

The Throwback Special Study Guide

The Throwback Special by Chris Bachelder

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Plot Summary

This study guide was created using the following version of this book: Bachelder, Chris. "Throwback Special." W.W. Norton & Company. 2016.

Throwback Special tells the story of a group of men who reunite once a year to reenact a football play called the Throwback Special. In 1985, Joe Theismann's career was ended after this play that went wrong. He fractured his leg and had to end his football career. For 16 years, these men have met to do the reenactment.

As they begin to arrive at the hotel, the desk clerk prevents them from checking in. Robert, the first to arrive, is tasked with mending a chinstrap while he waits in the lobby. The men discuss their lives and insecurities. A lottery is held to determine who will portray each player. The commission is assigned after the previous year's competition. This year, Trent is the commissioner and Gary is selected as Taylor, but not before Derek, the only person of color in the group, contemplates how he would approach the player seen as a villain differently from the others.

The other players choose who they will play until the last name, which reveals who will play Joe Theismann. Fat Michael, a pinnacle of male physique, is selected, which leads him to isolate himself from the group as he contemplates what it means to be in great physical form and face a life-altering injury. The men discuss their families and divorces. They grapple with toddlers learning to walk to teenagers exploring their sexuality. Andy, who once struggled to call his girlfriend his wife, now has difficulty calling her his ex-wife. The men try to relate to one another, but most of them have little in common with each other outside of participating in the reenactment.

The day of the reenactment arrives and the men come together to eat breakfast and watch the original play repeatedly. Watching Theismann's leg break over and over again leaves some of the men queasy. Some even believe that this will be the final year of the reenactment. Things are different this year. The group is forced out of the conference room where employees from Prestige Vista Solutions are having a corporate gathering. The men are older and questioning elements of their lives, from marriage to parenting to fitness.

When it is finally time to do the reenactment, the employees from Prestige Vista Solutions go to the football field to watch. The players take their places and the play begins, but something changes and they do not follow through on the play. The Prestige Vista Solutions employees are confused, but one man cheers from the sideline. The men return to the hotel room to celebrate. Their celebration includes David, one of the young employees from Prestige Vista Solutions. He slips out of the hotel room unnoticed and thinks about the reenactment. In his excitement he contemplates starting up a new tradition with all new people. The one thing David knows he needs to keep is the lottery system to ensure that everyone gets a chance to play as Theismann.



Prologue - Chapter 1

Summary

The novel opens with a prologue titled "Today in Sports History." It details a Washington Redskins game on November 18, 1985. During the game, Joe Theismann suffers a compound, leg fracture that ends his football career.

Chapter one is titled "The Arrival." Robert arrives before check-in at the hotel. He asks the female desk clerk to make an exception, but she says no. He walks around the hotel and notes the fountain, which is roped off for repair. He checks the conference room that the group usually uses, but it is scheduled for another group. He is anxious, which is why he has arrived early. He returns to the lobby to wait. He takes a sewing kit from his bag and begins to mend a chinstrap.

Charles arrives and sees Robert sleeping. Robert wakes when Charles greets him and explains he tried to check in and that no one else has arrived. Charles reassures Robert and Robert tells him they do not have the conference room. Because Charles is an adolescent counselor, Robert asks him advice about his daughter, who broke her arm. Robert's daughter fell off the monkey bars. Robert is confused by how he felt after hearing his daughter scream, as though it offered him some satisfaction that it would teach his daughter a lesson. Charles tries to reassure Robert that his reaction was normal, but he does not really want to have the conversation at all. Robert thinks about how he did not lie to his daughter because he told her "everything was going to be fine, and it was" (21).

In the parking lot, Vince and Fat Michael, who is extremely fit, meet up. Others arrive, including Tommy, Car, Gil, Myron, Gary, and Chad. Derek, who is mixed-race, also arrives, and is surrounded by others because of the "allure of annual interracial acquaintanceship" (23). Andy is in his car thinking about the strangeness of talking about his wife now as his ex-wife. It is raining and George asks to join Andy in the car and offers his sympathy for the divorce. Andy has a Redskins helmet in the passenger seat. George offers Andy firewater and they both drink from the flask.

Peter parks his car and goes in through the side entrance without anyone noticing him. He gets a cup of water and heats it in the microwave. He checks his phone and considers his sore knee and his age. He has let his hair grow to prepare for the haircut that Carl will give him on Saturday afternoon. He does not care for Carl's haircuts, but does not want to hurt his feelings. He drops a mouth guard into the hot water and puts it in his mouth to mold it to his teeth. He repeats the process, trying to improve the fit.

In the men's room, Carl takes a pill without water and feels a bump under his armpit. He carries books in his bag, including one on anorexia and a DVD titled "Marla Sessions" (36), which he puts in his coat pocket. With a sharpie, Carl decides to put some graffiti on the bathroom wall, but does not know quite what he wants to write.



The men gather in the lobby with their football gear, helmets and cleats. Trent, who is the commissioner for the year, has gained about thirty pounds. Jeff attempts to check-in, and is turned away like the previous men. The other decide it is best to wait. Wesley is coping with a bout of insomnia, which has given him more time to ponder “his other failures and shortcomings” (39). Bald Michael starts talking and joking about his son, who is “cruising” (39). He shares a photo of the toddler. Wesley misinterpreted Bald Michael’s comments about his son, thinking that the son was gay and Bald Michael was mocking him. Bald Michael asks about Wesley’s son, who is in college and whom he believes is gay, although he has not come out.

Vince goes into the men’s room and Fat Michael enters, choosing a urinal a safe distance from Vince. Vince comments that his wife would prefer that he sit down in the bathroom and Fat Michael nods. Vince sees the bag and books on the floor in the middle stall and knocks. Gary tells them that he tried sitting, but he came self-conscious when his dog walked in and saw him and he felt like the dog was judging him. Vince knocks again and pushes the partition open and sees a lengthy bit of graffiti. Vince, Gary, and Fat Michael read the unsigned graffiti: a first-person account of a high school boy having a sexual relationship with a classmate who would let him in and they would have sex on the foyer rug. One night the girl’s father yelled for him to come in the house and the boy left. Throughout the passage, he tells the reader not to respond with words like “slut” or “faggot” or “hell yes,” but admits that he went back to have sex with the girl again (46).

In the lobby, Robert talks to Jerry, who works at Prestige Vista Solutions, which has the conference room this year. Robert explains that while this is an annual tradition, this will be the last year for the reenactment, even though he has no confirmation of it. Jerry remembers the play, stating that it is something he will never forget.

The men talk about things that have happened, such as their children having sex and doing whippets to a medical emergency with a dog and a fire. Gil found his mother, who is living with his family, stuck in the bathroom after the shower door shattered. The woman at the desk is ready to check them in. Andy sees the scar on her face and remembers that she has one below one of her breasts. When she asks if they have stayed at the hotel before, Andy tells her “every year for the past sixteen years” (53).

Analysis

The prologue details Joe Theismann’s injury. The prologue functions not only to give readers information about the play the men in the novel reenact annually, but also foreshadows how this may be the last time the men come together.

The men in the novel are not necessarily involved in each other’s lives outside of this event. Robert’s initial interaction with the clerk who pretends not to know him introduces both the themes of masculinity and insecurity. Robert arrives early because he is anxious. This is part of his personality, but nothing about his interaction with the woman allows him to relax. Because she does not allow him to check in, he feels emasculated.



He is relegated to sitting in the lobby and ultimately taking out a sewing kit to repair a chinstrap on a helmet.

With Charles' introduction, the reader witnesses him trying to make Robert feel more comfortable. The men talk and their reunion is sedate. Neither of the men seems overly excited to be there. This establishes the theme of ritual and tradition. There does not appear to be a celebration in coming to the reenactment, so much as it is an obligation.

There is a familiarity between the men. Robert asks Charles for his opinion about how Robert reacted when his daughter fell and broke her arm. Robert maintains his insecurity throughout, feeling as though he should have felt differently when the accident happened. Charles tries to reassure him that his reaction is normal and nothing to be concerned about, but it still weighs on Robert's mind. He felt satisfied when his daughter fell and broke her arm and he does not think that this is a reasonable response. It does give insight, however, to how these men all come together to reenact a brutal injury. Just as there is satisfaction in recreating the play, Robert felt satisfaction in his daughter's accident. The two main things that Robert considers are how he felt satisfied that his daughter learned something and that she further learned that everything would be fine. This allows the reader to see how this tradition helps the men find some kind of normalcy.

Masculinity and insecurity continue to be explored with the introduction of Fat Michael and Trent. Fat Michael is an exceptionally fit man, while Trent has arrived at the hotel having put on thirty pounds over the previous year. The men both admire and are jealous of Fat Michael's physique and it separates him from the rest of the group. This foreshadows his selection in the upcoming lottery in chapter two.

Another tradition in this gathering involves haircuts. While Carl may not excel at being a barber, the tradition continues. Peter has let his grow out so that he can partake in the haircut ritual. Not all of the men do it, but Peter feels some sort of obligation in taking part. As Peter waits to be able to check in to the hotel, he heats up water to assist in molding a mouth guard for the event. As he does so, he manages to achieve a decent fit on the first try. In keeping with Peter participating in the ritual, even though it may not be what he wants, his second attempt at molding the mouth guard becomes a metaphor for how he feels about the tradition.

Masculinity is further explored with Carl's graffiti. He takes a moment to understand what he wants to write and when he does, it ends up being much longer than would be expected for bathroom wall graffiti. He explains a sexual relationship with a girl, which while consensual, does not appear to be an enjoyable experience. He leaves when the girl's father tells him to come in and get it over with, feeling shame for doing it. But he continues to go back after the incident even though he feels wrong about it. The graffiti may also be a metaphor for the men coming to partake in the ritual. They may have enjoyed it in the beginning, but they continued to do it because it was available to them. Further, Carl takes care to preempt predictable comments to the graffiti. He does not want the girl to be called named or have his younger self (if indeed the boy in question is Carl) mocked or emasculated. He uses this graffiti as a way to express what once



may have been enjoyable, which has now become a habit that he does not feel good about.

Robert's passing comments to Jerry, a Prestige Vista Solutions employee, indicate his lack of desire to continue the tradition. Robert does not know for sure that this will be the last year, but he must sense it in some capacity. While Robert may have felt emasculated and insecure in the earlier part of the chapter, this gives him a moment of control over the entirety of the tradition, even if he expresses it to someone outside of the reenactment.

As the men continue to gather, they discuss their wives and children, establishing the theme of marriage and parenting. Some of the men are dealing with insecurities in their parenting, such as the incident with Robert and his daughter discussed earlier. Wesley, who believes his son to be gay, misinterprets comments made by Bald Michael about his son "cruising" (39). Wesley suspects that Bald Michael's son may be gay as well and does not like the way that Bald Michael appears to be mocking his son. When it is revealed that Bald Michael's son is a toddler, Wesley is likely left trying to reconcile his fears for how someone else may comment about his own son.

The woman finally allows the men to check into the hotel. Throughout the opening chapter, this unnamed female controls the men. During check in, Andy notes a scar on the woman's face and remembers that she has another scar under her breast. The woman gives no indication that she remembers the men or Andy in particular. He reminds her that they have been returning to the hotel for 16 years, but she offers no recognition.

Discussion Question 1

Why would the men get together annually to reenact such a devastating play?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the desk clerk refuse to let the men check into the hotel early?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Carl write the graffiti on the bathroom partition?

Vocabulary

ovation, reluctant, invariably, auditor, acquiesce, atrocious, precarious, cordoned, desiccated, errant, formidably, quarks, gravid, vindication, rebuke, affront, inane, imperious, stratum, restive, synergistic, portico, gesticulating, felonious, misanthropic, destitute, miasma, annelid, regeneration, solvents, riposte, purview, divested, flagrant,



contravention, lugubriously, probation, gratuitous, propitious, recalcitrant, impediment, incorporeal



Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter two is titled “The Lottery.” George talks to Rick, who works for Prestige Vista Solutions about the fitness, the hair of a woolly mammoth, and how looking at the animal would not necessarily predict its survival. He likens it to calling a football play, which is designed to give information, rather than predict an outcome. George explains that football is a scientific game in which it “is a series of discrete experiments” (58). He argues that the Throwback Special play, which ended Theismann’s career, could not be called a bad play simple because it did not work.

Years earlier, Steven made a large lottery drum of the reenactment. It has a Redskins logo and a Plexiglas drum. Some of the men refer to it as “Fancy Drum” and do not care for it (61). Trent teases Steven about the drum, asking whether it is insured. Instead of the conference, the lottery is being conducted in room 324. The men begin to assemble, with Chad, Myron, and Trent in the room before the others. More men arrive and room is warm. Nate talks to Charles about how he told his wife that he was “sexually curious” about women in children’s books (64). His wife thought it was wrong, but Nate defends that because the women are drawn as women and have children, it is a natural assumption that they have a sex life. Charles explains that Nate is likely responding to the privacy of the women and their perceived happiness.

Rules are outlined for the lottery, including that the men may not select the same player twice within a given period of time and that every seven years, a player must be part of the Giants defensive backfield. The initials of whomever is left on the last remaining ball in the lottery will be Theismann. When a keg is brought in, it hits the lottery drum and damages it, resulting in the drum being left in the hallway. Pizza is delivered and the delivery man sticks around, talking to the rest of the men. They begin the lottery and the delivery man talks about his marriage. He reveals that he met his wife through a dating site that used algorithms to match couples. After it was revealed that there were no algorithms, his wife suspected that she did not really know the man she married. His wife had long been miserable, but thought she must be the problem because the computer matched them. She asked him to move out. After doing so, she called him to come deals with birds trapped in the chimney.

With the drum in the hallway, the men use a pillowcase for the lottery. They toast to Fancy Drum and Trent acts as commissioner. He reads an invocation that he wrote and begins the selection. Derek is self-conscious about being selected first as Lawrence Taylor because he is the only man of color in the group. Derek thinks about how Taylor is often portrayed as the bad guy “who laid waste to the Caucasian lineman,” ending Theismann’s career (84). Derek considers that he may be overthinking Taylor, but remember how the others have played Taylor in the past. He thinks about how he could portray him differently with nuance and humanity. He continues to think through the pros



and cons, understanding both himself and Taylor as racial allegories. Ultimately, Gary is selected for Taylor.

Robert checks the time and contemplates his life and marriage and how good times are sad because one they happen, they are over. Tommy considers his choice as the men would prefer to be part of the defense, rather than a “Redskins player who was essential to the calamity (91). Some of the men regard the selection as a way to match themselves to history. Tommy chooses to be John Riggins, a Redskins player whom Jeff called the “vice president of the disaster” (93). The picks continue. Randy decides to be Donnie Warren of the Redskins. He thinks about losing his eyewear business and selling the Bostic gear on the internet, but emailed Trent that the gear was stolen. Trent replaced the gear. Vince views Randy’s pick as an admission of guilt because he chose the player responsible for the injury.

Derek is selected sixteenth and is frustrated. Adam knocks on the door and Gary lets him in. The men had not realized that Adam was not there all day. Adam asks why the drum is in the hallway and avoids questions about where he has been.

Adam asks to be brought up to speed. Chad tells the group that he will see them all in Vegas, the name given to the room where the defensive backs stay. The last balls are selected and Fat Michael is chosen for Theismann. Fat Michael’s selection seems a way to “cut him down, albeit ceremonially” (101). The drum disappears from the hallway.

Analysis

Chapter two details the lottery that takes place every year. The commissioner is chosen the previous year by that year’s commissioner and this year it is Trent’s duty to act as commissioner. The first person chosen represented Lawrence Taylor and the last is Joe Theismann. Throughout the rest of the selection, the men are tasked with choosing who they will be from the two teams. There are rules attached to the selection process, which reinforces the theme of tradition and ritual.

In the past, the men gather in the conference room for the lottery, but this year Prestige Vista Solutions has the conference room. Already the dynamic of the tradition is changing. The men are crammed into a hotel room where they conduct the lottery. They drink and eat pizza and talk about their lives.

Similar to how the men have been moved from the conference room to a hotel room, the group is altered by the addition of the pizza delivery guy. When he arrives, he drops off the pizzas and then sits down and starts talking to the group. It is not casual conversation or anything to do with the lottery or the football tradition. Instead he begins to confess to the men about his marriage breaking up. This further develops the theme of marriage and parenting.

The pizza delivery guy tells the men about how he met his wife through a dating service. When it is discovered that the dating service is a fraud, the wife decides to end the marriage. While she had long been unhappy, she stuck it out. In a way, the woman’s



reaction to the dating service is representative of the men who reenact the Throwback Special. Something brought these men together originally and they are connected by the tradition of the reenactment. But not all of the men remain engaged in the ritual. Many do not see each other through the remainder of the year and others feel obligated to attend even if they are bored or have outgrown the tradition.

It may be that the men crave the camaraderie or they continue with the relationship with the others out of obligation or a sense that they should continue to want to do it. Robert gives a more fatalist view of it as he thinks about his own marriage and family. He associates all good times with being sad because they have already ended. For Robert, it is like time passing is the enemy of joy. He likely feels similarly about the reenactment, thinking that after sixteen years: is there any more enjoyment left?

The men mock the Fancy Drum and celebrate its demise. It is quickly put into the hallway where it is out of sight and mind. Similarly, when Adam shows up late, many of the men realize that they did not notice that he was not there. It is as if they are going through the motions of the tradition, filling in what is missing with past memories.

The drum is indicative of the lottery, which makes the men feel inherently insecure. They cannot anticipate who will be chosen in the main roles of Taylor and Theismann, and they must understand that their choices are judged by the others. They want to understand why someone chooses who they do. For example, when Randy selects Donnie Warren it is viewed as his decision to punish himself by casting himself in a role that is viewed responsible for Theismann's injury.

Randy's decision is rooted in the guilt he feels for selling off the Bostic gear that was in his possession. Trent replaced the gear, thinking it had been stolen, but Randy sold it to help offset losing income. The loss of his job is emasculating and leads to insecurity. His selection is chosen to punish himself, but it also gives other the opportunity to confirm what they suspected about the gear.

Derek's anticipation of knowing when he will be picked during the lottery further demonstrates the theme of insecurity. As the only person of color in the group, Derek does not feel secure in how he actually fits in with the others. He thinks about Lawrence Taylor's role in the Throwback Special and is concerned with how it will be perceived if his name is drawn to be Taylor. Because Taylor is vilified in the play and is black, Derek is critical of the way others have played Taylor in the past. He wonders what responsibility he has as a person of color portraying another person of color who is traditionally vilified. Once Gary is selected as Taylor, Derek is left with both a sense of relief and regret that he was not assigned the role.

In a way, Derek's physical difference from the rest of the men gives him a link to Fat Michael, who will eventually be chosen to be Theismann. Because Fat Michael's identity is inextricably linked to his appearance, he may feel similarly to Derek. Because Theismann is the person that is physically harmed during the Throwback Special, having Fat Michael represent him gives the rest of the men an opportunity to feel physically superior to Michael.



Discussion Question 1

Why do the men dislike the Fancy Drum so much?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Nate ask for Charles' advice with regard to his position on being curious about the women in children's books?

Discussion Question 3

What does Robert's view of life and marriage reveal about his character?

Vocabulary

inherent, analogy, crucible, speculative, scrimmage, confluence, isotopes, tautology, asinine, contingency, superfluously, ornate, rectitude, congruity, minuscule, idiom, negligibly, adjudicate, pathology, intrinsic, feints,

egalitarian, fraudulent, altruism, capacious, garrulously, nonchalant, derision, involution, espoused, fervently, inexorable, nuance, ferocity, exemplar, idiosyncratic, allegory, commutation, calamity, culpability, periphery,

dilettantes, pernicious, debauchery, verisimilitude, dexterous



Chapter 3

Summary

Chapter three is titled “Night.” The players are grouped by type of players: defensive or offensive line, linebackers, receivers, tight ends and touchers. They exchange gear and Nate notices the chinstrap Robert tried to repair earlier.

Jeff talks with his son on the phone, who is playing a video game. They discuss the upcoming holidays and where the family is going. Meanwhile, Myron has two sets of gear and is trying to find Vince to give him his. Fat Michael hides from Peter who is trying to get him the Theismann gear. Peter thinks about what he will say to Fat Michael about playing Theismann.

Chad walks the hallway, noting the do not disturb signs. He gets onto an elevator to avoid Andy and Nate, and ends up in the elevator with the two men. Chad, having quit smoking, has not told Andy and Nate because when they see each other once a year, they go behind a dumpster and smoke together. Nate and Andy had also quit smoking and had not told anyone. They go out to the dumpsters, but none of them have cigarettes. Chad unties his shoes.

Vince and Carl debate how electrocution kills people and Wesley leaves the room because he is feeling ill. As Wesley walks outside he remembers the year Bald Michael was mugged. He walks along a service road in the rain and drivers honk and yell out nasty comments. He ends up at a convenience store for ginger ale, which the store does not carry. He looks for saltines, which they also do not have and the clerk watches him suspiciously.

Gary tapes his fingers, although “not in historically accurate fashion” (119), and wears wristbands like Taylor. He wishes he could lose some weight and thinks about how fit Fat Michael is. Gary is having trouble with his back and George offers to walk on his back. Gary initially declines, but then allows him to do so. George comments on the tightness of Gary’s back. Nate wants to ask George to walk on his back as well, but does not.

Jeff tries to defend his theory on marriage to the group of receivers. He believes that marriage is “watching someone and having someone watch you” (122). He likens it to being an extension of parents watching their children. He even posits that caring is not as critical to the marriage as watching. Jeff further explains that people pretend they are in movies in an effort to be watched when they are not.

Steven thinks about calling the front desk to report the Fancy Drum as stolen. Derek wonders what would happen if they ran a different play instead of the Throwback Special.



In another room, Adam is asked why he was late. He alludes to a domestic situation. Chad thinks about how he pulled his shoes from the dumpster, after Chad, Nate, and Andy threw their shoes away together. They had ended up smoking after a man from Prestige Vista Solutions walked by with a pack of cigarettes. Chad knows the others will see his shoes.

Gil asks where Andy is and the conversation turns to television. Gil explains that he does not watch particular shows, but rather flips around the channels to watch television holistically. He thought about programming his remote to channel surf for him, which gave him an idea for a channel that moved through the channels for him. Redirecting the conversation, Trent admits that he thinks the Throwback Special was a bad call. Gil wonders how the other players felt about it the night before the game. Trent counters about how those players would not have known the outcome. Robert hides in the bathroom, preferring to be alone. He likes “to be near his family but not with them” (133). He thinks about the scars on his body and how they remind him of stupid things that he has done. On his way out of the bathroom, Robert runs into Andy who is carrying a pair of wet shoes.

Fat Michael left the touchers’ room, which is where the lottery was held. He left his Theismann helmet, a bottle of water and antibacterial wipes. The room is a disaster and Tommy and Myron start to clean up the room. Afterwards, they toss a football to each from opposite corners of the room and then they attempt diving catches onto the bed.

Andy and Robert share a bed in their respective room. They talk about injuries and Robert tells Andy he is sorry about his marriage ending. Andy shrugs it off and thinks about going back to the house and seeing how his wife had painted their daughter’s room. After a while, Robert tells Andy that his mother has Alzheimer’s, but it is not true. He wanted to be able to share something personal with Andy.

Analysis

Chapter three finds the men relegated to their separate rooms based on the positions that they are playing. The men interact with each other based on these roles, but they maintain their autonomy as well.

Jeff is dealing with family matters over the phone, while others are trying to avoid the responsibilities of the reenactment. Fat Michael is hiding from Peter, who needs to give him the Theismann gear. It is likely that because of Fat Michael’s level of fitness, he views himself as superior to the rest of the men, at least physically. This is his defining characteristic and now he must face the fact that he will be tasked with playing a physically superior man who has that superiority taken from him.

Peter wonders what he will say to Fat Michael when he finds him. The way in which the lottery is arranged, no one chooses to be Theismann (or Taylor). These roles are the most significant in the play, but ultimately they are villain and victim. The lottery also assures that it is a rite of passage for every man to be Theismann. Psychologically, this



may weigh heavily on any man that plays the part. Peter likely understands that this psychological burden will be more poignant because of Fat Michael's physicality. Peter may not know exactly what to say to him because he is not sure how to relate.

Wesley leaves the group because he is feeling ill. As he heads out onto the road to walk to the liquor store in search of ginger ale and crackers, he remembers the year that Bald Michael was mugged. This memory addresses the theme of insecurity. Further, as he ventures down the road, a car passes and the men inside hurl insults to emasculate Wesley. The men are strangers. This is a random act of dominance to cause fear or instill weakness in someone. Wesley is vulnerable because he is on foot. The men who shout at him have little reason to feel threatened, which is why they feel able to make the comments. For Wesley, this must be particularly difficult, especially when one of the men yells "homo walk" (117). Earlier, Wesley was troubled by the way in which he thought Bald Michael was talking about his son, with Wesley projecting that the son is gay like his own. Walking alone, Wesley must be fearful of how his own son would be treated and his vulnerability in a similar situation.

The theme of friendship is explored throughout the chapter, as is evidenced by Peter's concern for Fat Michael, and how Tommy and Myron toss around the football. But as is indicated throughout the novel, many of the men do not have a connection outside of the reenactment. In previous years, Nate, Andy, and Chad all met up at the dumpster because they shared a common habit: smoking. All of the men are insecure about revealing to the others that each of them has quit smoking. They go through the motions and get to the dumpster without telling each other. Once they finally do reach the dumpster, Chad bends down and unties his shoes. The men ceremoniously throw their shoes away. This is now what connects them, but it is not anything they can build upon. Later, Chad feels insecure because he knows the other men will learn that he went back and got his shoes. It does not matter that he is not the only one who did so. These men continue to be connected to one another, but ultimately without anything to connect them.

Andy and Robert end up talking about injuries and marriage. Earlier in the novel, Andy expressed difficulty at admitting that his marriage was ending. He likened it to how it was initially strange to refer to his wife as his wife after they got married. Now, after having settled into his role as husband, he realizes that it is just as strange to refer to her as his ex-wife. Robert is apologetic for the demise of Andy's marriage. Not wanting to appear vulnerable, Andy shrugs it off like it is not that big of a deal. Robert must sense this and he ends up telling Andy about how his mother has Alzheimer's disease. Robert lies to Andy to make him feel less vulnerable. He is not looking for sympathy or trying to illustrate to Andy that there are other problems. He wants to be able to connect with Andy through vulnerability.

Fat Michael ends up isolating himself from the rest of the group. While the tradition dictates that whoever plays Theismann gets to sleep in a bed by himself, Fat Michael takes the isolation further. He needs to be alone, with the reason for doing so being revealed in the next chapter.



Discussion Question 1

What do the comments made by the men who drive past Wesley reveal about masculinity?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Derek contemplate changing the play in the reenactment if he is selected at Taylor?

Discussion Question 3

How does Fat Michael's decision to withdraw from the group relate to the theme of insecurity?

Vocabulary

bestowal, inebriated, alcove, wanton, salient, assiduously, renunciation, capitulate, lassitude, pallid, invective, allay, redolent, coefficient, dulcimer, sentient, insidious, profligacy, cohesion, auxiliary, admonitions, insolent, punitive



Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter four is titled “The Fountain.” The chapter begins with a list of the t-shirts the men are wearing while they sleep. Some of the shirts have words or pictures, others are V-neck, and some are white or different colors. Some of the men are snoring. Trent is in the bathroom dealing with a nosebleed. When he realized it was bleeding, he grabbed for something close and ended up getting blood on Gil’s jersey. Trent sneaks out and ends up taking the stairs when the elevator does not come. He hears the rain and Fat Michael on the treadmill in the Workout Center. He ventures beyond the Staff Only door to get to the laundry. He sees a man and woman asleep on a pile of linens. He checks to see if they are breathing and thinks that the woman is pregnant. The name on her vest is Holly. He thinks about how pregnant woman should not sleep on their backs because of restricted blood flow to the fetus.

Trent hears someone and he leaves and ventures through the hallway, up the stairwell, to the lobby and the fountain. The tape around the fountain had been removed, as had all the coins in the bottom. A barefoot woman cleans a stain from a blouse with a toothbrush. She tells him that is “an old traveler’s trick,” but he does not understand (151). She elaborates by explaining about the bleach put in the fountains.

Trent looks around and sees a hotel employee by a luggage cart in front of the hotel. Trent asks the woman about him, but she says he does not notice. He asks if he can use the fountain and she explains the fountain is for everyone. She offers him her wash clothes and toothbrush. He thinks about what he would have wished on with one of the coins that was removed. He watches the woman clean. As Trent puts the jersey in the water, the blood flows into the water.

Analysis

Chapter four is a short chapter that focuses largely on Trent. Fat Michael is in the workout room on the treadmill. He has isolated himself from the rest of the group. It is as if the only way he knows to maintain control is by working out.

Trent wakes up thinking that he has a runny nose, which turns out to be a bloody nose. No reason is given for the bloody nose, but once he realizes he has gotten blood all over Gil’s jersey, he knows that he needs to do something to fix it.

He goes in search of the laundry. He wants to be able to manage the problem on his own, which is indicative of his role as commissioner. This is a test of his ability to handle what has happened. While looking for the laundry, he sees Fat Michael on the treadmill. When he finally finds the laundry, he sees a couple asleep together. He watches them breathe, concerned about whether or not they are okay. He does not try to wake them but considers how the woman should not be sleeping on her back because she appears



to be pregnant. He reads her name on her uniform and she is the first woman in the novel who is directly named.

In the lobby, Trent encounters another woman who happens to be washing a blouse in the fountain. He finds it strange, but takes her advice. He does not introduce himself to the woman, nor does she introduce herself. She is a nameless encounter, almost as if he is in a dream state.

When he washes the stain from the shirt, he watches the blood dissipate into the chlorinated water. Watching the blood disappear is symbolic of the ending of the reenactment ritual and foreshadowing how the tradition will differ this year.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author make a point to list the types of t-shirts the men wear to bed?

Discussion Question 2

How does Trent washing the jersey reinforce the theme of ritual and tradition?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Trent think about what wishes he would have made on the coins removed from the fountain?

Vocabulary

edict, occluded, synchronized, ostentatious, inaccessible, meticulous, devout



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Chapter five is titled "Rites." The men are eating the continental breakfast provided by the hotel. The breakfast is average, but the men feel like "they were getting away with something" (157). As they arrive in their jerseys, the people from Prestige Vista Solutions had already gone through the buffet. When it is replenished, the men begin to eat.

Fat Michael mixes something in three cups and drinks it quickly. He sits alone and does not look well, in spite of how well he looks physically. After eating, Nick passes through the dining area to the fountain. Seeing the fountain reminds him of when he was a child and stole quarters from a fountain to buy an erotic puzzle. He ended up digging a hole in the backyard and burning the puzzle out of shame.

The men linger in the dining room. A woman passes through with her son and some of the men begin to miss their children. The woman hurries her son because they are running late. The men meet in room 324 to go over the film of the play. Carl puts up a sign-up sheet for afternoon haircuts for those interested and some of the men sign up. Trent creates a makeshift bag with a towel for the ping-pong balls to determine who would go into the conference to get an HDMI cable. Derek is chosen and he goes to get the cable.

A man is lecturing in the conference room and asks Derek if he needs help. He claims to have the wrong room and starts to leave. The man suggests he should call security and wonders if Derek is a corporate sky. He admits to needing a cable and Robbie offers to help. They take the elevator and go behind the desk. Robbie asks who Derek is this year and Derek lies and says he is Taylor. Robbie goes through the closet looking for the cable. Derek sees Charles' canvas bag and the Fancy Drum. Derek realizes he is looking at the lost and found and Robbie offers him some thumb drives. Derek takes some and thanks Robbie. Derek sees a purple silk scarf. Noting that Derek likes it, Robbie gives it to him.

The men watch the football play several times, paying attention to different players and how they plan to reenact the play. At the point of impact when Theismann's leg breaks, some of the men get queasy, even after watching it for years.

At the front desk there is a 16-monitor surveillance system. The images are listed, including a deer by a dumpster, a man running on the treadmill, and occupants in the conference room. The last box shows an elderly man with a limp. He makes his way through the lobby to the elevator to men throwing a football in the hallway. The men break up, leaving the football behind. The man continues to a room and knocks and enters the room.



Wesley is in the lobby talking to his daughter who is distressed about a classmate telling her that Jesus was pinned to a cross. He corrects her and regrets it. He tries to reassure her by explaining the resurrection, but he regrets that as well.

In another room, Carl gives haircuts, even though he is not a good barber. The men go in one at a time because a “haircut by an acquaintance required submission” (183). The appointments are in fifteen minute increments. Peter removes his mouth guard and explains about his children’s fall choir concert. Gil makes fun of Peter’s haircut and closed his eyes as Carl runs the clippers and Gil thinks about missing his family, but not wanting to go home yet.

Nate tells Carl about his daughter’s allergies and a raccoon getting in his house; Carl remembers bats in his attic. Adam comes in for his haircut and Carl is concerned about whether he is dying, though he is not. He cuts the hair out of obligation, no longer thinking he enjoys it. Randy confesses that he sold the Bostic gear. A man on business named Dennis asks for a haircut and a trim on his eyebrows and Carl obliges.

Fat Michael enters and sees Carl resting. He finds the remnants of hair in the room “distasteful” (192). He thinks that the men should go in a new pair of scissors for Carl. It is Fat Michael’s birthday, but he has not told anyone.

The author lists notable events of the previous years, such as one of the men bringing a girlfriend or forgetting a football or when someone forgot to make reservations. In the lobby, Myron, Gil, and Tommy are waiting. Jerry, the man from Prestige Vista Solutions passes through and comments about it being the last time for the reenactment. The men are confused and deny that it is.

The men site with their “positional mates” at dinner (195). They do not discuss Theismann and his treatment following the injury. The men do not eat much and then return to their rooms. They help each other with their gear and each man drives to the Warren G. Harding Middle School alone.

Chapter six is titled “The Play.” The chapter opens with dialogue among sales associates from Prestige Vista Solutions looking for the football field. The women have umbrellas and offer to share, but the men decline as they make their way to the field. They laugh and talk and head to the benches. Two other men are there to watch. The players take the field and the sales associates comment on their appearance. A man in a yellow poncho stands beneath the scoreboard. The play begins, but the quarterback does not throw the ball and is tackled. Sarah, one of the sales associates, asks what is happening and if someone was hurt. Then she asks if the players are leaving.

The men return to room 324 and celebrate, embrace, and drink. Randy ices his hand and Tommy is relieved. Gil sits on the bed and finds Fancy Drum hiding under the sheets. The men pose for pictures with the drum. They listen to music.

David, a web specialist from Prestige Vista Solutions, celebrates with them. In the bathroom, he decides that he will not blog or post anything about the night. He starts to leave as Trent, as commissioner, is tasked with declaring the commissioner for the next



year. When David leaves, he puts the Do Not Disturb sign on the door. He considers how he could start the same tradition with other guys, but in a better hotel and a lottery system.

Analysis

Chapter five finds the men preparing on the day of the reenactment. They eat the continental breakfast provided by the hotel, just as anyone else staying at the hotel would. When they begin to arrive, however, much of the food is gone because the people with Prestige Vista Solutions have beaten them to the breakfast. The food is replenished and the men go about the breakfast.

Fat Michael remains an outsider. He does not eat from the buffet, but rather drinks some kind of concoction, likely containing supplements. The narrator comments about how Fat Michael looks. He is an impressive example of the male form, but he does not look well. The weight of the role of Theismann is getting to him.

While the men linger in the dining room, another nameless woman enters. She has her son with her and she hurries him along. Their presence reminds some of the men of the families they will go home to after the weekend ends. Some miss their children and others continue to enjoy their time away, but all remain in the moment of what they are there to do. This reinforces the themes of family and ritual and tradition.

Further developing the theme of ritual and tradition, the men all gather in room 324 to go over the play. While the men likely know what they need to do because this is something they have been doing for years, some of the men may need to be reminded of what is expected of them in their given role for the year, but also to represent what must have transpired prior to the actual game. These men are not getting together to recreate a game, but rather just a play. They do not even recreate the play in the context of playing a game themselves. This is about holding onto an unforgettable moment, even if it is rooted in pain.

The men need an HDMI cable to run the projector and Derek is tasked with going to the conference room to get one. Once again, Derek thinks about how he would do things differently, just as he did while contemplating how he would play Taylor given the opportunity. The man at the lectern in the conference room accuses Derek of being some kind of corporate spy and threatens to call security. It seems an outlandish accusation, but it shows the man at the lectern exhibiting power over the man who enters the space he has control of. This reinforces the theme of masculinity as the man proceeds to take an alpha role in the room. Derek explains what he needs and many in the room are aware of the reenactment. Derek is asked about the role he will play and he lies. He tells Robbie that he is Taylor. If he has been dominated by the man at the lectern, then this is his way of exhibiting his own power.



Robbie takes Derek to the lost and found where they find a cable. The closet is filled with many things, including the Fancy Drum. Robbie offers and Derek takes thumb drives from the closet. He also takes a purple scarf.

Back in the room, the men watch the play repeatedly and learn their roles for the reenactment. In doing so, they must endure watching Theismann's leg break repeatedly, which makes some of the men ill. This is part of the experience, but differs from what the actual players must have experienced before the real play. They had no way of knowing that something like this would transpire.

The theme of ritual and tradition continues with Carl giving haircuts to the men. He observes different things about the men who come to him for a haircut. He does not restrict the haircuts to the other men. When a man from Prestige Vista Solutions signs up for a haircut, he does not refuse him because he is not part of the ritual. Carl views the haircuts as a time of submission, which is why he cuts their hair privately. Being part of the reenactment involves submission as well. When Fat Michael enters the room and is repulsed by the hair on the floor, it is as though he is rejecting the very idea of submission.

The narrator reveals that it is Fat Michael's birthday, although he has revealed this fact to none of the others. It is possible that Fat Michael is grappling with aging. He fights the aging process by being obsessive about his physical fitness. If he maintains perfection in his body, he can deny that he is getting older. His birthday, combined with playing Theismann, force him to confront both his aging and how his body could betray him as well.

Carl also struggles with his mortality. He has been searching online for answers about the lump that is under his armpit. He believes his is sick, but a later discussion with Charles helps to put some of his worry at ease.

On the surveillance system, an unnamed man with a limp enters. The man is never identified, but the way the man asserts himself, he must be of importance. He may or may not be Theismann himself, but certainly appears to represent the man, especially as the play is set in motion in chapter six.

Chapter five ends with the men making their way to the football field. As chapter six opens, the focus shifts to people from Prestige Vista Solutions going to the field to watch the play. They appear more enthusiastic about the play than any of the players did. They watch and talk among themselves. Most of them likely do not know what they are about to witness. They mock the players because of their age and when the play does not go off as planned and the players walk off the field, the group is confused. They think that the players are not up for completely the play, but the older man watching applauds the decision to not follow through on the play. Not completing the play allows the ritual to be broken. Theismann's injury does not need to be relived.

The men reconvene in the hotel room and are celebratory. For the first time, there is genuine camaraderie among the men. Stopping play has offered them hope beyond the



fatalism of accepting that the outcome must remain the same. David, one of the employees from Prestige Vista Solutions, takes part of the celebration. He is younger, but when he is in the bathroom, he decides that he will not blog about the event or post any pictures. When he leaves, he thinks about how he could start the same tradition, but with new people. His decision not to post pictures or blog about the event reflects how the day belongs to the others and not him. In moving forward, he can take ownership of the experience, but with the knowledge that the lottery system must remain intact.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Carl consider a haircut an act of submission?

Discussion Question 2

What does Fat Michael's decision to not tell the others about his birthday reveal about his character?

Discussion Question 3

What does David's decision to start a new tradition with other men indicate about the themes of masculinity and insecurity?

Vocabulary

petulant, restitution, cauterize, torpor, languorous, interstitial, mitigate, dissimulation, incipient, traverse, fecundity, indignation, exonerated, parodist, transmuted, tai chi, invocation, valedictory, voltaic, entropically, divested



Characters

Robert

Robert is the first of the men to arrive at the hotel. He arrives early because he is anxious. He mends a chinstrap on a helmet while he waits to check in.

He talks with Charles about his concerns about his reaction to his daughter's accident when she broke her arm. He wants to know that his reaction is reasonable, if not normal. He also wants to make others feel okay. After he speaks with Andy about Andy's divorce, Robert lies about his own mother's health in order to make Andy feel more comfortable.

Fat Michael

Fat Michael is a man who compulsively works out and is obsessed with his health and fitness. He is selected to be Theismann during the reenactment, which causes him to withdraw from the rest of the group.

He does not tell the group that it is his birthday. He also spends the night before the reenactment alone, running on the treadmill. He is concerned with fighting aging.

Derek

Derek is a mixed-race man. He is the only person of color in the group. He is conflicted about the possibility of being chosen to represent Lawrence Taylor. He is concerned about how the other men have portrayed Taylor in the past and the racial subtext of their doing so.

He wants to be selected for Taylor as much as he does not. He feels like an outsider in the group. Ultimately, he is not selected as Taylor and this continues to leave him conflicted.

Charles

Charles is a therapist who mostly works with young girls who have eating disorders.

Steven

Steven made the Fancy Drum for the lottery.



Trent

Trent is the commission for this year's reenactment. He gets a bloody nose and stains Gil's jersey, leaving him to washing the jersey in the hotel fountain after learning the trick from a woman cleaning a blouse in the fountain in the middle of the night.

Andy

Andy is getting divorced. He struggles with referring to his wife as his ex-wife. In a previous year, he had a sexual relationship with the desk clerk who does not recognize him.

Adam

Adam shows up late to the lottery after a domestic issue at home.

David

David is the employee from Prestige Vista Solutions who decides that he wants to continue the reenactment with new people and a lottery system.

Robbie

Robbie is the hotel employee who helps Derek get an HDMI cable and gives him thumb drives and a purple scarf from the lost and found.



Symbols and Symbolism

Throwback Special

The Throwback Special is symbolic of the men's mortality and how they are getting older.

Fancy Drum

The Fancy Drum is symbolic of the lottery and how the men get anxious waiting to find out who will be Theismann.

Chinstrap

The broken chinstrap is symbolic of the how the men are becoming less interested in doing the reenactment every year.

Graffiti

The graffiti in the bathroom is symbolic of the confessional intimacy the men share over the weekend.

Dumpster

The dumpster is symbolic of how some of the friendships between the men are disposable.

Lottery

The lottery symbolizes chance and how the men cannot predict what will come next in their lives.

Shoes

The shoes symbolize how the men can try to throw away a tradition, but something compels them to go back to it.



Room 324

The hotel room is symbolic of the men gathering together for a single purpose as a team.

Football Field

The football field is located at a middle school and is symbolic of their youth.

Rain

The rain is symbolic of the men cleansing themselves of the ritual and embracing change.

Settings

The Hotel

The hotel is where the men meet annually to reenact the Throwback Special. It is a mid-range, unidentified chain hotel with a workout center, continental breakfast, and a conference room.

Room 324

Room 324 is the hotel room where the men gather for the lottery.

Warren G. Harding Middle School

Warren G. Harding Middle School is where the football field is located where the men perform the reenactment.

The Dining Room

The dining room is where the men have their continental breakfast before the reenactment.

The Dumpster

The dumpster is where Chad, Andy, and Nate meet up to smoke, but instead throw away their shoes.



Themes and Motifs

Masculinity

The author uses the theme of masculinity to give contrast to the vulnerability of the men as they reach middle age. The prologue gives a base for this by introducing Joe Theismann, who at 36, suffered a career-ending leg break during a game. The break forced him to find a new path in his life.

In the novel, the men unite annually to reenact the play. The men have changed over time. While Fat Michael remains a pinnacle of physical fitness, Trent has gained weight, Bald Michael has lost his hair, and Andy is divorced. In reenacting the play, they are able to celebrate a heightened state of masculinity within the confines of a contact sport.

They do not meet to reenact the entire game, but rather just the career-ending play. Its brutality is hyper-masculine, as is their ritualized celebration of it. But the men are do not appear to be as excited about the play as their once may have been. While their past feelings about the play remain unclear, it can be inferred that the men hold the ritual in high regard because they have continued to do it for sixteen years.

Their attitude toward it is changing. Robert suggests to an outsider that this will be the last year and others, such as Chad, Andy, and Nate realize that they do not have anything in common with the men other than the reenactment.

In many ways the men are emasculated throughout the novel. During Robert's introduction, he is dismissed by the female desk clerk from checking in early and sits in the lobby mending a chin strap. The other men arrive and are rejected by the woman until the men quit asking about the possibility of checking in early. Further, Andy has had a previous sexual relationship with the woman and she does not recognize him or remember that the men have been coming to the hotel for sixteen years.

Because he feels guilty about selling the Jeff Bostic gear because he has lost his eyewear business, Gary takes a role as player that the men feel contributed to the accident in the play. When Wesley walks by himself to the liquor store, men drive by shouting emasculating comments to assert their dominance over him. Further, when the group from Prestige Vista Solutions arrives at the football field to watch the play, they mock the players because of their age and suggest that they do not know what they are doing when the play does not go as planned.

Ritual and Tradition

The theme of ritual and tradition is explored as a way to give purpose to escape everyday life.



From the outset of the novel, the reenactment is perceived as something that is done, rather than something the majority of the men want to do. They maintain a sense of obligation. When Robert arrives early, it is because he is anxious. He is not necessarily looking forward to the event, but knows it is something he should do.

When Derek considers the possibility of being selected as Lawrence Taylor, he is conflicted about what he would do. Traditionally, the men have played Taylor as a villain, a choice motivated not only by Taylor causing the injury, but also because he is black. As the only man of color to participate, he thinks about how he would break with the traditional portrayal of Taylor. He also thinks about the possibility of running a different play altogether. Ultimately, he is not selected, and the tradition continues.

The men gather and take part in the lottery. Traditionally, they have conducted their lottery in the conference room. This year the conference room has been scheduled by the Prestige Vista Solutions group and the men are relegated to cramming into a hotel room.

As the lottery gets under way, it is possible that the men are already rejecting the ritual. Many of the men hate the Fancy Drum that is used when it is used. When the Fancy Drum is damaged, some of the men celebrate. Yet they must understand the importance of the tradition to them because when the Fancy Drum is returned after the reenactment is completed, but with a different outcome, the men celebrate it. They view the Fancy drum in both a positive and negative light.

The men adhere to the sleeping arrangements, but Fat Michael breaks with one. While the person who is tasked with playing Theismann gets a bed to themselves, Fat Michael withdraws further from the group. He goes to the gym and spends time on the treadmill.

Insecurity

The author uses the theme of insecurity to not only heighten the theme of masculinity, but offer insight into the psyche of men.

There is an inherent masculinity in the game of football. The men involved in the reenactment are not athletes, but rather ordinary men who get together every year for this one purpose. Most of the men do not interact with the others throughout the remainder of the year. Because they do not, there is both a familiarity and a timidity when they reunite.

Robert feels like he can ask Charles about the normalcy of his reaction to daughter's accident because regardless of the answer, he does not have to face the man for at least another year. Nate also reaches out to Charles about his sexual curiosity toward the women illustrated in children's books. While Charles' job is to counsel girls with eating disorders, the men view his job as suitable enough for them to get an acceptable response.



Andy is insecure about telling the men about his divorce. It is not that the men will not offer compassion, but Andy views it as a failure. He thinks about the difficulty he had adjusting to calling his girlfriend his wife and now he feels similarly about calling her his ex-wife. While the reason for the divorce is not directly given, Andy did have a sexual relationship with desk clerk. This may have contributed to the downfall of his marriage. The woman's dismissal of Andy contributes to his insecurities as well.

Further, Robert offers his condolences for Andy's marriage breaking up, but in doing so, he ends up lying to Andy. He tells Andy that his mother has Alzheimer's even though she does not. He does it so that he has something to share with Andy. He does not do it to lesson Andy's hardship or to belittle it in comparison, but rather so he can feel better about sharing something intimate as well.

It is likely that Fat Michael is insecure as well. He works hard to maintain his physique, which in and of itself does not indicate insecurity. His name is ironic and he probably does not care for it, especially given that this is likely the only group of men who call him that. Fat Michael's insecurity is revealed in the way he reacts to playing Theismann. He does not want to be viewed as the one who ends up broken. He withdraws from the group in order to protect himself.

Parenting and Marriage

The theme of parenting and marriage is used to demonstrate how the men cope with their everyday lives. Most of the men have wives and families. While Andy is going through a divorce, the other men are dealing with other aspects of raising a family. Bald Michael jokes about his toddler learning to walk, but his comments have sexual overtones that Wesley misinterprets as Bald Michael mocking his son for being gay. Wesley believes his own son to be gay, but his son has yet to come out to him or the rest of the family.

Other men talk about catching their children exploring their sexuality or having difficulties in school. When the unnamed woman and her son enter the dining room during the continental breakfast, the men begin to miss their kids. Most of them are looking forward to returning home to their lives.

During the lottery, the pizza delivery guy sits down and starts talking to the group about his marriage. He is getting a divorce because he wife feels duped by a dating service that turned out to be fraudulent. He explains about seeing his daughter's room after he moved out.

Robert's perspective on marriage can be considered bleak. He feels sadness from the good times because they have already happened. Instead of looking forward to something, he is automatically saddened by the ending of something.



Friendship

The author uses the theme of friendship as a way to isolate the men. The men that participate in the reenactment are friends, but do not appear to have a deep connection. This annual event is what binds them together. They know details about each other's lives, but may lack any other connection.

For Chad, Nate, and Andy the reason that they all spend time together is because they shared a common habit. They would meet at the dumpster to smoke, but ultimately had nothing else in common. All three of the men are reluctant to tell the others that they have given up their habit. With nothing else to connect them, they proceed to throw their shoes away. Later, they feel self-conscious about going back and retrieving the shoes and having the others find out about it.

The men try to find one another to pass off equipment, but avoid each other. Myron cannot find Vince and Fat Michael is hiding from Peter. As he looks for Fat Michael, Peter does not know what he will say to him when he finds him.

In one of the hotel rooms, George offers to walk on Gary's back. Gary is reluctant, but relents when he thinks it will help him. Nate would like to ask George to walk on his, but he is not comfortable enough to ask.

The men do not realize that Adam has arrived late. Until he gets to the room for the lottery, no one had noticed he was not there. The men ask, but Adam deflects any questions. Later it is revealed to have been a domestic issue, but the details are never given. Adam clearly does not feel comfortable enough to share with this group of men.



Styles

Point of View

Throwback Special is a third-person narrative about a group of middle-aged men who get together annually to recreate a famous football play. The narrator gives insight and information into each of the players.

The narration does not stay focused on any one player for too long. It moves around in much the same way a commentator would provide information about a team. The narration uses information from all aspects of the players to create a cohesive team.

Much of the narration focuses on the individuals, giving insight into where the characters are in their lives. For examples, Wesley is grappling with his son's sexuality; Andy is going through a divorce; and Fat Michael continues his obsession with physical fitness.

The ritual of the reenactment moves the story forward. The men all have a common goal. However, they may not share the same ideas about why they are doing it. Instead, many of them are going through the motions out of obligation.

Language and Meaning

The language is straight forward and vocabulary accessible, though at times advanced. The style is literary, and does not read as a traditional sports novel. Some football jargon is used throughout. References are made to notable football players from the mid-1980s.

Most of the novel is narration with sparing dialogue. Some of the dialogue passages are short bursts without identification of the character speaking, such as when the employees of Prestige Vista Solutions go to watch the reenactment. These types of dialogue passages reflect a cohesive team without a standout player.

The dialogue passages between the men tend to focus on two men discussing a particular topic, usually germane to a concern of the men has in their life outside of the reenactment. These intimate interactions help focus the characters in novel in which there are many characters that are not fully developed as they do not represent the core members of the team.

The language and dialogue is appropriate to the characters. The tone is conversational and natural given the setting and situation. These men are both looking back and looking forward as is representative of their positions in life.

Structure

The novel is divided into a prologue and six chapters. The prologue gives background information on the Throwback Special play that the men reenact. The chapters are numbered and titled. Each title reflects an element of the reenactment process, such as the lottery or the night before the reenactment.

Some of the men are seen as solitary, such as Robert arriving early, Trent going to clean the jersey, Wesley going to the convenience store by himself, and Fat Michael withdrawing from the group. Others are viewed in tandem, such as Chad, Andy, and Nate at the dumpster, and Tommy and Myron tossing around the football.

As a group the men come together during the lottery, breakfast, and during the reenactment. The narration reflects the audience viewing elements of the ritual throughout, shifting focus. Some of the men are seen talking to their families, but no dialogue from the family members is heard. It can be inferred from the context of the way the individuals respond.

The prologue ends with the reveal that Theismann never played football again. This foreshadows the break with tradition at the conclusion. However, just as the play is known by many, including when Robert has a casual conversation with Jerry from Prestige Vista Solutions, it is clear the play will live on. David's realization that he can do the reenactment with others indicates that the tradition can continue even though the men who have done it broke with tradition.



Quotes

The idea of normalcy in human thought is something of a controversial concept, but I can absolutely assure you that your response was normal.”

-- Charles (chapter 1 paragraph 60)

Importance: The quote shows how the men come to Charles for advice, and this is how he is able to make them feel okay about their concerns.

He had no idea if his claim was true. Its truthfulness was somehow beside the point, as he had not intended to disclose or predict.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 215)

Importance: The narrator comments on Robert's claim that this would be the last year of the reenactment. It demonstrates Robert's desire to move on from the tradition.

He was desperate for the ball in Trent's raised hand to be his ball, and also for the ball not to be his ball.”

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 141)

Importance: The quote demonstrates Derek's anxiety about being selected to represent Taylor in the reenactment.

They would rather be the most insignificant player on a pillaging defense (e.g., Terry Kinard) than a Redskins player who was essential to the calamity.”

-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 148)

Importance: The quote speaks to the guilt Gary feels about selling the Bostic gear and how he uses this opportunity to punish himself.

The ring finger and middle finger of Gary's left hand were taped together, though not in historically accurate fashion.

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 84)

Importance: The quote shows that the men are waning in their commitment to the reenactment, suggesting it may be coming to an end.

All it is, he said, and he said he learned this too late, but all it is, is watching someone and having someone watch you.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 108)

Importance: The quote addresses the need to be seen and recognized through Jeff's theory about marriage.

With despair, Trent considered (reasonably, but incorrectly) that this year might now very well be remembered primarily as the year that Trent ruined Gil's jersey, instead of



the year that Randy picked Donnie Warren seventh in the lottery, or the year that Adam came late, or the year of the weird pizza guy, or the year without the conference room, or the year of Tommy's mustache."

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 24)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the ego that allows the men to think that what they do will live on as the defining event from that year's event.

Gradually, the blood swam in wavy lines away from the jersey, vanishing in the clear pool."

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 40)

Importance: The quote indicates how easy it would be to end the annual reenactments.

The breakfast involved no surprises and no risks."

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: The quote indicates how the men crave something that makes them feel normal and free from criticism or comparison.

He did not look good. He looked incredible, but he did not look good."

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: The quote reveals Fat Michael's emotional response to having to be Theismann for the reenactment.

Men who had detested Fancy Drum now looked upon it with affection, tenderness."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 52)

Importance: The quote illustrates how the men are able to reevaluate what the situation around them and embrace what they had not previously thought to.

And the thing is, there had to be some kind of lottery system, with meticulous rules so that everything was fair."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 68)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the importance of the lottery and its ability to share the responsibility of reenacting the play.