

The Sheep Look Up Study Guide

The Sheep Look Up by John Brunner (novelist)

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Plot Summary

"The Sheep Look Up" is a science fiction novel that describes the decline of the United States in an environmental disaster that results in widespread disease and death. It follows several characters over the course of a year as their paths intertwine while they struggle to cope with the drastic changes in the environment. Written in the early 1970s, the story takes place in a fictional future when much of the country is under permanent cloud cover and the air is too polluted to breathe without wearing filter masks. Food and clean drinking water are in short supply. Throughout the country, a movement of environmentalists calling themselves "Trainites" after their inspiration, a scientist named Austin Train, spray-paint slogans and symbols on polluting cars and buildings. Some of them live in "wats," commune-like compounds where they try to live as cleanly as possible.

Austin Train himself has gone into hiding after inspiring the movement by trying to warn the public of the dangers of their way of life. He works as a garbage man while the situation around him worsens. Meanwhile, in Africa and Honduras, people have become crazed after eating a food-product called Nutripon, made in the United States. The insanity is traced to a substance somehow introduced into the product, perhaps intentionally. As international tensions rise, the environmental damage in the US rapidly increases. An epidemic of diarrhea sweeps the country. The rate of birth defects increases. Insects that have become resistant to insecticides plague food crops. The insurance industry is faced with a declining life expectancy and an increase in environmental disasters. A company trying to profit from the crisis by selling water filters finds the water so dirty the filters clog up. People in the US begin to show signs of insanity similar to those in Africa and Central America. The US government declares that the nation is under attack by biological means, imposes martial law and begins to round up Trainites. Several outspoken critics of the government are killed.

At the height of the crisis, Austin Train emerges and goes on a national television interview program. He is immediately arrested on a trumped-up charge for a kidnapping that was actually committed by one of his devotees using his name. He exposes the farce of his trial on national television and gives a dramatic explanation of how the nation has become so poisoned it is doubtful it will survive. The novel abruptly ends at this point with the suggestion that the only way for the planet Earth to survive as a whole is if the United States and its consuming and polluting culture disappears.



December

December Summary

The first chapter is called "December." It opens with the confused thoughts of a man named Decimus Jones, who imagines he is being hunted by wild animals, and decides to make a run for escape. In actuality, he has gone insane and is running across a busy highway, where he is struck and killed.

The traffic delay from Jones' accident affects Philip Mason, who is driving from Denver to Los Angeles to attend a meeting of sales executives for a large insurance company called Angel City. Mason arrives late, his throat hurting from breathing the heavily-polluted air. He meets another executive who has also arrived late because a group calling themselves Trainites had created an anti-car disturbance on his route. Following the meeting, Mason's boss, a man named William Chalmers, tells Mason he and his family will be visiting the Denver area on vacation and would like to see him.

Back in Towerhill, Colorado, a police officer named Pete Goddard has a hangover the morning after a party for his first anniversary. He tries to purchase some oxygen from a coin-operated machine, but it is not working.

In Honduras, a representative named Leonard from a United Nations organization called Globe Relief is being shown a patch of coffee plants by a man named Williams. Williams pulls up one of the dying plants to reveal several insects called "jigras" that have bored through the roots. The insects attack coffee, corn, beans and other food crops and are resistant to every known insecticide. The local residents are facing a food shortage because of them.

Back in Colorado, a reporter named Peg Mankiewicz identifies the body of Decimus Jones and learns what she can about his mysterious death. He apparently was driving, and simply pulled his car over and ran out into the traffic. Peg knows Decimus from her past as a friend of Austin Train, a scientist who had given dire warnings about the collapse of the environment from the use of chemicals, antibiotics and pesticides, but who had gone into hiding. Decimus was also a friend who lived at a commune called a "wat" where the residents tried to live without reliance on chemicals and polluting substances.

Peg decides she must tell Austin about the death of Decimus and tracks him down working as a Santa Claus in a mall. Although Train has gone underground, she is one of the few people who knows how to reach him. Train already knows about Decimus' death, as it happens. In conversation with Peg he is dismayed at the violence people are undertaking in his name. Although the Trainite movement was inspired by him, he does not lead it. Nevertheless, he is wanted by the US government who suspect he is behind the increasingly destructive actions of the movement.



Also in Colorado, the wealthy heir of an oil fortune, Jacob Bamberley, proudly gives his adopted son, Hugh Pettingill, a tour of his hydroponic food plant where a product called Nutripon is produced. Hugh listens begrudgingly, but is privately disgusted by Bamberley.

Nutripon is mainly used to provide food relief to parts of the world suffering from hunger. One such place is in the village of Noshri, in Africa, where a nurse from South Africa named Lucy Ramage is working to help the local population. Shortly after receiving the Bamberley Nutripon, the people of Noshri begin to act strangely and come after Lucy and the military authorities of the village. She is rescued by international forces who put down the riots.

December Analysis

The story begins with very little background or introduction. Although it is not apparent until later in the story whose thoughts are described at the opening, it is later implied that they are those of Decimus Jones, an environmentalist who becomes the first victim of a widespread accidental poisoning. Although this is the only direct description of Jones' actions or thoughts, his accidental death becomes a common point of connection for many of the characters in the story. Here, Jones' death in traffic makes Philip Mason late for his meeting in Los Angeles.

Mason is one of the primary characters, and he is introduced here. The main characters of Austin Train and Peg Mankiewicz are also introduced. Before introducing Austin Train, the author refers to the "Trainites" who stage environmental protests in his name. The name of the movement suggests that Austin Train is perhaps a charismatic leader who is coordinating a widespread action. Instead, Train is an unassuming and anonymous figure who has retreated from the spotlight and is working as a mall Santa when he is found by Peg Mankiewicz. The occasion for her visit to Train is the death of Jones, who is a mutual friend.

Two supporting threads to the story are established in the first chapter, as well. One is the ongoing failure of crops in Honduras and the rebellion there against the influence of the United States. The resistant insects called "jigras" are first spotted here. They will later spread to the US. The second supporting thread is about a starving African village called Noshri where the US has supplied food relief in the form of Nutripon, a protein-rich substance created in Colorado by Jacob Bamberley.

Bamberley's Nutripon plant is thoroughly described as he gives a tour to his adopted son, Hugh. Their contentious relationship is established here. Hugh's eventual departure from the family in disgust will play a central role in the story.

January

January Summary

The second chapter is called "January." The chapter opens at the ski resort town of Towerhill, Colorado, where Bill Chalmers and his family are vacationing. In an avalanche apparently caused by the sonic boom from a supersonic airplane flying over, the resort where they are staying is suddenly crushed by snow.

Pete Goddard, who has spent the day investigating the communal "wat" as part of the investigation of the death of Decimus Jones, who had been the leader of the compound, returns home to his wife, Jeannie, who has been working at the Bamberley hydroponic plant. He receives a phone call about the avalanche, and is called in to help with the rescue efforts.

Philip Mason, who is under some stress after his dinner with Chalmers, his wife, and his annoying son, turns on the television and sees the news of the avalanche. He has a sinking feeling because it is Angel City that holds the policy on the resort that has been destroyed.

Pete arrives at the disaster scene and begins digging through the snow. He breaks through to a pocket where several children are still alive under a shelf of snow being held up by a single beam. Pete sees that the beam is about to collapse and place himself under it, with the beam resting on his shoulder, while he calls for help.

Peg Mankiewicz receives a phone call from the doctor who performed the autopsy on Decimus. He informs her that Jones had a kind of psychedelic drug in his system. Peg knows that Jones and the other residents of the wat are against taking drugs, so this information concerns her. She wonders if he may have been poisoned. There had been some food left behind in his car, but she imagines it was discarded.

Jacob Bamberley visits New York City where he is invited to appear on the Petronella Page program, a very popular television interview show, to address the rumors that the people of Noshri were somehow poisoned by the Nutripon made by his company. Bamberley is nervous on the program and gets defensive over Page's pointed questions about his product, insisting it is produced in very clean conditions and is entirely safe. Page produces a box of Nutripon and invites Bamberley to eat some of it on camera to prove his confidence. Bamberley is presented with a bowl of Nutripon and as he begins to eat it, an announcement is made to clear the television studio as a bomb threat has been received. After the rush to evacuate, one of the producers tells a frightened Bamberley that the bomb threat had been aimed at him in particular, claiming to be in revenge for the deaths of the people in Africa.



January Analysis

The story focuses on Colorado, which will be the epicenter of the environmental disaster that drives the main part of the story. Although the Rocky Mountains are relatively clean and healthy compared to other parts of the country, the region has its own kinds of problems. One of them is the regular passage of supersonic aircraft which cause great sonic booms. One of these booms sets off a devastating avalanche that engulfs a large mountain resort. This accident continues a theme set at the beginning of the story which is the environmental damage caused by consumption.

The avalanche brings the character Pete Goddard into focus. Goddard is a black man in a society that is described as increasingly racially sensitive and segregated. He is shown as a man of action, heroically saving the lives of several children trapped in the snow.

The story takes on a hint of mystery when Peg Mankiewicz learns that Decimus had some kind of drug in his system when he died. She is surprised at this, since he and the other environmentalists do not use drugs as a rule.

Petronella Page first appears in the second chapter. She is a media superstar who puts her interview subjects on the spot. She challenges Jacob Bamberley to eat some of his own product on live television, for example, after the Noshri disaster has suggested that it might be poisoned.



February

February Summary

The third chapter is called "February." It opens in Ireland, where a doctor named Michael Advowson has overseen the destruction of several diseased cattle. Returning to his home, he is called on to treat the cut foot of a girl who has stepped on broken glass from a garbage dump. He receives an official visitor who delivers a message ordering Advowson to report to the United Nations to serve on a team investigating the riots at Noshri.

Peg Mankiewicz is fired from her position as a journalist for her obsession with proving that her friend, Decimus Jones, was murdered. As she is leaving her office, she meets a woman named Felice, who is Decimus' sister.

In Honduras, a village priest is raising alarm among the people calling the UN efforts to bring food relief an evil plot of the devil. There are people in his village who have been possessed by demons, he tells a relief worker.

Philip Mason fears he has contracted gonorrhea from a brief sexual affair on a business trip. He calls his regular doctor, who refuses to treat him but refers him to a clinic. At the clinic, a doctor confirms he has gonorrhea and advises him to inform his wife that she has been exposed. Mason does not tell his wife, and when she begins to show symptoms herself she goes to their regular doctor. He tells her she has contracted gonorrhea from her husband, which surprises her. Outraged partly at her husband for not telling her, but also in anger at the doctor who refused to treat him for it, she begins to throw and break things in the doctor's office.

Pete Goddard awakens in a hospital bed. He is a hero for his rescue effort. Holding up the heavy beam during the rescue operation has injured his spine, but he is expected to recover. The father of one of the children whose life was saved because of Pete has offered to pay for his treatment. Although he will not be able to return to his police job, a man named Alan Prosser has called him to offer him a job in Denver when he is ready. Pete is visited by his wife, Jeannie, who has recently been bitten on the hand by a rat in their apartment. He tells her about the job offer, which would mean moving to Denver from Towerhill.

Lucy Ramage is interrogated by government officials after the riots in Noshri. She describes the onset of the dementia in the people of Noshri, starting a few days after they began eating the Nutripon. Lucy herself was discovered in the village acting strangely. She had bit one of the officials who discovered her hiding in a hut, and had been sedated and taken to a hospital in England.

At the home of Jacob Bamberley, Jacob presides over a large family dinner with his wife and adopted sons. Hugh Pettingill, one of his sons, creates a scene at the table by



loudly criticizing his father for his apparent role in poisoning the people of Noshri. Hugh storms out of the house in a rage.

February Analysis

The secondary character Dr. Michael Advowson is introduced in this chapter. He lives in Ireland, which does not seem to be as heavily polluted as the United States but is experiencing some troubling events like infected cattle and litter. He is tied into the story through his connection to the United Nations, which is investigating what happened at Noshri. He briefly encounters Lucy Ramage, who provides more details about the insanity and rioting in Noshri.

The setting has been solidly established by the third chapter. Pollution has reached a level in the United States where people must protect themselves from the environment. Insecticides and antibiotics, originally meant to eliminate pests and disease, have been so widely used that resistant organisms have emerged that cannot easily be stopped. Philip Mason contracts a form of venereal disease that has become very common.

Philip Mason, Pete Goddard and Alan Prosser become linked in this chapter, introducing one of the secondary plots about the sale of water purifiers. The conflict at the end of the chapter between Hugh Pettingill and Jacob Bamberley begins Hugh's arc through the story.



March

March Summary

The fourth chapter is called "March." Peg and Felice are driving to the "wat" in Colorado where Decimus had been a leader. On their way they meet Hugh Pettingill, who is also heading to the wat and whose car has broken down on the road. Peg recognizes his name as one of Jacob Bamberley's sons and Hugh confirms it. They give Hugh a ride to the wat, where they meet Zena, Decimus' wife. Felice presents her with a canister of imported works to use in the wat's gardens.

Off the coast of California, a Honduran man skips a boat from which he releases several balloons carrying payloads of napalm. The balloons drift over Los Angeles and drop, killing and burning people where they land.

Alan Prosser comes to visit Philip Mason at his home. He has a business proposal for Mason, selling home water filters imported from Japan. He has a plan to become the sole distributor of the filters in the region, playing on the fears of people about the cleanliness of the water supply to install the filters and sell them refill cartridges. Prosser plans to use Pete Goddard, already recognized as a hero, as a spokesman for the filters.

Dr. Advowson is flown to Noshri and oversees an analysis of the Nutripon which shows it was contaminated with a substance known to cause hallucinations and dementia. Whether it was present in the Nutripon from the factory or introduced later cannot be determined. He is on a plane to New York to testify before the UN when he meets Lucy Ramage, who is also testifying. She is sitting with a man Advowson recognizes as a diplomat from Uruguay. Lucy tells Advowson she believes the Nutripon was deliberately poisoned by the United States to undermine stable government in Africa, and that the same thing was being done in Honduras, which had recently asked for similar food aid.

In Osaka, Japan, a sales executive named Hideki Katsamura is shown into the offices of Dr. Hirasaku, who gives him instructions on making a visit to the United States to award franchises for a brand of household water purifier.

March Analysis

Peg and Hugh are linked as the fourth chapter opens, establishing their connection that will figure in a plot revelation later in the story. The minor character Felice, the sister of Decimus, plays a significant role by accidentally bringing some of the resistant pests called "jigras" into the wat.

The cause of the insanity in Noshri is established by Dr. Advowson but its connection to Nutripon is left a mystery. This will not be revealed fully until the final pages of the novel.



The author adds some suggestive material that makes it seem possible the poison was intentionally added to the foodstuff.

The visit of Hideki Katsamura is an interesting development in the story. Katsamura's secretive visit to his superiors before coming to the United States suggests that he was intentionally infected with the disease that causes the epidemic of diarrhea. There is no doubt that the epidemic follows the same path that Katsamura follows on his trip. Whether his infection is deliberate is left unresolved. A second question is raised whether if it is deliberate, whether it is meant as a general attack on the United States, or is perhaps simply meant to develop a market for the water purifiers that Katsamura is selling. This follows one of the main themes of the novel, which is how commercial and environmental interests conflict.



April

April Summary

The fifth chapter is called "April." Gerry Thorne, an executive at Bamberley's charitable trust that operates his food relief efforts, is enjoying his vacation at a home in the Caribbean, one of the few places where it is sometimes still safe to swim in the ocean. He discusses the situation in Honduras with Moses Greenbriar, a fellow executive, as their wives swim nearby off the beach. They are interrupted by a scream from Moses' wife, Elly, and they see Thorne's wife, Nancy, thrashing around in the water.

Nancy comes ashore. She has what look like burns on her skin and is vomiting. They call an ambulance. Nancy survives, but is hospitalized in serious condition. Thorne later learns from a doctor that his wife was exposed to a nerve gas from World War I that had been dumped in barrels off the coast. The gas has a strong smell of violets. Occasionally one of the barrels washes ashore and breaks, the doctor tells him. It is usually kept quiet so as not to damage the tourist trade. Thorne vows he will make the matter known publicly.

At the wat in Colorado, Hugh Pettingill is trying to fit in. He is surprised that the people who live at the wat are nothing like the Trainites he knew in college. Outside the wat, the people calling themselves Trainites stage protests and call for destruction and violence. At the wat, the people are trying to live simply without creating pollution. Sometimes people from outside come in, trying to rouse them into taking some kind of dramatic action, but these people usually leave after discovering the wat dwellers are not interested.

Hugh meets another young man named Carl Travers who comes and stays at the wat from time to time. He and Carl sometimes leave the wat to smoke marijuana, which is not allowed at the wat. During one of these visits they become lovers.

Dr. Advowson meets with Jacob Bamberley while he is in New York, along with Thorne and Greenbriar. Bamberley explains his belief that the poison in the Nutripon must have been added after the product left his plant. He wants to avoid problems by having his plant inspected for safety measures and he asks Advowson if he will lead an independent team to certify that his Nutripon plant is clean. Their meeting is suddenly cut short by an explosion outside. Someone has detonated a car bomb that sends the glass windows crashing into the room.

Hideki Katsamura arrives in Colorado and meets with Alan Prosser about his bid for the Japanese water purifier franchise. Katsamura is troubled by persistent diarrhea during his visit. Shortly afterward, outbreaks of severe diarrhea are reported in the regions of the US that Katsamura has traveled through on his visit.



April Analysis

The accidental release of nerve gas that kills Gerry Thorne's wife causes him to sympathize with those protesting the environmental damage to the planet. This episode sets the character's path toward a showdown with the shadowy figures who seem intent on suppressing this kind of protest. The episode is also a foreshadowing of a similar accidental release of man-made poison into the water supply of Denver that will result in widespread dementia and rioting. The author establishes the fact that the disposal of dangerous chemicals by the government has been happening for many years and that the public is largely unaware of how and where these substances were stored. Dr. Advoson gets slightly closer to the truth about the Nutripon poisoning after meeting with Jacob Bamberley, but Bamberley is mainly interested in borrowing Advowson's credibility to protect his commercial reputation. This tension between commerce and the environmental good of the planet is one of the main themes of the story.



May

May Summary

The sixth chapter is called "May." It opens at the funeral of Nancy Thorne, who has died from her exposure to the nerve gas. Gerry Thorne is expecting a large turnout for the funeral, but the epidemic of diarrhea appears to have kept people away. In the wake of the publicity he created about the nerve gas, the tourist industry in the Caribbean has plummeted.

Doug McNeil, a doctor working for Alan Prosser, visits Pete Goddard and his wife in their new apartment in Denver. They discuss the epidemic and McNeil dismisses Jeannie's idea that it is being spread intentionally. He does admit that being awarded the new water purifier franchise seems to be good timing.

At the wat, the vegetable crops are failing. Peg and Zena pull up a potato plant and find a strange insect eating at the roots. They wonder if it could have come with the worms that Felice had brought, but the worms had come from a company called Plant Fertility, a reputable source. Peg becomes frustrated, wanting to do more to advance Austin Train's vision of a cleaner environment. She is also driven to find the truth behind the apparent poisoning of Decimus. She decides to leave the wat.

Austin Train continues to work anonymously as a garbage man. He draws some attention to himself when he saves a woman from being poisoned by an interaction of some chemicals and has to move on to another place before he is discovered.

Thomas Grey approaches Jacob Bamberley at his offices of the Bamberley Trust to ask to be able to use the trust's large computing capacity. Grey has written a computer program that will simulate the entire world. He intends to run simulations to search for a solution to the increasing damage to the environment. He is warmly welcomed by the trust, which is eager to be seen in a positive light.

Dr. Advowson has a contentious meeting with Bamberley and a committee making inquiries into the Nutripon incident. Jacob Bamberley tells the committee he will destroy all the Nutripon currently on hand and introduce new equipment into the plant to ensure absolutely clean conditions. He wants Dr. Advowson to certify their efforts as an independent authority.

Farms in other parts of the US begin reporting the presence of the persistent root-boring insects that kill most crops. All of them have purchased worms from the same source, Plant Fertility.

In California, Hugh and Carl have left the wat and are looking to take stronger action. They meet a heavy-set man who says he is Austin Train. The man is eager to undertake dramatic action himself and tells them how they can reach him.



May Analysis

The voracious insects first mentioned in the first chapter of the book reappear in Colorado, although it is unclear exactly how they came to be there. The source of these insects is left vague by the author, who suggests they may have been introduced deliberately or perhaps by a commercial dealer wanting to increase his profit.

Hugh and Carl leave the wat and a new thread of the story is established as they branch off on their own to take action against the environmental collapse. They met a man calling himself Austin Train, although it is clear to the reader, and soon to the characters, that he is not the authentic Austin Train. His adoption of Train's name will provide a plot twist toward the end of the story. The character is also destined to be the person who ultimately kills the real Austin Train.



June

June Summary

The seventh chapter is called "June." Large numbers of young people, some of them looking like Trainites, begin to arrive in Towerhill. At the same time, the army rolls several laser cannons through the city in the direction of the Bamberley hydroponic plant.

Dr. Advowson is at the plant to oversee the destruction of the Nutripon that is on hand as part of Bamberley's efforts to clear their name. The Nutripon is piled in an open fenced area where it is to be burned by the laser cannons. As the food is piled up, a mass of young people gathers at the fence. They insist on being given the food, believing it to contain the poison. They tell Advowson, who comes to the fence to speak to them, that the world has become so unbearable they want to go insane. Advowson tells them the food being burned has none of the poison in it, but they will not believe him. The food cannot be burned while they are at the fence, so Advowson hands some Nutripon through the fence to one of the youths, thinking that once they find there is no effect from eating it they will disperse. An angry American army officer sees Advowson giving out some of the food and is outraged. He draws a gun and places Advowson under arrest. A riot ensues. The laser cannons are used, and dozens of people are killed, including Advowson.

Peg Mankiewicz begins digging into the facts of the Nutripon poisoning, Plant Fertility and other signs of environmental collapse and believes she is being followed. She arranges to speak with Lucy Ramage, who arrives at Peg's hotel room with Fernando Arriegas. They tell Peg that the Nutripon sent to Honduras has the same poison as that sent to Noshri. They have brought a sample of it and they force Peg to eat some of it at gunpoint. They tell Peg they want her to experience what even a small amount of the poison can do. Peg fearfully begins eating the Nutripon and begins to feel lightheaded. She is uncertain what is actually happening when a man walks quickly into the room and shoots Ramage and Arriegas dead.

Gerry Thorne goes to visit Professor Lucas Quarrey to discuss Thorne's case against the State Department over his wife's death. Quarrey tells Thorne about what he has learned about the company Puritan, which claims to sell pure food. Some followers of Austin Train, perhaps even Austin Train himself, have analyzed Puritan foods and determined they are no better than other foods. Furthermore, they have determined that the food must be coming from outside the U.S., as there is not enough unspoiled farmland to produce as much food as they sell. He also has learned that the jigma pests were introduced into the country disguised to look like beneficial worms. Whether it was intentional or done just for profit he does not know. As Thorne is leaving, he opens the door to find two men dressed in black holding guns. The men kill Thorne, Quarrey and Quarrey's wife.



June Analysis

A dramatic showdown at the Bamberley Plant in Colorado will signal shift to the climax of the story line. The lead-up to this event begins in this chapter as more and more young people gather near the plant. The tone becomes more ominous, for as the people arrive so do large military laser cannons.

The turning point in the tone of the story is the riot and massacre that takes place at the Bamberley plant. Michael Advowson, a sympathetic character who is disgusted at the environmental pollution, is killed by the American army, foreshadowing the introduction of martial law in the area.

The tone grows even darker when Lucy Ramage, Gerry Thorne and Lucas Quarrey, all vocal critics of the government and the decline of the environment, are brutally assassinated. The central mystery of the story is deepened by the fact that Peg Mankiewicz is left alive.

July

July Summary

The eighth chapter is entitled "July." Jacob Bamberley's wife, Maud, becomes increasingly upset after the incident at the Bamberley hydroponic plant. She retreats to her bedroom and refuses to speak to Jacob, disrupting his beloved domestic routine. After a time, she reappears, coming to the large dinner table at meal time and taking her regular place at the end of the table. When it comes time to say grace, Jacob begins as usual, but Maud interrupts him, saying that he has blood on his hands and should not be saying grace. Bamberley leaves the table in an outrage and goes upstairs to his private study. He is hungry, but too proud to return to the table. Instead, he finds some candy that he had taken from one of his sons earlier in the day because his son is not allowed to have it owing to a medical condition. Although Bamberley never eats candy, he tries some as he stands at the high window of his study. He has a reaction to the candy and falls to his death from the window.

Around the country, the Trainites engage in increasingly destructive activities, like bombing gas stations and freeways. People in Cuba and Mexico plot to spread poison and disease in the US. In California, Hugh and Carl plot with the man calling himself Austin Train to kidnap Hector Bamberley, the teenaged son of Roland Bamberley, Jacob's wealthy brother, and Hugh's adoptive cousin. Roland Bamberley has recently become the distributor for the new Japanese water filters, and they plan to ransom Hector in exchange for Roland providing thousands of water filters to the people of California. Although Hugh and Carl now know that their friend, whom they call "Ossie," is not actually Austin Train, they follow his lead.

Hector is kidnapped and locked in a room in the house belonging to a friend of Hugh and Karl's named Kitty. Roland Bamberley goes on the Petronella Page show as a guest and angrily denounces the kidnapping, stating he has no intention of paying the ransom.

Moses Greenbrier is now the head of the Bamberley Trust and he calls in Tom Grey to ask him about his computer simulation. He wants Grey to use his program to find a way out of the current environmental catastrophe. Grey replies that he has taken the works of Austin Train and used them in his simulation and could try to find a solution if the Trust provides him with more money and staff. Greenbrier promises to give him whatever he needs.

Peg Mankiewicz finds herself in a comfortable hospital-like environment, uncertain of how she came to be there. A doctor named Prentiss asks her several questions about her association with Austin Train under the direction of someone from the government. They want to use Peg to track down Train, who they believe is behind the wave of sabotage and violence. They are uncertain, however, if the man she knows as Austin Train is the real one or one of many using his name.



July Analysis

Jacob Bamberley's accidental death marks the beginning of the disintegration of his family. He dies shortly after his wife questions his ethics over the poisoning of the people of Noshri. The author raises a question here about Jacob Bamberley's culpability for the environmental disaster. While he is the heir of an oil company, and he appears to honestly think he is doing good by developing and giving away Nutripon to food-starved regions. His pride blinds him to the possibility that he and his family may share responsibility for the impending collapse.

The kidnapping of Hector Bamberley establishes the event that will provide opportunity for the final scene of the book. The reader knows that the kidnapping is probably futile, as Roland Bamberley coldly refuses to negotiate for his son's release. Later, the kidnapping will seem even more futile as the reader learns the water filters the kidnappers demand in ransom are useless.

The mystery around the assassinations of several of the whistle-blowers deepens as it becomes clear to Peg Mankiewicz that she has been spared for some reason. It seems possible she is being manipulated to lead the authorities to Austin Train.

The slow buildup continues toward the near complete anarchy that engulfs the country by the end of the story. Tom Grey's efforts to find a way out of the current catastrophe using a computer simulation imply a kind of faith in technology to help resolve any problem.

August

August Summary

The ninth chapter is called "August." Orders for the Mitsuyama water purifiers are brisk, but shortly after they begin installing them, Alan Prosser begins to receive complaints that the filter units have completely clogged up. He is facing potential ruin having to replace them.

At the wat in Colorado, a meeting of wat members from all over the country takes place, deciding what their next step should be. They are being targeted as Trainites although they are not participating in the widespread protests. As they meet they hear a low flying plane approaching. Thinking it is a lost plane in danger of crashing into the mountain, they go outside to warn it with lights. As they step outside, firebombs are dropped from the plane, burning down the buildings of the wat and killing many of the people.

In California, Hugh and Carl's friend, Kitty, comes home to find Hector Bamberley being held captive in one of the rooms of her house. She goes into Hector's room and seduces him.

The real Austin Train makes his way from California to New York, where he gets in touch with Peg Mankiewicz. Peg pleads with him to come out of hiding, telling him he could be the most powerful person in the country. There are thousands of people who would drop everything and follow him if he would choose to lead them. Train is reluctant, but he finally agrees to allow Peg to arrange for him to appear on the Petronella Page program.

Poisonings and other environmental disasters continue to spread across the country. The government decides to blame the Honduran rebel factions and declare the United States to be under attack. Martial law is imposed in places like Colorado where Trainite activity has been heavy. Upon learning of Austin Train's intention to go on television, the government decides it must not let him gain any publicity and they decide to take action against him. They also learn that Train has already recorded a taped message to air in case he is silenced before his live interview.

August Analysis

The conflict continues between the outspoken critics of the current state of affairs and whatever unseen forces are behind the efforts to silence them. The mostly peaceful Trainites who live quietly on communes are killed in a coordinated attack on a leadership meeting. The government, which may be behind the attacks on the Trainites and others, uses the increasing violence and environmental collapse as an excuse to implement martial law. At the same time, official announcements sow mistrust among the people of the country, claiming that the country is under attack and that anyone might be an enemy, especially anyone seemingly sympathetic to Austin Train's beliefs.

Austin Train decides to come out of hiding and hints are given about the wide influence he once held before disappearing. He seems to know that emerging during the turmoil puts him in great danger, suggesting that he has perhaps expected things to proceed as they have.



September

September Summary

The tenth chapter is called "September." Hugh, Carl and Ossie are concerned about Hector Bamberley, who has become very ill living in his isolated room. Hector's father has stubbornly refused to negotiate or pay the ransom they demand, and they fear that Hector may die. They decide to leave his door unlocked and abandon the house, letting him go.

After they have gone, Hector does make his way outside the house, where he almost immediately collapses from sickness. He is taken to a hospital where he is identified. His father comes and receives the report from the doctor that his son has several illnesses, all of them fairly common among the population at that time, including venereal disease. The doctor also tells Bamberley that one thing his delirious son has mentioned is that he was kidnapped by Austin Train. The doctor himself thinks Hector is delirious and mistaken.

In New York, Austin Train has been taken to a high-security penthouse courtesy of the ABS television network that broadcasts Petronella Page's show. Page is delighted to have such a high-profile guest on her program and she speaks with Austin about the things he wants to say. She challenges him, and he defends the righteous anger of the people making protest against the environmental decline of the country. Although Page's plan is to "crucify" Train on her program, she changes her mind after he practically hypnotizes her with his description of the world before the air and water was so polluted when people could actually enjoy being outside and in nature. She decides to give Train a chance to make his case on her show and hold off on the "crucifixion" to a second show if he is not successful. When the time comes for the actual program, Train is in place in the studio but immediately after he is introduced police rush in and declare him under arrest for the kidnapping of Hector Bamberley.

At the offices of Prosser Enterprises in Denver one of the employees flies into an unexplained rage and believes Pete Goddard must be killed. Elsewhere across Colorado people are acting violently and strangely. The police are sent out to try to preserve order. Phil Mason offers to give Pete Goddard a ride home in his car, but they must take an alternate route because rioting has closed some of the streets. Phil finally gets Pete to his apartment and makes his way to his own apartment where he is stunned to learn from his wife that their young son had gone insane and stabbed his younger sister to death.

September Analysis

After it becomes clear their efforts are futile, Hugh, Carl and Ossie leave Hector Bamberley to find his own way free. The question of whether their actions are ethical is



left open, and continues one of the larger themes of the story which asks if the ends justify the means.

Austin Train is filled out as a character once he arrives in new York and meets with the powerful media personality Petronella Page. He appears to have an ability to hypnotize his listeners with his descriptions of what the world might be like without disease and pollution. Page plans at first to "crucify" Train on her show, but appears to change her mind after speaking with Austin. Her change of heart is conditional, however. She wants to wait to see the effect of his first appearance before she goes ahead with the plan to make him look ridiculous. This cynicism toward the media is implied throughout the story. Train is arrested before he can appear on television in what looks like a trumped-up charge based on Hector Bamberley's utterance that he was kidnapped by Austin Train. Later it will be learned that the charge is not merely invented but that the authorities have actually rushed to prosecute him with very little actual evidence.

The situation becomes desperate in Colorado as deranged and violent action become widespread.



October

October Summary

The eleventh chapter is called "October." The President of the United States makes a dramatic announcement that the country is under attack and that nobody should be trusted, including those calling themselves Trainites. His speech angers Trainites even more.

Philip Mason and his wife, Denise, are afraid to leave their apartment owing to the rioting outside. They stay holed up with their son, who is withdrawn and silent. Philip reluctantly opens the door when the Army arrive, going from door to door looking for survivors. He is stunned to learn they are the first people in the apartment complex to be found alive. An Army sergeant takes Philip's gun and calls in men to take away the body of his daughter. A doctor that Philip knows arrives to treat them for infection. He informs Philip that a military nerve gas had somehow been introduced into the water supply and anyone who had drunk any of the water had been affected with insanity. This is what must have happened to his son, Philip reasons. The doctor tells Philip that all able men are being drafted into military service and that he will be expected to report.

Hugh Pettingill is increasingly ill as he walks through the rain toward the Bamberley mansion. He is stopped by a military sentry who lets him in after he lies that he is reporting for military duty. The sentry tells him that Mrs. Bamberley has gone insane and is gone. The house is being used as a headquarters for operating work gangs of arrested Trainites. When it is discovered that Hugh is carrying forged identity documents, he is put on a work gang.

Peg Mankiewicz travels back to Colorado. She has been given a travel pass as a journalist through the influence of Petronella Page, who is quietly supporting Austin Train. Page tells Peg she has made several copies of the tape Austin gave her in case something should happen to her and is keeping them safe. Peg sees a work gang of Trainites and is alarmed to recognize Hugh among them. Pretending to want to interview some of the workers, Peg manages to get alone with Hugh briefly. He is disoriented, but remembers her. He tells her about Carl, and that Carl had also known Decimus. In fact, Hugh adds, Carl had once given Decimus a Christmas present of some Nutripon from the Bamberley plant where he worked, just before he had died. Peg immediately recognizes the significance of this fact.

October Analysis

The Mason family is in a gruesome and frightening position after their young son becomes affected by the poisoned water supply, and chillingly kills his sister. They are insulated from the rioting outside and are stunned to learn just how widespread the



violence and death is. Through news reports interspersed with the larger sections of the chapter it becomes clear that the situation is worsening across the country.

Uncertain what to do, Hugh tries to return home to his mother only to find she is gone and his home turned into a work camp for Trainites, who are being rounded up and forced into labor. This event does put him back in touch with Peg, who still has not been rounded up herself, despite her known affiliation with Austin Train. She knows she has the protection of Petronella Page, and Page's power is implied by the fact that Peg continues to go free.

This chapter near the end of the story concludes with a reference to the very beginning of the book. The book opens with the deranged visions of an unknown person who imagines he is being hunted by wild animals. When Peg realizes that her friend Decimus Jones had eaten some of the poisoned Nutripon shortly before he had run into highway traffic it confirms that these hallucinations from the first part of the story were those of Jones himself. It also reveals in retrospect what the current victims of the poison are going through.



November and Next Year

November and Next Year Summary

The twelfth chapter is entitled "November." Ossie, the man who had called himself Austin Train and who had helped kidnap Hector Bamberley, dies quietly alone after delirium and a high fever. Before he dies, he places a bomb at a public building. Meanwhile, the real Austin Train goes on trial for the kidnapping based only on the claim by Hector that it was Austin Train who had kidnapped him.

There is a throng outside the courthouse where Train is on trial. Peg Mankiewicz is inside the courtroom as a journalist. The trial is being broadcast live on television. Roland Bamberley sits indignantly with his son, Hector, as Austin Train is led into the room. Roland is astonished that Hector does not recognize him.

Pandemonium breaks out as it is realized nobody had ever actually asked Hector to identify his alleged kidnapper. The judge is infuriated and confused. Over the din, the voice of Austin Train rises, offering to help settle the confusion.

While everyone in the room sits rapt, Austin calmly explains that the planet cannot survive if the United States continues to export its pollution and its way of life to the rest of the world. He explains that the poisoning of the water in Colorado by nerve gas was not an attack, as the government claims, but the result of tons of buried military nerve gas that has seeped into the underground water supply. This was the source of the poison in the Nutripon, he explains.

Train goes on to explain that because of the stress from living in such a poisoned environment, as well as from all the pollutants, Americans have become steadily less intelligent. This is perhaps why they put him on trial without ever verifying with the victim that he was the one who kidnapped him. Train makes an impassioned plea to the television audience to vow that they will stop their destructive course so that future generations will not suffer as they have.

A cameraman informs Train that the broadcast has been stopped on order of the President. Just then an explosion rocks the courthouse, bringing the building crashing down. It is the last bomb placed by Ossie.

Philip Mason is on patrol in his military uniform when he is recognized by a fellow soldier who once worked for him installing water filters. The soldier blames the filters for poisoning the water and shoots him dead.

Pete Goddard surprises his pregnant wife, Jeannie, with a new microwave oven, but when she first uses it she collapses. Pete learns that the oven had leaked and killed the fetus, although Jeannie survived. He is outraged and begins to learn how to build a bomb.



Throughout the country, rioting and destruction spread. Fires are set in large cities. Petronella Page reports on the widespread destruction on her television program. Her guest is Tom Grey, who is finally prepared to announce his recommendation for reversing the environmental collapse based on his computer simulation. He mentions to Page that ironically, his recommended solution has already been undertaken, in a way. His simulation indicates that the only course of action that will save the planet is if the 200 million most "extravagant and wasteful of our species" are eliminated. (p. 636)

The final chapter is called "Next Year." It simply consists of a few lines from a poem by John Milton called "Lycidas." The first line of the stanza reads "The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed."

November and Next Year Analysis

"November" is the last full chapter in the book and it resolves most of the threads of the story while leaving the actual fate of the country vague. Ossie, the "fake" Austin Train comes in incidental contact with the real Austin Train and presumably kills him by planting a bomb at the courthouse where his trial is taking place. Peg Mankiewicz is also presumably killed in the explosion, as are Hector and Roland Bamberley.

Before the explosion, however, Austin train has his chance to address the nation. He exercises the same kind of hypnotic sway he demonstrated over Petronella Page earlier and is given a last word before the president orders the video feed shut down. His message is basically that the current generation is lost, and that only if it stops its wasteful ways will succeeding generations have a chance to enjoy the environment as people once did.

Meanwhile, Tom Grey has come to the same conclusion using his computer simulation, and he goes on national television to explain that the only way to prevent the collapse in the United States from spreading to the entire planet is to eliminate the hundreds of millions of people whose lifestyle has caused the collapse in the first place. This "solution" is an ironically simple one and is bitterly humorous. In the final chapter, called "Next Year," the author implies that this is precisely what happens afterward. The people of the U.S. are like the sheep who have nothing to eat and nobody to help them.



Characters

Austin Train

Austin Train is a scientist who is one of the first to sound alarms about the potential consequences of increased pollution, and the use of antibiotics and pesticides. After he becomes wanted by the government he goes into hiding, working anonymously as a shopping-mall Santa Claus and as a garbage collector. In his absence, people around the country take up his concerns and begin to stage protests against polluting industries and increased environmental damage. These protesters call themselves "Trainites" after Train, although he himself has nothing to do with their organization or activities.

When things begin to worsen and violent protests spread, Austin Train is blamed by the U.S. government, although many people around the country adopt his name and claim to be him. Eventually, Train decides the time has come for him to emerge from hiding and he arranges to go on a national television program to explain that his predictions have come true and to implore the country to stop its wasteful and polluting lifestyle.

Before he can make his statement, however, he is arrested and charged with a kidnapping undertaken by someone who was using his name. He is put on trial with very little evidence and it is soon clear that he is innocent of the charge. He uses the televised trial to make his statement to the world, but the video feed is quickly cut off by order of the president. Shortly afterward, the courthouse where the trial is being held collapses from a bomb placed by the man who had actually committed the kidnapping.

Peg Mankiewicz

Peg Mankiewicz is a journalist and personal friend of Austin Train. She is also a friend of Decimus Jones, and it is her investigation of Decimus' unusual and suspicious death that gets her fired from her job as a reporter.

Peg continues her investigation on her own, speaking in person with Austin Train. She is one of the few people he keeps informed about his location. Peg tracks down Lucy Ramage, the nurse who was present at the poisonings in Noshri, and is about to interview her when Ramage is brutally shot. Peg, disoriented from having been forced to consume some of the same poison that caused the Noshri incident, is taken into custody but then released, possibly to allow the authorities to follow her to Austin Train.

Peg does meet up with Train, and convinces him to come out of hiding to take control of the expanding movement of the so-called Trainites. She arranges for him to appear on the Petronella Page show.

Peg is covering the trial of Austin Train at the end of the story.



Jacob Bamberley

Jacob Bamberley is one of the heirs of a large oil fortune. He also heads the Bamberley Trust, a charitable organization that funds the production of Nutripon, a protein-rich food that is sent as food relief to starving areas of the world. Bamberley comes under fire when a shipment of Nutripon that is sent to an African village appears to have been poisoned, sending those who eat it into violent delusional rages.

Jacob Bamberley has a large family made up of adopted children and lives in a large home with servants. He becomes estranged from his adopted son Hugh Pettingill over his hypocritical position on the environment. After his usually submissive wife confronts him with his responsibility for the poisoning of the people of Noshri, Bamberley retires to his private study in a rage. He falls to his death from the window of his study after having an allergic reaction to a candy bar.

Philip Mason

Philip Mason is an executive with Angel City, an insurance company. He is married, with two children, and lives in Denver, Colorado. Mason goes into business with Alan Prosser selling in-home water purifiers after leaving Angel City and is doing well at first until the water filters begin to fail because of the extreme pollution in the water supply. Rumors spread that the poisonings that begin to afflict the people of Denver are actually caused by the water filters, and Mason is blamed.

As Denver descends into rioting and comes under martial law, Mason holes up in his apartment with his family, where his son, who has been poisoned by the water supply, has killed his daughter.

Mason is drafted into military service after martial law is imposed. He is shot to death by a fellow soldier who believes he is responsible for the mass poisonings.

Pete Goddard

Pete Goddard is a police officer in the mountain resort town of Towerhill, Colorado. He becomes a national hero when he helps rescue several children trapped in a ski lodge after an avalanche, but injuries he sustains during the rescue make it impossible to work as a policeman again. He becomes a spokesman for the Japanese water purification units being sold by Philip Mason and Alan Prosser and moves to Denver with his wife, Jeannie.

Goddard is optimistic about his new job and uses his increased salary to buy a coveted microwave oven for his wife. The oven is faulty and causes Jeannie to collapse the first time she uses it, also killing the child she is pregnant with. The incident causes Goddard to consider joining the violent protests.



Petronella Page

Petronella Page is a television star with a popular interview program. She is shown grilling people like Jacob Bamberley over his role in the Noshri poisonings, and is known for provocative stunts like asking Bamberley to consume some of his own product live on television. When Austin Train comes out of hiding, Page eagerly agrees to let him on her program, intending to "crucify" him by making him look ridiculous. Instead, she becomes sympathetic to Train's cause after speaking with him prior to the show.

Although Train is prevented from appearing, Page continues to support him quietly. She also uses her influence to get Peg Mankiewicz press credentials even though she is probably considered suspicious by the government.

Michael Advowson

Michael Advowson is an Irish doctor who is called into military service to help investigate the poisonings at Noshri. His investigation takes him to Africa, where he discovers the Nutripon supplied by Bamberley contains poison. He also goes to New York where he testifies before the United Nations, and to Colorado, where he oversees the destruction of the potentially tainted Nutripon. He is present when a riot breaks out at the Bamberley hydroponic plant where the food is being destroyed, and he is killed in the military suppression of the riot.

Lucy Ramage

Lucy Ramage is a nurse working for the United Nations in Noshri, a village in Africa. She is present when the village descends into violence after its residents become deranged by eating poisoned food. Ramage believes the poisoning was intentional and tries to spread the word about it in the United States. She is assassinated while she is being interviewed by Peg Mankiewicz.

Thomas Grey

Thomas Grey is a social scientist who develops a computer simulation of the environmental crisis that is affecting the world. Using the considerable computing resources of the Bamberley Trust, he is said to be working on a solution to the crisis. He finally does arrive at a solution with the aid of his simulation and he goes on national television to tell about it. His solution is simply to eliminate all those humans who are the largest consumers of polluting substances, namely the population of the U.S.



Hugh Pettingill

Hugh Pettingill is the estranged adopted son of Jacob Bamberley who joins the Trainite movement after becoming disgusted with what he considered hypocrisy by his father. Hugh lives at a commune for a short time, along with Peg Mankiewicz, but decides the peaceful lifestyle there does not suit him. He leaves and becomes part of a plot to kidnap his cousin, Hector Bamberley, to bring attention to the Trainite movement.

The kidnapping plot fails when Hector's father refuses to ransom him. Hugh returns to his childhood home but is soon branded a Trainite, and placed on a work crew.

Roland Bamberley

Roland Bamberley is the brother of Jacob Bamberley and also an heir to the family fortune. He is a cold-hearted businessman who refuses to give in to the demands of the Trainites who kidnap his son. He is killed in the courtroom explosion at the trial of Austin Train.

Hector Bamberley

Hector Bamberley is the healthy, strong teenage son of Roland Bamberley. He is kidnapped and held for ransom by Hugh Pettingill and other Trainites, but is let go after it becomes clear his father will not pay the ransom. During his captivity, Hector contracts many of the diseases and afflictions that are common among the general population but which he has no immunity to because of his sheltered upbringing.

Decimus Jones

The leader of a commune near Towerhill, Colorado. Jones dies at the opening of the story, one of the first victims of the poisoned Nutripon.



Objects/Places

Towerhill, Colorado

A resort town in the mountains of Colorado where much of the story takes place. While Towerhill is relatively free of pollution compared to places like California, it is still affected by the decline in the environment and the rise of technology. A sonic boom from a supersonic aircraft causes a massive avalanche in Towerhill, killing many people. The commune where Decimus Jones is leader is located near Towerhill

Denver, Colorado

The largest city in Colorado and the home of many of the story's characters. Denver becomes the scene of widespread panic and violence when the water supply is poisoned by escaping nerve gas disposed of in underground caves.

California

One of the most polluted of the American states in the story, where people routinely wear filter masks while outside and the smog and cloud cover is so thick the sun is rarely seen.

Trainite Movement

A loosely-organized movement that uses the scientist Austin Train as a symbolic figure warning against the increased pollution and use of chemicals and polluting technology. Although Austin Train does not lead the movement, it has many leaders who assume his name.

Nutripon

A high-protein food substance made from cassava plants by the Bamberley Hydroponics company. Nutripon is not sold in the U.S., but is purchased by international aid agencies to send to food-starved regions of the world. An accidental leak of nerve gas into the water supply used to make the food results in widespread hallucination and violence among the people of the African village of Noshri, creating an international incident. The food is also sent to Honduras, where similar poisonings occur.



Puritan Foods

A food company that sells supposedly naturally-produced products at a high price. It is hinted in the story that the company is dishonest in its representation of purity.

Angel City

A large insurance company that begins to feel a financial crisis as people start living shorter lives and environmental disasters increase. Philip Mason works for Angel City at the beginning of the novel.

New York City

The largest city in the United States and in the novel a place of intense overcrowding and pollution, where the rain is so acidic it eats through clothing. It is also where the Petronella Page show is based.

The Syndicate

A shadowy organization that is believed to be behind Puritan Foods and may be responsible for the assassinations of outspoken critics.

Jigras

Pernicious agricultural pests that attack the roots of many food crops and which have become resistant to the most powerful pesticides.

Themes

Ends and Means

One of the ethical questions that is explored in "The Sheep Look Up" is the question of whether it is acceptable to act in a way that might not normally be moral, if the ultimate intention is for a greater good. For example, the character Hugh Pettingill is willing to assist in the kidnapping of his cousin, Hector, and hold him hostage in exchange for Hector's father supplying water purifiers to the people of California. Hugh's intentions appear worthy on the surface. He wants a large number of people to have free access to clean water. The means he chooses to bring about that end is kidnapping and extortion, however, which are illegal and result in the victim, Hector Bamberley, in becoming seriously ill.

A similar ethical question exists in the larger theme of the novel, which charts the terrible descent of the United States into violence, disease and starvation. As the character Tom Grey suggests at the end of the book, the "extermination" of the people of the United States is the only plausible way to save the rest of the planet from a similar fate. His solution is not to try to save the lives of the 200 million people in the country, but to allow them or even cause them to die.

An Environmental Warning

"The Sheep Look Up" takes place in the future, but it is a future the author has made recognizable to his contemporary readers. Resistant bacteria and agricultural pests exist now, as does environmental pollution from cars, factories and other sources. The author imagines what the country might be like if these problems were to be allowed to persist into the near future. He imagines the emergence of pests like the "jigras," which ruin food crops and cannot be killed by any known pesticide because they have become resistant. He imagines a dramatic increase in common illnesses once the bacteria that cause them become resistant to antibiotics. He also describes air pollution so thick that it blocks out the sun. These problems not only weaken the population as a whole, they also make the country vulnerable to attack by biological means, such as the epidemic of diarrhea started by a deliberately infected Japanese businessman.

By conclusion of the novel, the situation has grown so bad that the only real solution is to allow the polluting culture of the United States to self-destruct in violence, disease and starvation. This is the final warning the author gives to his readers, arguing that there is more than the environment at stake, but also the health and livelihood of the human species.



Technology vs. Nature

"The Sheep Look Up" imagines a future not long off where technology has advanced, but so has pollution and other environmental strain. One source of the emerging disaster is the advances in science and medicine that have created antibiotics and pesticides. While these advances are helpful at first, they eventually become harmful as bacteria and harmful insects become resistant. This is an example of the tension the author describes between technology and nature, which forms a central theme of the novel.

In the world of the novel, technological solutions have been applied to some of the environmental problems that have arisen, with varying results. Steam-driven cars have appeared to counteract the pollution of gasoline engines. Filter masks and air purification units are common to counteract the poisonous air. Plastic overcoats protect people from corrosive rain. Perhaps most notably, the Bamberley Hydroponics Plant has developed a state-of-the-art facility to manufacture an inexpensive, high-protein food product that promises to help starving areas of the world.

In an ironic twist, however, the technology that promises to help humankind turns out to hasten its demise. Advanced as it is, the Bamberley plant is not immune to the poisoning of the water supply it uses to create its foodstuff, resulting in an international crisis when insanity and violence emerge in those who eat it.

In a final ironic twist, a technologically-advanced computer simulation arrives at the conclusion that there is no technological answer to the collapse of the United States, and that the only course is to let its people die.

Style

Point of View

"The Sheep Look Up" is set in the near future from the point of view of the early 1970s, when the book was written. It presents a pessimistic point of view of the future of the country, in terms of the stability of the natural environment and the ability for humans to continue to live as they are.

The novel imagines what the world might be like if people continue to expand their use of cars and other polluting forms of transportation, and concludes that eventually the air pollution will be so great that the sun no longer shines through the permanent clouds and the air stings the lungs. Other forms of pollution result in acidic rainfall and unproductive farmland. The continued use of antibiotics and pesticides have caused dangerous resistant strains of disease and pests to evolve.

Although measures have been taken to curb these problems in this imaginary world, they are too little, too late. Dangerous pesticides have been banned, but there is still a black market for them. A popular brand of food advertises its natural origins, but it is secretly passing off second-rate food as pure.

There are some characters within the novel who share this larger point of view that the country must be warned. These warnings go unheeded, however, until the only plausible solution is to eliminate the people who are creating the problem. Thus the larger point of view of the novel is as a warning cry that there may still be time to avoid the dire consequences of our lifestyle.

Setting

"The Sheep Look Up" is set primarily in the United States, with portions taking place in New York, California and Colorado. The time is an unspecified year in the future, although internal clues point to a time setting in the 1970s or 1980s. The book was originally published in the early 1970s.

The future is imagined as a place where pollution has drastically changed the way of life for most Americans. The smog in California is so bad that the region is under an almost permanent cloud cover and the sun shining through is an event that makes the news. The air is difficult to breathe and cars, homes and buildings have air filters. While outside, people wear face mask respirators to filter out the pollution. The water supply is often dangerous to drink, and the government frequently issues warnings not to use it. Acid rain falls that will stain and eat through clothing. Even in relatively clean regions such as high in the mountains of Colorado, the strains on the environment are felt. Rats and insects, made resistant after years of exposure to pesticides, endanger people and crops. The rate of childhood illness and birth defects is on the rise.



The government of the United States is led by a president who is little more than a cheerleader for the American way of life, and who dismisses reports of environmental disaster with flippant comments.

Elsewhere in the world the pollution is not as bad as in the U.S., but there is civil unrest and a shortage of food. People in Africa and Central America are resentful of the U.S. and the environmental damage that spills beyond its borders.

Political opposition exists within the U.S. as well, by a loosely-organized group of people who call themselves Trainites, after the scientist Austin Train who had given warnings about the consequences of America's unchecked pollution. Train himself is not involved in the movement.

Language and Meaning

"The Sheep Look Up" shifts style frequently, using language to set a wide range of tone. The largest sections of narrative are written mostly in a conventional past tense and in the third person. Interspersed with these narrative sections are brief descriptive sections that do not relate directly to the central narrative but provide background and commentary on the central events of the story.

These short sections take on a variety of styles. Some are written as news reports, presented in the present tense and describing larger elements of the story. Some are brief descriptions of events outside the main narrative, presented with very little explanation or background. These sections sometimes take other forms such as dialogue, official transcripts, menus, price lists and other incidental bits of information that contribute to the overall tone of the novel.

The author also shifts style among some of the longer narrative sections, such as the portions that take place as part of a television interview show, which include extended sections of dialog. Another shift is used when the scene moves to Japan, where the author uses short, direct sentences in a stylized English that approximates the foreign sentence structure of Japanese.

Structure

"The Sheep Look Up" is arranged in chronological order and unfolds over the course of a single year. Each chapter is given the name of a month, with a very short chapter of only a few lines serving as an epilogue to the story. The author begins by jumping from character to character in a series of seemingly unrelated changes in location. As the story progresses, however, the paths of most of the main characters cross in some fashion, intertwining their fates.

These episodes are described in short sub-chapters which are given short titles that are often ironic. Interspersed between these episodes are short sections that relate snippets from news reports, advertisements, government transcripts, poetry and other forms of



brief description that explain what is happening in the larger picture outside the experience of the main characters.

In general, the first part of the story establishes the main characters who are independently going about their lives. As the environmental crisis worsens, their paths begin to intersect. At the climax of the story, many of the main characters are mysteriously killed or succumb to poisoning or some other kind of environmental problem. This heightened crisis forms the second part of the story, ending with much of the country descending into violence and mayhem. The story then ends very abruptly on an ominous note that suggests the country self-destructs.



Quotes

"The acrid air ate at the back of his throat; he could imagine the tissues becoming horny, dense, impermeable. If this jobs likely to involve me in frequent trips to LA I'm going to have to buy a filtermask." December, p. 5

"These days nobody in his right mind would start a family before he could afford proper medical care for his children. Up here in the mountains it wasn't so bad as in the cities; even so you couldn't be too careful." January, p. 57

"He was home for the weekend from college, and this was the ritual of Sunday lunch after church. Apparently servants, in Mr. Bamberley's cosmos, didn't have to be allowed time off for worship, although both Christy and Ethel, the cook, were devout. They could be heard singing gospel songs in the kitchen most of the day." February, p. 109

"the sea moved lazily, its embryo waves aborted before cresting by the layer of oily residues surrounding the hull, impermeable as sheet plastic..." March, p. 124

"Exactly what Hugh Pettingill had expected to find at the wat, he couldn't have said. After only a short while, though, he was certain it wasn't there." April, p. 146

"Like most modern high-priced apartment blocks, the building where the Masons lived was protected by a sliding steel portcullis, bullet-proof glass, and a man with a gun on duty night and day." May, p. 166

"It was as though the entire country had been turned into a pork-barrel, with two hundred million people squabbling over the contents." June, p. 197

"At the big Georgia paper mill the saboteur was obviously a chemist. Some kind of catalyst was substituted for a drum of regular sizing solution and vast billowing waves of corrosive fumes ruined the plant. Anonymous calls to a local TV station claimed it had been done to preserve trees." July, p. 230

"She banged the table with her fist. 'Austin, for heaven's sake! Don't you know you're the most powerful man in the country right now? Whatever you think about the people who call themselves trainites, the picked the name because you exist.'" August, p. 273

"And then, all of a sudden, it was as though through those dark eyes an electrical circuit had been struck. She sat fascinated. Snake-and-bird fascinated. Afterwards she could not recall the details of what he had said. She remembered only that she had been absorbed, rapt, lost." September, p. 289

"We are fighting an enemy already in our midst. He must be recognized - by his words as well as his deeds." October, p. 327

"We can just about restore the balance of the ecology, the biosphere, and so on - in other words, we can live within our means instead of on an unrepayable overdraft, as

we've been doing for the past half century - if we exterminate the two hundred million most extravagant and wasteful of our species." November, p. 363



Topics for Discussion

The novel imagines a near future from the viewpoint of the early 1970s when it was written. Have any of the predictions in the novel come true? Have any failed to emerge?

The author raises the ethical question of whether it is acceptable to allow some people to die if it means others might live. Is there a clear answer to this dilemma?

What role does technology play in the novel? Does the author have faith in technology?

Discuss the author's description of the mass media in relation to how it exists today.

The novel imagines a governmental system that exists primarily to control its citizens. Discuss this view of the role of government.

The author shifts styles and viewpoints throughout the novel. How does this affect the way his story unfolds?

The novel ends abruptly, with the ultimate ending implied but not described. Does this make the novel more or less powerful?