat.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Willie is a very loyal and trusting person. Unfortunately, he also doesn't seem to be a very good judge of character. While Willie believes that Marcus is loyal to him and will not confess anything to the police, Willie is wrong. Ironically, Marcus believes that if he confesses to the police that it will prevent him from serving time, but Marcus ends up receiving a twenty-five year sentence anyway.

It happens again in prison. Willie starts to trust Johnny Egan because he believes he needs Johnny's tools and help to escape the prison. This foreshadows something going wrong with Johnny Egan because Willie does not seem to be a good judge of character.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Willie and Egan check into a hotel. The next day when Willie goes to Egan's room, Egan isn't there. When Willie finds Egan, Egan is drunk.

Sutton takes the reporter and the photographer to the location that Dutch Schultz used as his headquarters. Sutton alludes to the fact that Schultz is the one that helps him take care of the problem Egan poses.

When a girl commits suicide in the hotel where Egan and Willie are staying, Willie uses the makeup in her room to disguise himself. Willie tries to drop Egan off at each of his brothers' houses, but all of the brothers refuse to be associated with Egan. Willie then drives to Dutch Schultz's bar. Bo, a man that works for Dutch Schultz agrees to take Egan off Willie's hands in exchange for Willie not ratting Dutch Schultz out when Willie was arrested.

Willie drives to Philly, where he reunites with Eddie and they start robbing banks again. Eddie enlists a getaway driver, Joey Perlango, whose nickname is Plank. Plank keeps insisting that he wants to wear a costume, like Eddie and Willie do. Eddie and Willie keep refusing his request because he is just the driver and nobody sees Plank.

After a robbery that lands the men with millions of dollars, Eddie and Plank bring their girlfriends over to celebrate. As Plank follows his woman into the bedroom, Willie thinks he sees Plank wearing one of their costumes. One year after his escape, Willie is drinking in his apartment when the police bust down the door and haul him off to jail for questioning. Willie finds out that Plank is the one that ended up ratting him and Eddie out. When the cops go to arrest Eddie, they end up shooting him in the optic nerve, which causes Eddie to go blind.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Willie realizes that Egan's behavior is going to cause a problem for them—possibly even getting them caught. Willie had a bad feeling about bringing Plank into the robberies. Eddie, however, kept vouching that Plank was a good guy. Once again, instead of listening to his instinct, Willie allows Eddie to talk him into working with Plank. Plank ends up turning them in and landing Willie and Eddie back in prison.

While Eddie and Willie remain loyal to each other, it is when the men involve a third person in their robberies that there tends to be trouble. Instead of learning from these past incidents, however, the men continue to bring third parties into their plans, which ultimately lead to their downfall repeatedly.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

When Willie wakes up in prison, he isn't sure how long he has been there. This time the guards end up dragging him to an isolation cell because they've found the hacksaws he had for trying to break out of the prison. After spending eighteen months in isolation, Willie is released into the general population.

Willie works his way up into the secretary to the prison psychiatrist. Willie types of Shrink's book manuscript and notes from Shrink's sessions about Willie's fellow inmates. During a conversation one day, Shrink evaluates Willie. When the photographer and reporter ask if the shrink ever evaluated Willie, Willie says no because he was too complex.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Willie appears to be hallucinating. His denial of the fact that he's in prison once again is causing him to sleep for long periods of time. This causes him to lose track of time. All of this is a coping mechanism to help Willie deal with the situation he is in.

Shrink draws parallel lines between each person in Willie's life and the actions Willie has taken in his life. For example, Shrink points out that Willie constantly blames everyone else for everything that has happened to Willie in his life, rather than taking the blame or the responsibility for his own actions. Shrink also points out that it's ironic that one of Willie's father's jobs was building locks and that Willie has spent a lifetime breaking into locks.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Willie meets a man, Tick Tock, who tells him about a way to escape the prison through the sewer pipe. Willie and three other lifers go down into the sewer. Willie ends wading through waste and feces that reach to his nose but he is not able to find the way out. Willie then meets two other men that he finds out are on a crew digging a tunnel out of the prison. Willie joins the crew and they are able to dig a hundred foot tunnel out of the prison, which takes them a year to complete. When they finally finish and escape through the tunnel, all of the men are eventually caught or turn themselves in.

Willie confesses to the reporter that he has a daughter. She should be about forty by now. Willie says that he had her with a woman he met when he got out of prison in 1927. When the two men go to the car, they notice the photographer has been smoking marijuana in it. Sutton asks the photographer if he can have some.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The address on the envelope in Sutton's coat pocket might not be for Bess after all. The address might be for his long lost daughter. While Sutton has many regrets in his life, he mentions that having a child while he was in prison was enough to tear him apart.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

When Willie and the others go back to prison, they are put into isolation. Willie befriends the young prisoner that delivers his mail and books to him. Despite his hatred for the kid because he's a rat, Willie befriends the kid and convinces the kid to smuggle in a gun and hacksaws for Willie.

Photographer, reporter and Willie make a stop in front of a bank. Photographer says the bank built the safe in plain view in the middle of the bank window as to prevent Sutton from robbing it back in the 1950s. The paper wants a picture of Sutton in front of the bank.

The night Willie plans to break out of the prison, the rat kisses Willie. Willie has to play along so that the kid doesn't go straight to the warden to report the break out. At midnight, Willie meets up with his two fellow escapees. They overtake the guards and put on the guard uniforms.

Willie hitches rides and borrows money from the people that pick him up. He continues to do so until he reaches New York City. Sutton tells the reporter and the photographer that he was able to land a job as a porter when he arrived in the city. He also says the Statue of Liberty spoke to him and saved his life that day. The reporter points out that Sutton's version of the breakout is different than what the file says.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The reporter has files about Sutton's cases that seem in direct conflict with how Sutton is now telling the story. Some of this can be because Sutton is telling the story from his own point of view. Sutton's point of view is his own and therefore can differ from the point of view of the other prisoners and guards that were involved in the cases.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Willie works as a porter in Farm Colony, which is a hospital for women, under the assumed name of Joseph. Willie listens to their stories. He also takes pride in his work, throwing himself into learning how to best wax the floor and undertake all of the duties he's assigned. By 1948, he and one of the fellow escapees, Freddie, are still free. The two other escapees have been recaptured. Joseph becomes close with Claire Adams, one of the patients. When she dies, Willie goes to dig up one of the jars of money he buried when he was robbing banks. He donates it anonymously so Mrs. Adams can be properly buried.

As more women die, more anonymous money appears. When a bank robbery article says that it had to be a job by Willie the Actor Sutton, Sutton's picture starts to appear in the paper again. The Head Nurse of the hospital confronts Joseph about his true identity. Joseph admits to her that he is Willie Sutton.

Chapter 20 Analysis

When Sutton tells the reporter and photographer the story about working in the hospital, he also takes them to a grove. He tells them that Bess is buried nearby. This, of course, suggests that Bess is dead. This also indicates that the address on the envelope in his coat pocket is not Bess's address. This makes it likely to be the address of Sutton's long lost daughter.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Willie rents a room from a Spanish landlord and changes his name to Julius Lorton. He also has plastic surgery to change his appearance. Willie also meets Margaret, a prostitute that is half Irish and from Cairo. Margaret is about twenty years younger than Willie and one of her eyes is bigger than the other one. As their relationship continues, he ends up convincing Margaret to let him take her to the doctor to have her eye checked out.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Now that Willie is happy once again with Margaret, it foreshadows something bad happening in his life. As is his history, when things are going right, it is typically the point where Willie is arrested. For example, Margaret's eye continuing to get bigger and to bulge out further indicates that she has some kind of an illness or disease that is causing this. It can lead to Margaret's death.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

The day of Margaret's doctor appointment is the day Willie has to meet Mad Dog to plan the bank robbery for the following day. When Willie gets to his car, the battery is dead. Two cops approach him asking for his identification and registration. The cops leave but come back and ask to take Julius down to the station to question him about some vehicle thefts.

When they arrive at the station, they take his fingerprints. When they determine Julius is really Willie the Actor, they arrest him and return him to prison.

The reporter and the photographer start talking about Arnie Schuster as they drive to the home where he lives. Sutton recalls the first time he saw Arnie they were on the same subway train. Arnie kept staring at Willie. It turns out that Schuster recognizes Willie from the FBI's most wanted list and turns Willie in to the police for a reward the banks promise to pay.

In prison, Sutton becomes friends with the warden. The warden brings Willie books. This is when Willie starts reading some of the greats. The crowds of New York City think that Willie is a hero and that Schuster is a rat. The cops end up arresting Mad Dog and even Margaret. Margaret kept begging to see a doctor. When they didn't take her to one, her eye exploded from the tumor that was making it bulge and she ended up suing the city for negligence.

As the reporter, Sutton and the photographer return to the alley where Schuster was shot, the reporter continues to tell the story of Schuster's death. It's the biggest unsolved crime in the city, although, they believe it was a mob hit since Schuster was shot in both eyes and his groin. After shooting a photo of Sutton in the alley, they want a photo of him in front of Schuster's house.

Sutton says that he needs a cigarette first. He returns to the running car to get his Chesterfields. Sutton gets behind the wheel of the car and speeds off.

Chapter 22 Analysis

The way that Sutton remembers the events of his life and the way the reporter is reciting other people's accounts of the same events seem quite different. In addition to the differences stemming from perception differences, it also seems as if Sutton's illness might be causing him to hallucinate and envision events from an entirely different perspective from the truth.

When Sutton steals the car, it foreshadows him driving to the address on the envelope from Donald. When Sutton drives to the address, it will finally reveal whom he has been trying to see for the entire day.



Chapters 23 and 24

Chapters 23 and 24 Summary

Sutton follows Donald's directions. He knocks on the door and a young woman answers with blue eyes and ash-blonde hair. Sutton finds out that it's Bess's granddaughter. She also tells him that Bess and her mother, Sarah, are both dead. Kate tells Sutton that she knows who he is and that her grandmother spoke about him all the time.

As they continue to talk, Sutton starts to babble. Kate tells him she doesn't understand what he's saying because Bess was eloping with Happy, not Sutton.

It's eleven years later. the reporter is in Florida, which is where Willie Sutton died just a few months prior. Willie lived longer than he did or anyone else thought he would. Willie and the reporter ended up becoming friends over the years. The reporter is there trying to find Willie's final manuscript.

The reporter thinks about how Willie is the only person to write two memoirs that contradict each other. The reporter also believes that Willie lived three lives—the one Sutton remembers, the one Sutton tells other people and the truth.

Chapters 23 and 24 Analysis

Kate's conversation with Sutton confirms that Sutton is going crazy. The entire time he's been telling his story he's been talking about how in love he and Bess are. The truth is that Willie was in love with Bess, but Bess was in love with Happy.



Characters

Willie Sutton

Willie Sutton is sixty-eight years old. He has been in Attica, doing time for bank robbery, for the last seventeen years. He is also suspected of murdering a young man by the name of Schuster. Willie was committing crimes and robbing banks for forty years before going to prison.

Sutton is very intelligent. He likes to read books by some of the greatest authors - Plato, Socrates, Keats, and more. In prison, he has written a novel, which is his own life story. When he is released from prison, he takes his first ever plane ride into New York City, where he is scheduled to give his exclusive story to a reporter.

Bess Endner

Bess Endner has blue eyes and ash-blond hair. She is the daughter of a wealthy man that runs a local shipyard. Bess meets Willie, Eddie and Happy on the boardwalk one day when she is delivering lunch to her father.

When Bess and Willie fall in love, Bess introduces him to her parents. They don't approve of him because he comes from a different social status. It is Bess who convinces Willie to rob her father's safe so they can run away together, elope, and be together.

Bess has to testify in court about the robbery. She strikes a deal with the prosecutor so that she doesn't do any jail time. Bess goes on to marry a man from a wealthy family that supposedly abuses her. She has a daughter with him. Bess and Willie are never able to be together or to marry.

Donald

Donald spent time in prison with Sutton for killing a man. Donald was released from Attica nine months prior to Sutton's release. Donald picks Sutton up from prison and gives him the woman's address Sutton asked Donald to find for him. Sutton and Donald have a few drinks together at a bar before Donald drives Sutton to the airport.

Arnie Schuster

Arnie Schuster was a man in his twenties. One day he runs into Sutton on a subway train. Three weeks later, Schuster is dead. People think Sutton is responsible for Schuster's murder, even though Sutton was in prison at the time of Arnie's death.



Katherine

Katherine is Sutton's attorney. Sutton calls Katherine when he finds out that he's being released. She says they've given up on trying to keep Sutton in prison. She also thinks that since it's Christmas, they are giving him the ultimate gift - his freedom. Katherine is the one that arranges for Sutton to give an exclusive to a reporter.

Reporter

The reporter is in his mid-twenties. He greets Sutton at the airport and flies with Sutton to New York Sutton. When Sutton looks at the way the reporter is dressed, he thinks they guys is dressed like an old codger. Over the eleven years following Sutton's release, up until Sutton's death, the reporter and Sutton become friends.

Photographer

The photographer is also in his twenties. He drives the car containing Sutton and the reporter around the city while Sutton tells his life story to them. Additionally, the photographer likes to smoke marijuana. The photographer even shares some with Sutton during the novel.

Daddo

Daddo is Sutton's grandfather. He is Mrs. Sutton's father. Daddo and Willie were close when Willie was growing up. After Daddo dies, Willie's perspective on life changes.

William Happy Johnston

Willie Happy Johnston becomes Willie Sutton's friend when they meet at Catholic school. Happy, which is what everyone calls him, has coal black hair and eyes. Happy always seems to be in a good mood and has a smile on his face. Happy helps Willie rob Mr. Endner's safe, which lands Happy in prison for the next twenty-five years. Upon his release, nobody ever hears from Happy again.

Edward Buster Wilson

Edward Buster Wilson becomes Willie Sutton's friend when they meet at Catholic school. Eddie comes from a wealthy family—at least more well off than the other families in Irish Town. Eddie has blonde hair and blue eyes. Eddie fights and is angry all the time.

Throughout their friendship, Willie and Eddie are partners in crime. When they first start robbing banks, they start robbing them together. Eddie ends up getting shot and killed by the police when they are trying to arrest him for some bank robberies with Sutton.



Objects/Places

New York City

New York City is the primary setting in the novel. Sutton is born and raised in an Irish neighborhood in the city. Upon his release from prison, Sutton drives around New York City with the photographer and the reporter while Sutton tells them his story.

Attica

Attica is a prison in New York. It is the prison where Sutton ends up spending his latest years in prison. It is from Attica that Sutton is released when the novel first opens.

Books

Sutton is constantly reading books. When he's packing his things to leave prison, some of the first items he grabs are his books. Sutton seems to find solace in reading while he is in prison, although he continues to read in between stints in prison too.

Manuscript

Sutton has written a book manuscript on yellow legal pads while in prison. The manuscript is also one of the items Sutton packs when leaving prison. At the end of the novel, the reader learns that the manuscript was never published, even though Sutton did publish other books.

Meadowport Arch

Meadowport Arch is an arch at the end of Long Meadow. It is the meeting place for Willie and Bess after Bess's father forbids them from seeing each other. It's where Bess finally convinces Willie to rob her father's safe at the shipyard.

Poughkeepsie

Poughkeepsie is a city in New York. It is where Bess, Happy, and Willie run to after the robbery. Poughkeepsie is also where they get arrested.

Greystone

Greystone is the name of the Untermyer estate and mansion. Willie lands his first job after being released from prison the first time as a landscaper at Greystone. Willie

writes Mr. Untermyer a letter after he's laid off from the landscaping company, but Mr. Untermyer never responds to Willie.

Subway Train

Sutton and Arnie Schuster first see each other on a subway train. It is this encounter that propels Schuster to report Sutton to the police and FBI for a reward. Most people believe that it is this encounter that leads to Schuster being murdered in an alley near his home a few weeks after Sutton is arrested.

Alley

Arnie Schuster is walking in an alley when he's shot. The killer shoots Schuster in each eye and in his groin. Schuster's body lies in the alley until a woman from his neighborhood trips over him. After visiting the alley, Sutton drives away in the photographer's car to try to see Bess.

Florida

Florida is where Sutton moves to after his final prison release. Florida is also where Sutton dies. The reporter travels to Florida after Sutton dies to try to find Sutton's final manuscript.



Themes

Good versus Evil

The primary plot throughout the entire novel is that of good versus evil. Biblical symbolism can be found throughout the book. Each of the characters experiences an inner struggle with good versus evil, but the struggle is especially strong within Willie Sutton himself.

Sutton struggles with the good and evil of committing crimes. The way he presents the struggle, or the way that he rationalizes his crimes in his own mind, is that Sutton became desperate. The desperate times always pushed him from trying to do the right thing, in finding a job, into committing crimes, such as robbing jewelry stores and banks. He also struggles with having to sacrifice his own wants and needs as a typical teenage boy and young man to become a hardened criminal.

The reporter and the photographer also struggle with the good and evil of Sutton's crimes. The man that they see before them seems to completely contradict the hardened criminal they have read about over the years in news accounts, FBI files and police records. Both young men start to sympathize with Sutton's actions, even though they both know that each crime Sutton committed was harmful to someone.

Coming of Age

One of the primary themes that run throughout the novel is growing up and coming of age, even against adversity, such as poverty and the loss of a great love. Sutton struggles with the fact that his coming of age includes having to grow up faster than his peers because he has to take care of himself after his family all but disowns him for going to prison the first time. All of the characters in the novel have to face adult problems, such as poverty and committing major crimes, when they are still children and very young adults.

Bess Endner's coming of age involves her first love and losing her virginity. While she and Sutton seem to have an unbreakable bond and love for each other, their social status is what keeps the two lovers from being together. By the end of the novel, however, it seems that their love affair was all part of Sutton's imagination. Additionally, it was really Bess and Happy that had an undying love for each other.

Family

Family is the central theme throughout the entire novel. This is because a major part of the storyline is about the lives of Willie's family - the Suttons. While every family has their trials and tribulations, the Sutton family has its own family dynamics that are the same and that are different from those of other families. In the end, Sutton blames his

life of crime on the way he was treated by his brothers, his parents, and his grandfather, Daddo.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person point of view, from the perspective of author. The novel swings back and forth between the present and the past. The present represents the time after Sutton's final release from prison. The past represents the time leading up to Sutton's final arrest and final stint in prison.

The point of view of this novel is intimate, allowing a reader to connect closely with the main character, Willie Sutton. The book written in this manner allows the reader to get inside the head, thoughts and inner struggles of Willie Sutton as it pertains to the plot. The reader cares what happens to Willie Sutton. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the other characters and the occurrences taking place.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in New York City ranging from the early 1900s up until the 1980s. The novel covers the life of Willie Sutton, which stretches over this eighty year period. The main characters are involved in the aftermath of the crimes Willie Sutton committed over his lifetime.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware of how many crimes involve Willie Sutton. However, as events unfold, the crimes are a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters, and even the outcome of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is relatively simple and easy to read. The language is from the 20th century, which is when the novel is set. The language is descriptive enough that it helps to explain the situations and is detailed enough for the reader to truly understand.

Structure

The novel is divided into 24 chapters. The length of each chapter ranges from six pages 30 pages long. The chapters tell the story primarily in exposition and some dialogue. The narrator injects his own voice and thoughts throughout the book, providing his opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is the struggle of human beings in choosing between good and evil. One subplot is the coming of age of each of the characters. Another subplot is the relationships that form in family.



Quotes

"All roads eventually lead to Schuster, right, Donald" (Chapter 1, p. 168).

"Coming, Mother" (Chapter 2, p. 35).

"Toughened me up" (Chapter 3, p. 42).

"You're talking to yourself, for starters. And you're not making sense" (Chapter 4, p. 49).

"Welcome to earth, suckers. The whole thin's rigged" (Chapter 5, p. 65).

"Boys, you're only really alive, in the fullest sense of the word, when you're in love. That's why everyone you meet seems like they're dead" (Chapter 6, p. 71).

"You look at me as if you want to make happy, as if you can't possibly be happy unless I am. It's thrilling. It's frightening. It's what I want for the rest of my life. The only thing I want" (Chapter 7, p. 79).

"Never thought I'd be an outlaw" (Chapter 8, p. 93).

"And so it begins" (Chapter 9, p. 116).

"Schuster, Schuster, Schuster—that's what my editor said as I walked out the door" (Chapter 10, p. 131).

"A man requires some beauty to survive" (Chapter 11, p. 147).

"No word where the most prolific bank robber in U.S. history is spending Christmas" (Chapter 12, p. 157).

"You saw it happening. Patience, or Fortitude, whatever the fuck your name is. How come you didn't warn me? One little roar" (Chapter 13, p. 176).



"I know" (Chapter 14, p. 191).

"It felt like a dream, boys" (Chapter 15, p. 210).

"He told the cops everything" (Chapter 16, p. 232).

"So your father, who never spoke to you, made locks. And you are now locked up—in part for picking locks. You think that's all coincidental" (Chapter 17, p. 239).

"I have a daughter" (Chapter 18, p. 253).

"That's not how I remember it" (Chapter 19, p. 268).

"She's buried on the other side of this hill" (Chapter 20, p. 268).

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Chap. 21, p.

"That's what I want to know" (Chapter 22, p. 315).

"She was eloping with Happy" (Chapter 23, p. 323).

"Willie? Sure. He was a regular" (Chapter 24, p. 329).

Topics for Discussion

Who is the true Willie Sutton? Why has he chosen to tell his story to the reporter and the photographer? Do you believe Sutton's story as he tells it to the reporter and the photographer? What do you think the true story is about Sutton and Bess and some of the other inconsistencies throughout the novel?

Discuss the relationship between Eddie and Willie. Are they friends, like brothers or simply partners in crime? Does Willie see Eddie's faults? Why does Willie feel the need to protect Eddie? How does Willie feel about Eddie? How Eddie feel about Willie? How do Willie's feelings change after Eddie's death? Do you think Willie's life would have turned out differently if he never became friends with Eddie?

Who is Bess Endner? Why does she choose to marry the man that she does? Why do you think Willie believes that he and Bess had a love affair? What role does Happy play in the lives of Bess and Willie?

Why do think makes Sutton move to Florida? What makes Sutton write conflicting memoirs of his life? Why do you think Sutton lived eleven years longer than he thought he would?

Discuss the crimes Sutton commits throughout his life. What impact do the crimes have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them and how does it derail their lives?

What do you think happens to the reporter after Sutton's death? Do you think he ever finds Willie's latest manuscript? How do you think the public will process the information in the new manuscript if it is ever published?

Do you think Sutton had anything to do with Schuster's murder? Is Sutton's connection to the mob and crime world enough to prove Schuster was murdered in honor of Sutton?