

# **To Rise Again at a Decent Hour Study Guide**

**To Rise Again at a Decent Hour by Joshua Ferris**

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# Contents

<a href="#">To Rise Again at a Decent Hour Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10 and Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">49</a>



# Plot Summary

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour, by Joshua Ferris, tells the story of a fictional character named Paul O'Rourke. Paul has a successful dental practice in New York. He pushes himself to do the best he can with his business, but he feels that most people don't understand the importance of taking care of their teeth. He consciously tries to limit his dependence on technology and refers to cell phones as "me-machines." He realizes that he is searching for something that can fill his life, but he doesn't know what that might be. He claims to be an atheist, but he acknowledges that his life would be better if he could simply believe in God and focus on some religion.

Paul's childhood was chaotic, mostly because his father was manic-depressive, suffering through bouts of highs and lows. Paul's father, Conrad, was a loyal Red Sox fan despite the fact that the team had not won a World Series in years. Paul remembers watching the games with his dad, including all of Conrad's superstitions. Conrad fell into a deep depression and committed suicide, shooting himself in the family's bathtub. For awhile, Paul was terrified that he might be the only person awake at night. That fear was loneliness, the result of his father's absence, and it continued to haunt Paul throughout his life though he did get a level of control as an adult.

Paul had a couple of serious girlfriends, but part of the draw was the idea of becoming part of their families. The first, Samantha, was from a large Catholic family, and Paul found himself drawn to her family despite the fact that he claimed not to believe in God. The second, Connie, was Jewish. Paul managed to be slightly more reserved with her family, though he desperately wanted to be accepted by them.

Paul's dental practice is thriving when he sees a new patient named Al Frushtick. Al says that he is a member of an ancient religious group, the Ulms, and that Paul is also a member of that group. Paul believes that Al is rambling because of the gas used during the dental procedure and dismisses the man's comments. Then a website for Paul's dental practice appears online. Paul hasn't approved the creation of the site but finds that it's nearly impossible to have it taken down. He begins to communicate with the person he believes is the site designer, a company named Seir Designs. Paul is actually talking to Grant Arthur, the modern-day leader of the Ulms.

The Ulms are a religious sect who believe that their one commandment from God was the instruction that they were to doubt God's existence. As Paul begins to learn about the Ulms, he questions the feasibility of that commandment but comes to realize that most religions have some level of conflict. Paul connects with another member, a millionaire named Pete Mercer. Pete says he has explored most religions and confirms that the Ulms are real. However, Pete learns new information about Grant Arthur and sours on this religion as well. Paul is shocked when he learns that Pete has closed down all his business endeavors and committed suicide.

Paul continues to learn about the Ulms while he struggles with his personal life. One day, a young patient announces that she's pregnant. She has a cavity, but she and Paul



agree that she'll wait until after the baby is born to have the work done. Paul suddenly understands that this is what normal people might do and that he has the ability to find happiness within himself. With this new level of understanding, he tries to reconnect with Connie but she isn't willing.

Paul goes on with his life, admitting that his father is gone and that his devotion to the Red Sox has been fanatical because he hoped it might somehow bring his father back. He sets that devotion aside as he continues to work, looks more closely at the Ulms, and spends time focusing on his own life. One day, he sees a Cubs hat in the window of a shop and realizes that he might begin following that team, also underdogs with a lengthy losing streak behind them.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

Chapter 1, *The Son of a Stranger*, opens with Dr. Paul O'Rourke talking about his view of the mouth. He says that flossing makes all the difference in a healthy mouth but most people simply won't floss anyway. He urges every one of his patients to floss. Paul says that a dentist's main job is that of a mortician because he pulls teeth, drills out rot, and deals with cavities. Paul has a successful dentist practice in the ground floor of Aftergood Arms, an apartment building on Park Avenue. He borrowed money to start the practice and ignored the advice to create an office space for himself. Instead, he created five exam rooms. That decision means he has no privacy at all but makes "tons and tons of money."

Paul talks a great deal about his life and what his life could have been. He says he feels his life has been wasted but that he can't be certain it would have been any better if he'd religiously studied the Bible and applied himself to God. He doesn't believe in God and points out that one "house of worship" can easily become the house of worship for an entirely different religion.

Paul visited Europe with his former girlfriend, Connie Plotz, and they saw many churches during their tour. He saw very little differences between them. He talks about the boredom of entering a church but says he doesn't mean to disrespect believers.

Paul lives in a duplex overlooking the Promenade in Brooklyn. There are many things to do in New York but Paul stays too busy with his dental practice to really enjoy the city's museums, theaters, and other attractions. He moved to New York from Maine twelve years earlier and hasn't done much in the city.

Paul says his life "really began" in 2011 when a man came into the dental office to have a tooth pulled. His name is later revealed as Al Frushtik. Al is chanting when Paul arrives in the office and declines medication to numb the pain. A short time later, he asks for gas and Paul completes the procedure, including placing a temporary crown. Later in the day, Paul learns the man is still in the waiting room and that he wants to talk to Paul. He thanks Paul. Al then repeats from an earlier conversation, saying he's soon leaving for Israel. He is obviously still feeling the effects of the gas. As Paul helps him get into his coat, Al says, "I'm an Ulm," then he says that Paul is also an Ulm. Paul doesn't pay much attention, putting it all down to the gas.

## Analysis

From the beginning of Chapter 1, Paul talks about his lack of fulfillment, which is one of the story's themes. Religion is an important part of the story, and Paul says that a belief in God could fulfill a person. He, however, doubts God's existence. He calls himself an atheist, but it seems more likely that he's agnostic. As the story comes to a close, he



finds himself associated with the Ulms, a group of people dedicated to doubting God's existence.

Paul gives some interesting views on dentistry and on the mouth. He talks about the need to floss and says that flossing can literally add years to the average person's life while poor dental hygiene can lead to serious problems that can shorten a person's life. He talks about the attitudes of his patients and sees a lack of focus on dental health as a serious problem, even if most people don't see it that way. All of this is an important look at Paul's core character, which undergoes a dramatic change over the course of the story.

The "greatest disappointment" in Paul's adult life happened in 2004 when the Red Sox won the World Series. He is a tried and true Red Sox fan but says his life prior to that win had been a devotion to the Red Sox despite the fact that they always lost. Once they won, he no longer had the right to say that he backed the Red Sox despite their constant losses. This concept seems a little strange, but it is an important theme of the story. Before the Red Sox won the pennant, Paul and other loyal fans were determined to stand by their team. Paul got this loyalty from his father, who was also a fan of the Red Sox. Before the win, there was always the hope that the team might win. Once the team won, ending their losing streak, more people claimed to be Red Sox fans who had not been loyal to the team through the losing years.

Paul talks about something that can be "everything" in his life. There is no doubt he is searching for something that will fulfill him, and this search is one of the book's themes. He tries to fill his life with his work, with golf, with various activities, and occasionally, with women. None of it really fills the gap that he's trying to fill and he comes to realize that he has to find happiness within himself.

Paul says that his life begins when he meets Al Frushtick for the first time. It's an obvious use of foreshadowing meant to make the reader aware that this is an important meeting. The chapter ends with Paul saying that he didn't pay much attention to Al's words, putting it down to the effects of the gas used during the dental procedure. That's another example of foreshadowing, indicating that it's going to be more important than Paul indicates.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe what you know about Paul at this point. Keep the list and add details as they are revealed.

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Paul's first encounter with Al Frushtik. How does the author include foreshadowing in this encounter.



## Discussion Question 3

What is Paul's attitude toward religion?

## Vocabulary

hideously, ponderous, supplanted, poignant, devout, succumb, nabob, quintessentially, inconceivable



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Chapter 2 opens six months after Al's appointment. Paul's dental assistant is Abby. She is an excellent assistant, but they never talk about their personal lives. Paul feels that Abby is often silently judging him. Elizabeth Convoy is a widow and an efficient hygienist. Connie keeps the office running efficiently, making appointments and taking care of other office matters. She is Paul's ex-girlfriend, and he doesn't credit her with all the work she does around the office.

Paul talks about his relationship with Mrs. Convoy, who is devoutly religious. Each year, she convinces him to spend a week in a third-world country, performing free dental work. He always says he won't go but winds up going anyway. He talks about the fact that although the people there don't have a chance, he claims it as a tax write-off.

Paul is taking care of a routine procedure when Mrs. Convoy announces that there's a website for their dental practice. Paul avoids technology whenever possible and has refused to have an online presence. He immediately suspects that one of the others in the office created the website. Paul demands that Connie find out how to get the site removed, but she says she doesn't know how. He finds that a company named Seir Design created the site and sends an email to the address listed, demanding that they remove the site.

Paul is a loyal Red Sox fan and watching all the games is such a habit that he doesn't know what to do if he isn't watching. He tapes every game and follows the superstitions taught by his father, Conrad O'Rourke, including eating the same meal before each game and leaving the room for the sixth inning. Paul recounts that his life with Conrad was chaotic as his father tried to cope with the depression that manifested between manic episodes. When Paul was still very young, Conrad got in the bathtub, closed the shower curtain, and shot himself in the head.

As an adult, Paul has trouble sleeping. This particular night is no different and he wakes in the early hours of the morning. He knows he shouldn't, but he calls Connie. She doesn't answer.

### Analysis

Paul has a great deal of respect for Mrs. Convoy as a dental hygienist. He says that she is able to handle the situation, even when all five chairs are filled with patients. With the help of one or two temporary assistants, she can oversee all five of the patients' pre-exams, including charting, x-rays, and cleanings, getting them all ready for Paul's examinations. Paul says most dentists won't believe that, but that most dentists have never worked with someone of Mrs. Convoy's caliber. The interesting thing is that Paul doesn't seem to like her as a person. She is a devout Catholic and fusses at him about





his views on religion. She fusses at him for smoking. She hates it when he refers to the bathroom as the “thunderbox,” especially when he offers up details that offend her. It seems that he does offer up the details and makes other comments just to prompt her fussing. In truth, Paul's respect for her is greater than his dislike of her as a person, though he claims that isn't the case.

Paul is very lonely though he doesn't identify it as loneliness. He goes on a long rant about having nothing to do in New York City. He says that he doesn't want to go out alone to be “gawked at” by others. He says there is nothing to do that interests him and that is part of the reason he continues to watch the Red Sox games. He doesn't have to worry about what he's going to do on game nights, but he doesn't know what to do with himself on other nights. Paul's lack of human connection is an important part of his character. He wants to belong to a family but doesn't have one of his own. The details about his own family will be described later in the book.

Another part of the reason Paul is so devoted to watching the game goes back to his childhood. Paul's father, Conrad, was a fan and Paul watched with his dad, whenever possible. Conrad was manic-depressive, and Paul's time with his father was typically chaotic and confusing. Conrad was distracted during the games, focusing on them to the point that he forgot Paul's presence, but at least it was consistent. Paul remained in tune with his father's every move during the games, and he literally learned to be a fan from watching his father. This relationship between Paul and Conrad is an important part of Paul's character, and it's one of the book's themes.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Paul and his father. How might Conrad's suicide affect Paul?

## Discussion Question 2

Who is Mrs. Convoy? What is her relationship with Paul like?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Paul is so lonely?

## Vocabulary

poignancy, tyrannically, edifying, genuflections, liturgies, exhortations, estranged, copious, sacrosanct, pantomimed



# Chapter 3

## Summary

In Chapter 3, Paul watches as Connie applies lotion to her hands. He hates how lotion feels but wishes he could enjoy it as she does. He asks why she puts on the lotion, and Connie challenges him to try it. He refuses, and she says that he avoids anything that he might like. Paul and Connie are struggling to maintain a professional relationship because they were a couple for a while.

Paul recounts his love for a girl named Heather. They were very young, and Paul says that tasting Heather's tongue was part of the reason he became a dentist. He liked Heather and was drawn to her father, who coached their coed baseball team. Paul couldn't imagine Heather's father in a manic state, hiding the effects of some manic episode.

Paul was also in love with a girl named Samantha Santacroce. They were together for 11 weeks. When Paul went to visit Sam's parents, he planned to tell them he was going to marry Sam. She was shocked. Paul knew that part of the reason he was enamored with Sam was because he wanted to be part of her family, "adopted" by her parents and "living under their good fortune." He planned to become a Catholic as part of this Catholic family. Then Sam changed her mind about Paul, and he was hurt. He admits now that he "began to menace her" by hanging around her apartment, crying until she'd let him in. When he used his key to get in while she wasn't home, she called the police. Later, Sam wanted to reunite. Her parents didn't approve, and their affair lasted about a year.

Paul's next love affair was with Connie. He was more reserved with her family, hoping that he wouldn't repeat the mistakes he'd made with Sam. Paul remained reserved with Connie as well, keeping professions of love to himself for six months. He also didn't let her see that he had lost all sense of self once he fell for her. He says their affair hit problems as soon as "my self reasserted itself." He later came to realize that Connie was hiding her true self just as effectively, and it was also because of her love for him.

Paul gets on with his day, seeing patients until Connie points out his bio on his website. The first paragraph is typical for a business. The second seems biblical, including a call to make a covenant and threatening that anyone who makes "of me a God" will be "consumed." Connie says there's nothing like that on any of the other bios. Paul says he isn't a Christian and wants it removed. Connie suggests he talk to Mrs. Convoy about it. She isn't familiar with the passage but says it's a "stern, Jewish thing to say."

Paul talks about his relationship with Connie's family. They were Jewish and he knew that they would accept him if he and Connie married, but that it wasn't what they wanted for her. Then one day, Connie's Uncle Stuart told Paul a "joke" about a man who claimed to love Jews and another who openly hated them. A Jew said he preferred the



one who openly hated because he was at least telling the truth. No one laughed at the end of the joke.

Paul goes back to Connie with the quote from his bio. She tries to look it up online but can't find an exact match. Paul again writes to Seir Design, threatening legal action if they don't remove the site. He immediately sends another, asking if it's a specific disgruntled patient. He quickly sends another, demanding an explanation for the bio. He sees a patient, then sends another, saying he doesn't "need these kinds of distractions" while he's working. He sends others during the course of the day. Later, he gets a reply that says only, "How well do you know yourself?" Then his bio changes to include another quote, ending with "And we followed Safek, and were not consumed." Connie recognizes Safek as the Hebrew word for "doubt."

## Analysis

Paul makes many comments about seemingly random things, but most have a basis in his desire for fulfillment or his loneliness. For example, Chapter 3 opens with Paul watching as Connie puts lotion on her hands. Paul hates how lotion makes his hands feel but wishes that he could be "a lotioner." He doesn't really care about using the lotion, but he sees it as something that fulfills Connie. He wants that fulfillment more than he wants soft skin. This search for fulfillment is an important theme in the book.

One of the first examples of fatalism is seen in this chapter as Paul and Connie talk about the use of lotion. Paul is constantly using his older patients as examples that everyone comes to the same end, regardless of what they do to try to maintain youth. When he and Connie have their conversation about lotion, Connie challenges him to try the lotion to see if it makes his hands feel better. Paul refuses and Connie says it's because he might like it, and that he would hate liking it because he would still know that his hands would "turn liver spotted and die." She says that he's afraid of enjoying something that he knows he'll eventually lose, and that he'd rather avoid it altogether. Paul does exhibit this fatalism and it seems likely that it can be traced back to his father's suicide.

Paul uses a crude term for when he falls in love with a woman. It seems that this is designed to make the love affair itself ugly. He says that he is unable to hold onto any part of himself once this happens and that he is lost in the love affair.

There is a lengthy passage in this chapter related to Paul's thoughts on religion. He talks about the fact that Christians have to believe in God and that there's no such thing as a "non-practicing Christian." By contrast, Jewish people are always Jews, even if they don't practice their religion or participate in Jewish holidays. Paul says that Connie is Jewish and he believes that she is really an atheist, though she can't quite put aside her lifelong teaching to say it. In fact, Connie will later admit that she isn't an atheist at all and that she'd only gone along with Paul's views on the subject because he was so insistent in his belief that God doesn't exist.



Paul has a 5-year-old patient at the end of the day. He recognizes the parents as overprotective and acts accordingly. The child makes him think about his relationship with Connie. He says he'd been open to the idea of children when they began dating, but he later changed his mind. He knows that he could love a child completely, so that he would be devastated if the child died. He also knows a child could be "everything" in his life; but, he worries that a child could take up so much of his life that he might resent that. He admits only to himself that a child also limits choices. While he has never considered suicide, having a child eliminates that as a possibility in Paul's mind. This final idea is a part of the theme related to Paul's relationship with his father. The entire attitude about children is an important part of Paul's character.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Paul's love affair with Connie. What role did her family play in the affair?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Paul's attitude about having children? What happened in his past that affects that attitude?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Paul become so upset that there's an apparently Biblical quote in his biographical information?

## Vocabulary

heinous, banes, spoliation, troglodytes, diatribes, nebulous, lubricious, ambivalence, travails, primordial, dogma, equipoise, supine



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Paul has never told anyone that his middle name is Conrad. He was named for his father and has hidden that fact from everyone, including Connie. His middle initial is included in his online biography, meaning the person there knows him well.

In the office, Paul sits and watches Connie for awhile. She is beautiful. Connie says that Paul “objectified her” because of her looks, then complained when he found out she was human with human faults and frailties. As he watches, he realizes that she juggles many tasks in the office and that he has never fully understood her job. Paul scrolls through his phone, which he calls the “me-machine,” while he watches. That’s when he discovers that someone has been posting to sports blogs in his name. Paul always posts as YazFanOne, but the new posts are in Paul’s real name.

Paul asks Connie for help and they click through a series of links originating from the posts. One of them is a reference to the Amalekites, led by a man named Agag. Amalek, according to Connie, is an enduring ancient enemy of the Jews. He is the grandson of Esau and son of Seir, who is reincarnated repeatedly. The post talks about a “people risen out of the ashes of the Amalekites” and the constant effort to eradicate them. Paul fires off an email to Seir Design, saying that anyone who knows him is going to recognize the posts as fakes.

Paul’s attorney tracks down the registered owner of the website for Paul’s dental practice. The site is registered to Al Frushtick. It takes Paul a few minutes to remember Al. Paul addresses the next email to Seir Design directly to Al. Paul’s bio changes the next day to include more of the story of the Amalekites who lived during the days of Moses. The story includes battles of the people. At one point, the leader of the Amalekites suggests eliminating their practice of worshiping many gods in favor of worshiping only the God of the Israelites. They even castrate all the men and the Israelites practically wipe them out in a battle. The 400 who were left, fled into the mountains. The story, according to the website, is from the Cantaveticles.

Paul stops on the way home that evening at Carlton B. Sookhart’s Rare Books and Antiquities. He asks if Mr. Sookhart has heard of the Cantaveticles. Mr. Sookhart hasn’t, but he asks for information. Paul recounts what he knows of the story of the Amalekites. Mr. Sookhart says the Amalekites were “godless savages” and that they might have completely died out or evolved into some other culture. Mr. Sookhart says the Biblical account of the story is that the final 400 were also killed, at God’s command. He refers to it as “the first genocide in recorded history.”

Paul recounts his time with Connie and her family. He had learned restraint by this time in his life, but he really wanted to be part of her large family. He was especially enamored with her Uncle Stuart, probably because the man was dignified and



appealing as a person. Paul studied the Jews and found himself wanting to apologize to Stuart for the hardships the Jews faced. He never did, feeling that it would give a negative impression about Paul rather than doing any good. At one point, Paul began writing down facts about the Jews. He pulled them out during family events but when someone questioned his motives, he realized how “insane” he appeared.

Connie tells Paul that she got a Facebook friend request from him. He's upset that he now has a Facebook page as well as a website. On his page, Paul is “listed” as an Ulm. Paul furiously sends another email to Seir Design, saying the person creating the online presence is “ruining my life.” There's an immediate reply that reads, “What do you really know of your life?” Paul contacts Mr. Sookhart who says Albert Einstein was born in Ulm, Germany. He says he's conducted a “cursor search” for the Cantevicles, but seems more interested than he was initially.

## Analysis

In the book, Paul notes that his father's name was Conrad and that everyone called him Connie. For the sake of clarity in this guide, Conrad is always referred to as Conrad and any reference to Connie is referring to Paul's former girlfriend and office manager. Paul doesn't like that he shares his middle name with his father. When he and Connie were dating and she asked for his middle name, he said it was Saul, making his full name Paul Saul O'Rourke. After the website is launched, she asks him about it again and he denies that he ever told her his name was Saul.

Paul obviously wanted to fit in with Connie's family but didn't know how. One day in the office, she asks Paul if he'd told her Uncle Michael a job about a Jew and a Rabbi while the family was sitting Shiva. Paul denies having told the joke but Connie pushes. Paul admits to himself that he might have told Michael a joke, and that if he did it was because he was trying so hard to fit in. This is an example of one of the book's themes, seen repeatedly as Paul searches for a way to fill his life with meaning.

Paul talks briefly about his family's attitude toward religion. He says they were largely indifferent except for a 6-week period when they attended regularly. He believes someone might have suggested that his father would find that God was the answer to his mental issues. This might explain why Paul believes God doesn't exist. The fact that Conrad searched for God as an answer and failed to find it could have jaded Paul's perspective. Similarly, Paul's mother spent some time visiting various kinds of churches after Conrad's death. She might also have been looking for answers that she failed to find, and this might have cemented Paul's lack of faith. Paul says that during this time, he was taught that his family would be reunited in Heaven, and that Paul had only to “Love Jesus with all my heart.” Paul says that he did believe for awhile, but only because he wanted to badly to believe. It's left to the reader to decide whether Paul's thoughts have merit.

One of Paul's appointments on this day was a man who had cancer. It's obvious to Paul that the man has a very short time to live. He refers the patient to an oncologist. The



patient fears the dentist and dreads any pain related to a dental visit, and has therefore put off an appointment much longer than he should have. Paul's fatalism becomes more understandable with this patient. If the man had shown up sooner, Paul might have been able to help him. As it is, the man is doomed. Paul sees cavities and decay all day, and he can't understand why some people have such poor dental habits, especially when it's obvious to him that it shortens the lifespan.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you think it was important to Paul that he fit in with Connie's family? What were the challenges he faced?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Who is Mr. Sookhart and why does Paul contact him?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the reason for Paul's fatalism and how does it affect him?

## **Vocabulary**

colloidal, incognito, benign, nefarious, preemptive, zenith, preposterous, variegated, execrated, periphery



# Chapter 5

## Summary

In Chapter 5, Paul's lawyer refers him to an attorney that specializes in cyber law. She says there isn't much Paul can do to force the site down. She advises him to avoid "engaging" Seir Designs or anyone else associated with the site. Paul fires off another email, again referring to the recipient as Al and saying that any database could have the information about Paul. A reply comes back and the writer, later identified as Grant Arthur, says that he isn't Al. Grant says he is "reaching across" to Paul, and ends with, "I am your brother." Paul sends another email with lots of questions about himself. Grant answers, including with the insight that Paul is afraid to have children because his life is too "untethered" and he doesn't want to pass that on to his children. Paul sends another email, saying, "How do you know all that?" Grant responds that they are brothers.

Later that day, a new quote appears as a tweet from Paul O'Rourke. Paul and Connie think the quote means that God wants people to doubt His existence.

Paul thinks about one of Connie's relatives. The man, named Izzy, claimed to be an atheist but practiced all the Jewish religious rites. Paul puzzles over this situation. He also cites a conversation with Mrs. Convoy in which she challenges him to prove that God doesn't exist. They both know he can't.

Paul occasionally visits malls all around the area. He equates them with the malls of his childhood and childish accomplishments. If he had some coins, he could "turn them into a Coke or a high score on a video game" or some other minor purchase. As an adult, the mall represents a place where a desire was "easy to resolve." It was also where Paul's mother took him for the annual back-to-school shopping and where he spend summer days when there was nothing else to do. The family was poor and it was sometimes where he visited at Christmas, longing for things he knew he couldn't have.

One evening, Paul visits a mall with Mrs. Convoy, and they have dinner at an Olive Garden. They talk about religion and Mrs. Convoy holds to the idea that anyone who doesn't believe in God will not go to Heaven. Paul points out that the Jewish people don't believe in God, but Mrs. Convoy says that it's possible that Jews admit to their belief just before they die. Paul continues to insist that he's an atheist, but he says that he didn't become one for any reason other than the fact that he doesn't believe that God exists.

Back in the office, Connie points out tweets written in Paul's name. She says the writer has matched Paul's tone perfectly. One of them reads that "the world whips us with scorn."

Paul offered free dental care to all of Connie's family. A man named Jeff, who Paul thought was a cousin but who was really just a neighbor, was the only person to accept.





He was a drug user and the work was extensive. After he left, Connie said Jeff had often called her family derogatory names. With that news, Paul admitted that he had never really seen Connie's family as individuals, but had seen them as a "family of Jews."

Paul begins receiving emails from random people who read the online posts being made in his name. Someone asks if "THE Pete Mercer" is also a member of the Ulms. Pete is the seventh wealthiest person in America and there are rumors that he was a member of the Ulms. A press release in Pete's name denied the allegation and requested that the rumors stop.

Paul ponders his decision not to have a child with Connie. He says that he wants desperately to be accepted into Connie's family but not if it means fathering a child. He then gets an email from Grant, still anonymously. Grant asks if Paul feels "something is missing." A few days later, a Tweet in Paul's name reads, "Imagine a people so wretched that they envy the history of the Jews." Connie questions Paul but he continues to insist that he isn't composing the tweets and doesn't know what the author is talking about. Paul asks Connie not to bring it to her family's attention, especially her Uncle Stuart. Connie says it hadn't occurred to her to show anyone, and that his request is "weird."

Paul sends an email, asking that the tweets stop. He says that Connie has begun to believe "it might actually be me." Grant and Paul send messages back and forth, and Paul finds himself explaining that he has noticed that Connie does a lot in their office. Grant applauds Paul for noticing. He says that now Paul has a duty to tell Connie she's doing a good job.

The next day, more of the story of the Amalekites appears on Paul's website. God appears to Agag, the Amalekite leader. God offers Agag a covenant and pledges a "great nation." He says Agag is never to make "an enemy in my name" but he is never to worship God, "for man knoweth me not." Paul writes to Grant, asking how a person can doubt God when God has appeared to him. Grant responds that every religion is filled with contradiction. He says the Ulms are the "true Chosen People."

Over the next few weeks, a Wikipedia page appears on the Ulms. There's controversy at first but the officials finally let the page stand as fact. People begin contacting Paul, asking for more information about the Ulms. One day Connie shows him a tweet she calls particularly offensive. It calls for an end to the discussion of the 6 million Jews who were killed until the near-annihilation of the Ulms has been acknowledged. Paul furiously responds to Grant via email. He demands that the tweets stop, especially those about Jews. Grant responds that the Ulms are not against the Jews and have had no time in their history for hate. He says the Ulms have been near extinction repeatedly, but - unlike the Jews - that history has never been documented.

At one point, Connie makes it clear she believes Paul is writing the posts himself. Grant Arthur has set up an email account in Paul's name, so it appears that Paul O'Rourke is



sending emails to Paul O'Rourke. Connie is clearly upset with Paul and with his attitudes about the entire situation.

Paul finds that Al Frushtick is his next patient. Paul says he knows the website is registered to Al, and refuses to treat him until Al explains. Al says that the Ulms have been searching for reclaimants. These are people of “diluted bloodlines” who might return to the Ulms. He asks if Paul has been contacted by Grant Arthur, the man who discovered that Paul belongs to the Ulms. Paul says he hasn't, and Al first says that's an “irresponsible” tact. Then, he says that Grant must have a reason.

Paul says he's angry because of the things being said about the Jews. Al says the Ulms feel “kinship” with the Jews and that they use them as “a point of reference. Al says he personally believes the Native Americans are a better comparison, but says that doesn't have the same “global reach” as Jewish references.

Al explains that a geneticist, Dr. Clifford Lee of Tulane University, can do genetic testing to prove Ulm descent. The tests are only about 70 percent accurate, but family history records can erase any remaining doubt. Al says there are records to prove that Paul is an Ulm. Al says all Ulms are connected and that Grant's research takes him naturally from one member to the next. Paul moves on to other patients. When he returns to the room, Al is gone. Paul finds a note that says Al “doesn't deserve” to have the dental work done.

## Analysis

Paul continues to insist that he's not the one posting the tweets, but Grant has a lot of very personal information about Paul. When he begins posting about the Jews, Connie becomes upset. At one point in the emails between Paul and Grant, Paul says mentions that he would like to sing on the subway. Paul also said that once to Connie, though they both knew he would never have the courage to do so. Grant uses that comment and posts a tweet that references his desire to “overcome my terrifying inhibitions one day, and sing on the subway with my banjo.” At that point, Connie seems to really begin to believe that it might be Paul posting the tweets. She asks if he “needs help.” Paul is infuriated at the situation but Grant actually has a goal in mind. He is trying to keep Paul engaged so that Paul examines his life more closely. The entire situation is bizarre and unbelievable, but most readers will find merit in the self-discovery.

Paul and Connie were in a relationship, and Connie says that Paul “objectified” her to the point that he couldn't stand it when she had human frailties. That might actually be true; but, what's more important about this situation is that Paul isn't really observant about many of the significant things in his life. Connie is an example of this shortcoming. Paul has hired her and trusts her to handle much of the day-to-day operation of his business. However, he thinks that Mrs. Convoy is really the one running the business. In Paul's mind, Connie “helps” set up appointments and has some other minor duties. It's not until Paul takes time to sit down in his own waiting room that he sees how much Connie really does. She deals with patients who have just been through dental



procedures and now have to pay for the work. She answers phone calls and makes appointments while also handling some of the personnel issues. She also knows that the appearance of the office is important to Paul, and she has fresh flowers on the reception desk each day. Paul tells Grant Arthur of his discovery about Connie and it's Grant who asks if Paul has ever told Connie that she's doing a good job. Paul realizes that he hasn't, but it takes this conversation with Grant to bring him to that point. Ironically, when he finally does pay Connie a compliment, he winds up showing her the emails between himself and Grant, and Connie is then dismayed to find out that someone had to suggest Paul pay her a compliment. This is all important as aspects of Paul's character and of his journey of self-discovery.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Paul's second meeting with AI. What does he learn from AI?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Paul discover about Connie? How does he make this discovery and what does this say about his character?

## Discussion Question 3

What changes are happening in Paul's life at this point in the story? What is prompting these changes and how is Paul reacting?

## Vocabulary

impersonations, squander, rapport, inexorable, proliferating, charismatic, proximity, guileless, vociferous, poseurs, monotheism, ruminated



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Part 2 is titled Ersatz, Israel. In Chapter 6, Paul is talking to Mr. Sookhart, who says he has found no one who knows about the Ulms. Paul asks how many Ulms it would take to make it real. Sookhart says that there is merely a categorical difference between a small group of believers and a large group and that the tendency is to call one group a “cult” and to classify another as a religion. Sookhart then points out another problem with the Ulms. He says that modern-day scholars are all searching for opportunities to publish their findings. Sookhart argues that some historian would have written about the Ulms if the group exists. Paul names several other groups that have lived “on the brink of extinction.” Sookhart asks why the Ulms have been persecuted and Paul touts their one belief – that they are duty-bound to doubt God's existence. He says this belief “makes people nervous.” Paul then suggests that the Ulms have been mentioned throughout history, but not by name. Paul hands Sookhart a check and he agrees to continue his research.

Paul remembers his life after his father's death. Paul was terrified that he would be the last person awake in the entire world. He would talk to his mom, trying to keep her awake until he could fall asleep. Looking back, he realizes that she was tired and struggling to hold their lives together, and that he was demanding that she deal with his fear on top of all her own.

One afternoon, a banker named Jim Cavanaugh arrives at the dental office. His teeth are in horrible shape, and Paul spends most of the afternoon working on him. The man seems surprised. At the end of the visit, he says that Pete Mercer sent him to see Paul and he has a note from Pete. The note asks Paul to call. They meet in Central Park. Paul doesn't know what to expect and is surprised to find that Pete likes fast food and that he's not really denying that he might be an Ulm. He says he always issues public denials of rumors in an effort to keep his personal life private.

Pete says Grant Arthur personally delivered Pete's family tree. Pete says he was amazed by the details Grant delivered. Paul says he hasn't gotten any family tree information and hasn't taken a DNA test. He and Pete discuss the possibility that Grant is using him for some other purpose. Pete says it's probably a “hoax,” then abruptly leaves.

Paul goes to a mall. He cites his previous decision to stop being one of the mass consumers but now says that buying things makes him feel good. He shops but has trouble finding anything he really wants to buy. He remembers a time when he wanted to buy everything at the Pottery Barn but now doesn't want to buy anything there. He goes to a music store and finds the Beatles' album titled “Rubber Soul.” Paul has owned the album on vinyl, cassette, and CD. He wants to buy it but not because he needs it.



He wants to feel the excitement of buying “Rubber Soul” for the first time. He buys it, planning to give it to someone. He doesn't find anyone who's excited to get the gift.

Paul goes to T.G.I. Friday's and Paul remembers going to the restaurant with his mom and dad. They'd all carefully stuck to the cheapest things on the menu and Paul feels a “sense of accomplishment” at being able to order whatever he wants. He feels lonely and wishes he could renew his relationship with Connie, but realizes that he really just wants to be in love again, regardless of whether the woman is Connie. On the way home, Paul stops at a liquor store and finds a six-pack of Ulm's beer, brewed in Germany. Later, Grant sends an email, answering Paul's question about the number of Ulms. He says there are 2,000 to 3,000, but that they are scattered around the world.

At the office, Connie says she has a confession. She says she had claimed to be an atheist only because Paul's arguments were so convincing. She says she was in love with Paul and got “swept up” in his belief that God doesn't exist. Paul says it doesn't make her weak, if she's a believer for the right reasons. Connie says they should stay out of each other's personal lives in an effort to finally be honest.

Grant sends an email. He says that Ulms have to doubt God's existence, just as the Jews would be lost without their faith. He calls doubt the “moral bedrock” of the Ulms' foundation. Paul later sees that Wikipedia has a new entry and that the editors have approved this one. The article includes details about the suppression of the Ulms. It also describes the Cantaveticles as “a portable fatherland.” Paul spends so much time thinking about the article that he finds himself seated before a patient with no idea what he's supposed to be doing. He also realizes that his assistant is a temp, and Connie says Abby has taken the afternoon off.

Paul is shaken by the episode, and he deletes his email account. He ends his cell phone contract and destroys his phone. He also stops his internet service, both at home and the office. Connie and Betsy are furious, saying they can't conduct business without the internet. He doesn't manage to remain offline for long and has to restore the service in a relatively short period of time.

The next afternoon, Paul enters a room to find an attractive young woman wearing a Red Sox hat. She says she is a research assistant and begins to show him his family history. She says there is another document of his family history he should see, but that it's being kept in Seir, Israel. She says he knows whom he should contact if he has additional questions. Then she leaves.

## Analysis

At one point, Paul receives an email from Grant Arthur that refers to the suicide of Paul's father. Arthur asks if Paul ever thinks about suicide. He says that Paul belongs to a “noble tradition,” referring to the Ulms. This seems like a callous reference and a rude way of trying to tell Paul that he shouldn't think about suicide. If Paul were at the point of considering suicide, it seems unlikely that his genetic connection to the Ulms would be



enough to convince him otherwise. The suicide was a major event in Paul's young life and has inexorably changed his character while Paul is not yet even certain the Ulms exist.

Paul remembers a time when he decided that he would stop being a mass consumer. He says he thought he would save his money to do something significant for some charity. He soon realized the futility of that, saying that his meager donations didn't even make a dent in the needs of others. This is another example of Paul's fatalistic view, which is a major part of his character and a theme of the book.

Paul ends his internet and cell phone service abruptly after he realizes he's so caught up in the Wikipedia entry about the Ulms that he doesn't know what he's doing with a specific patient. Commie has already pointed out to him that he's too caught up in the situation and that his practice is suffering because of it, and this seems to be Paul's only way of addressing the issue. This is another example of Paul's character. He hates technology, even though he's caught up in it and can't do without it long term. Paul doesn't seem to have the self-control to put thoughts of the Ulms on hold until after his work is complete, which is another aspect of his character.

The timing for Paul to receive his family tree information might be tied to his decision to end his internet service. It might be that Grant Arthur had tried to reach Paul by making Paul curious about his heritage, but took another approach once he wasn't able to communicate with Paul via email any longer. It's left to the reader to decide if there is some significance to this change.

Paul is captivated by the young woman who presents him with his family tree information. She says she is an anthropologist and a researcher. Paul thinks she's beautiful and has to stop himself from saying that he loves her. This willingness to attach himself to a complete stranger is another example of Paul's loneliness and his desire for companionship.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Paul receive the information about his family tree?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Paul cut himself off from all outside communication, include the internet? Does this seem like an extreme measure?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Describe Paul's fatalistic view of the world. What has he done to try to make a difference in the world and why did he abandon this track?

## Vocabulary

empirically, outlandish, melee, prognosis, apportioned, analogy, proselytize, gullibility, redundancy, claustrophobic, elision



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Summary

In Chapter 7, Paul arrives at Pete Mercer's office just as officials from the Metropolitan Museum are packing up a painting by Picasso which Mercer has given them as a gift. Paul knows that Pete has an uncanny gift for making money, seemingly magically managing his investments even when the economy suffers setbacks. Mercer says he's planning to "wind down" his business endeavors and doesn't want to forget that the painting is hanging on his office wall.

Pete asks if Paul has visited Seir yet. Paul asks if it's a real place. Pete says it "smells of goat," but he assures Paul that it's real. Pete seems to believe the Ulms may have inherited Seir as an irrendentism pact. This is a pact that gives territory to a person or group of people who formerly owned the territory. Pete says that, as the victims of genocide, the Ulms would have a claim to the land. Pete says he has plans to return to Seir. Paul says he's impressed that Paul is still interested. He says he would have been put off if the group had approached him in the way they approached Paul.

Later, Paul sends another message to Grant Arthur. Grant confirms that he is in Israel. He invites Paul to visit but says they aren't asking people to drop their old lives and move to Seir. He says their days are filled with study and their evenings are a time of sharing conversation. Grant includes more information about the history of the Ulms. Paul takes away a basic idea from this part of the story: The Ulms are not immune to tragedy but don't have to say that their fate is God's will.

Paul visits Mr. Sookhart. Sookhart has a scan of a scroll. He says he believes it's an original and that it's the precursor for the Biblical book of Job. Back at the office, Paul evaluates his feelings for Connie and realizes that he isn't in love with her any longer. She then announces that she's seeing a poet named Ben. She says it's becoming serious and she asks if Paul is okay. He assures her he is and he smiles at her, but he knows that the smile isn't as convincing as he wants. He realizes that he doesn't really know himself at all.

In Chapter 8, Paul sends an email to an old girlfriend, Samantha Santacroce. Their relationship had been serious but Paul was so frantic when they broke up that he scared her into getting a restraining order. Her family was Catholic and Paul was, as always, caught up in the idea of being part of her family as much as being in a relationship with Samantha. In the email, Paul says he had only wanted to be "part of things" with Samantha and her family. Samantha responds, telling him that he'd been too insistent that his belief was correct and that he should have been willing to accept that her family was Catholic without expecting them to change. She says that his opinions were too strong and suggests that things might have changed since he's made a success of his life. He doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't answer at all.





Paul is in with a patient when Connie announces that her Uncle Stuart is in the office, asking to see Paul. Paul asks if Stuart is there for a dental exam. Stuart says he wants to talk about the things being posted in Paul's name. Paul insists it isn't him. Stuart asks if Paul knows who is posting. Paul says he has an idea. Stuart says the name Amalek is "an eternally irreconcilable enemy" of the Jewish people. He goes on to say that Amalek lives on in modern times as temptation, apostasy, and doubt. Stuart says he hopes Paul doesn't hate Jews "like an Amalek just because you doubt God." Stuart says the Jews have a law ordering them to remember that Amalek's evil and to "destroy the seek of Amalek." Stuart then gives Paul some information about Grant Arthur, including that he changed his named from David Oded Goldberg in 1980.

Paul confronts Connie who says that she told Stuart about the situation because she fears someone is taking advantage of Paul. Paul then goes to Pete who gives more information about Grant Arthur. Pete says he has experienced "just about all" religions. Pete realizes now that he was searching so hard for something to fill his life that he was destined never to find it. Paul wishes he could have been content to be a Christian, and says he knows that even after all the searching, he's still going to die without knowing why he was alive in the first place.

Pete says he spent some time at a recovery center in California that taught rechanneling. This, according to Pete, is to acknowledge that the instructive voice is nothing more than conscience.

Pete then recounts an event when he was 18 and studying economics at Columbia. He says he was at the train station when there was a bright light. He fell to his knees, then to his back, and he knew all the details about each person standing on the platform with him. Ten years later, he went to the home of one of the witnesses. The woman remembered the event but recalled that someone had hit Pete. He didn't remember that at all and put the situation down to an encounter with God. Ten more years passed and when Grant Arthur contacted Pete, he was ready to hear about the Ulms. Like Pete, years had passed without a second encounter with God. Pete says no one is better prepared to doubt that "someone who once stood in the direct presence of God and had that memory taken away." Pete says being passed over by God in the final days of one's life is awful, but that it doesn't compare to the feeling of being passed over "all your days on earth."

That weekend, Paul goes to visit his mother in the Sarah Harvest Dodd Home for the Elderly in Poughkeepsie. Paul is obviously distressed but his mother doesn't react to his presence at all. He tells her he is no longer seeing Connie. Then he talks about the days after his father's suicide. He recounts how afraid he was to sleep and how much she helped him by telling him that people in China were just getting up to begin their day when Paul was going to bed. That meant Paul could never be the only person in the world who was still awake. He says that helped him at the time and that she did a good job of holding their lives together.



## Analysis

Paul goes to visit Pete Mercer again after the researcher presents Paul with his family history information. As he arrives, Pete is presenting the Met with a Picasso painting and he says that things might start “winding down.” The situation seems to be an obvious foreshadowing and the reader may think that Pete is planning to go live among the Ulms. Looking at the chapter with the knowledge of how the book ends, it seems more likely that Pete is already planning his suicide.

Paul continues to search for answers about the Ulms even while he harbors doubts that the group exists in the form Grant Arthur describes. While he's talking with Pete, Paul asks if the Ulms had ever asked Pete for money. Pete is wealthy and it would seem reasonable for the Ulms to try to recruit him in order to have his financial backing. Pete says that they never asked for any money and have only requested that he practice discretion in order to avoid undue attention. The fact that Paul asks is another example of his fatalistic view of the world. He fully expects that the Ulms have some ulterior motives and that they are not what they appear to be.

Paul had once believed that Connie was very beautiful but he now sees a myriad of little flaws. He congratulates himself on having escaped the fate of being tied to her forever, especially because of all those little flaws. More importantly than the physical, Paul reconsiders that she now claims to believe in God. He thinks about the fact that she said she was caught up in Paul's arguments and he realizes that she had lost herself in the relationship, just as he had lost parts of himself in their relationship. An important thing for the reader to realize here is that Paul and Connie were very much alike in their willingness to change aspects of their lives for their mate. The difference seems to be that Paul was more adamant in his decision to be an atheist than Connie was in her decision to be a believer. Connie allowed herself to be swayed on this point while Paul remained outspoken and firm. Paul now realizes that things might have been radically different in their relationship if Connie had been more determined to stand by her faith. Paul isn't willing to say that he would have become a believer, but he does accept that it might have happened that way. This is an important look into the characters.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Connie claim to be an atheist while she and Paul are involved in a relationship? Compare this with Samantha's comment in her email on the subject.

## Discussion Question 2

List three things Paul learns from Connie's Uncle Stuart.



## Discussion Question 3

What is Pete Mercer's situation at this point in the book? What does it seem he is planning to do as he shuts down his business ventures? What leads you to this conclusion?

## Vocabulary

extricating, erstwhile, digression, litany, enigmas, digression, exponentially, apostasy, emulate, incendiary, functioning, disembodied, misfortunes



# Chapter 9

## Summary

In Chapter 9, Mr. Sookhart says he has a copy of the Cantaveticles, which originated in Hungary and dates from the middle of the 18th Century. It's written in Yiddish. He believes it's genuine. Grant sends an email and says that the biggest threat to the Ulms at this point is that some become believers.

Paul has a new patient. His name is Eddie, and he's in his 80s. Eddie's previous dentist, Dr. Rappaport, died. Eddie had spent decades taking good care of his teeth, but he is no longer able to floss or take care of them correctly. His teeth are in now poor condition. Paul says it's "one more indignity of old age" to have one's dentist die, forcing a person to find a new dentist at such an elderly age. As Paul considers the situation, he says he wonders what to do about Eddie.

Paul realizes that Abby is not present again and he goes to find Connie. Abby never asks Paul when she needs time off and she never talks to him. She is afraid of him and prefers to talk to Connie. When Paul asks about Abby, Connie says Abby has quit "to pursue new opportunities." Connie says Abby didn't give notice and Paul continues to press for details. Connie finally admits that Abby said Paul was difficult to work for and had been upset about the things being posted to Twitter in Paul's name. Paul is upset that he didn't have a chance to apologize to Abby for being moody and indifferent.

With Abby's leaving fresh in his mind, Paul goes to talk to Mrs. Convoy. He asks if she's heard about the online posts. She says she isn't concerned because Paul said he's not anti-Jewish. The conversation turns into an argument with Paul pressing her to express some curiosity or show some concern about the situation. He challenges her to prove that he's not anti-Jewish. She refuses to be drawn into the debate and goes about her duties.

Paul's final patient for the day is a marketing executive. He is in for a routine exam and is surprised when Paul finds cavities. He says they aren't bothering him at this point and refuses to have any work done. Paul asks why he bothered to show up for the appointment, but the man says it is what he's supposed to do. Paul is frustrated by the man's attitude and doesn't understand.

Connie's Uncle Stuart arrives with a woman named Wendy Chu, an employee of Pete Mercer. Stuart says Pete has requested that Paul go with them to a Jewish community in Brooklyn. Paul agrees and they arrive at the home of Mirav Mendelsohn, who was once engaged to Grant Arthur. She had lived outside the Orthodox Jewish community for awhile, had married and divorced, and raised two children before returning to teach traditional Jewish practices to women converting to the Jewish faith. Mirav agrees to tell them about her relationship with Grant.



She says it was 1979 when she first met him. He had found a rabbi willing to help him convert to the Jewish faith. He studied religiously as the relationship between Mirav and Grant grew. However, Mirav's father refused to consider that she might marry someone who was born outside the Jewish faith, even if he had devoted himself to becoming a faithful Jew. In an effort to impress Mirav's father, he purchased a Marc Chagall painting and made plans to attend seminary to become a rabbi. Mirav warned that her father would never accept him. She suggested they move to Israel to raise a family of their own, but Grant didn't want her to give up her own family. They spent lots of time together at Grant's house, though Mirav hid her whereabouts from her family.

One day, Mirav's father arrived at Grant's house. He then asked Mirav to sit with him while he talks to Grant. During the conversation, he asked Grant whether he believed in God. Mirav was surprised by the question and even more surprised when Grant said he didn't. Mirav didn't understand why Grant would convert if not because of his belief in God. Mirav's father learned this fact from the rabbis Grant had studied under and said that Grant would have been in seminary by now if not for this disbelief. Grant argued that there are other Jews who didn't believe, but Mirav's father said that Grant wasn't a Jew at all. Mirav admitted that she saw Grant differently from that moment and realized that Grant was a joke to everyone in the Jewish community.

After her father left, Mirav questioned Grant. He said the Jewish faith was about the people, not about God. Mirav decided that it wasn't important to her that Grant believe in God, and they began to live together. Mirav became more in tune with the secular lifestyle, and she saw the rites of her Jewish faith as meaningless. Without her focus on God, she saw no need to continue to wear the clothes of the Jewish faith or to observe the rituals. One day she asked Grant why he prayed if he didn't believe in God.

Grant's father died, and he was gone for awhile. When he returned, he put aside his interest in the Jewish faith and began doing extensive research on his family tree. As her story comes to an end, Wendy asks Mirav why she returned to the Jewish community. She said she experienced a marriage and divorce, followed by mistakes and spiritual emptiness, which led her to realize that her life would be better if she lived as a Jew.

After they leave, Stuart and Wendy try to convince Paul that Mirav is telling the story of her time with Grant differently than Grant tells it and that the differences are significant. Paul agrees that there are differences, including that Grant claims it was only after he and Mirav parted that he learned he was a descendant of the Ulms. Stuart says that he wants Paul to see that Grant took some bits of a story and turned it into a myth. He insists Grant has broken away from reality and has come to believe his own story.

That evening, Paul falls asleep on his balcony which overlooks the Promenade. He wakes hours later to find that there is no one on the Promenade. He's so afraid for a moment that he can't move.



## Analysis

Paul's relationship with Abby is another step in his journey of self-awareness. He works across from her on a daily basis, and he says that she is an excellent assistant in the professional sense. However, Paul and Abby never share anything about themselves, and they don't talk about anything other than the patient. Paul is uncomfortable with the silence between them because he feels that Abby is judging him. The fact that the book is written entirely from Paul's perspective means the reader can't know what Abby is thinking, but it seems likely that she's experiencing very similar feelings about Paul. This is another case in which Paul knows that she's doing a good job; but, he never tells her so, leaving her to wonder about his opinion. As the boss, he should be taking a more active role in his office staff. This is another important look at Paul's character and of his changing level of discovery.

When Connie reveals that Abby has quit, Paul wants to know why. He pushes until Connie admits that Abby was tired of working for such a moody person and that she was offended by the comments being made online in Paul's name. Paul objects to the latter, pointing out that he isn't making the comments, but he also wants to know about Abby's religious leanings. Connie points out that Paul isn't Jewish, which means he doesn't know how badly the comments hurt the Jewish people. Paul counters, saying that the vast majority of people are now opposed to anything with an anti-Jewish sentiment attached. This seems accurate for modern times. The Nazi persecution of the Jews has become a black mark in history among all forward-thinking and tolerant people. One of the deeper story lines running through this story is the persecution of the Jews.

There are several references to the experiences of the Jews that only the Jews can understand. Connie mentions it when Paul says he's upset by the anti-Jewish comments being made in his name. Mirav makes it clearer when she talks to Grant about the men who escaped Hitler. She says Grant, having never been persecuted as a Jew, can never fully come to that level of understanding. This is an important aspect of the book as the various groups try to come to terms with and understand each other.

There's an important piece of information in the relationship between Mirav and Grant. Grant had devoted himself to learning about the Jewish faith and Mirav admitted that he knew more about the Jewish history during his time of study than she had learned over a lifetime of classes. However, Grant couldn't personally understand the persecution and the deep-seated beliefs of the Jewish people. Grant said that some Jews were non-believers, which would have been true. In his mind, that meant that he could become a practicing Jew as well, without believing in God. For Mirav, God was at the center of her belief system and she didn't understand. As a comparison, Grant considered the Jews as a group of people with rites and rituals in common. Mirav considered the Jews as a group of people who believed in God. When Grant took the belief of God away from Mirav, she saw no need to practice any of the Jewish rituals. Grant was still holding onto those rituals and that eliminated one of the final pieces of information the two had in common, ending their relationship.



It's never really clear why Pete wanted Paul to hear Mirav's story. Grant had told the story but with some basic differences, including which of them ended the relationship. It seems that Pete may be hoping that Paul can find something to believe in or something to allow him to cut his ties with the Ulms. It's left to the reader to decide what Pete's motivations were, or if it matters.

The scene in which Paul wakes to find the Promenade empty is a look at a long-term effect of his father's suicide. In the months after his father's death, Paul had a terror of being the last person awake in the entire world. This fear has followed him into adulthood. Though he is obviously able to deal with it on a typical day, he is caught off-guard when he wakes on the balcony in the middle of the night, and that fear rears itself in full force. This is a part of Paul's character and a lasting effect of his father's suicide.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Mirav and Grant, including why it ended.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Abby quit and why does it make Paul evaluate himself as a person and as a boss?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Paul's fear when he wakes in the middle of the night on his balcony?

## Vocabulary

dexterity, aspiring, taciturn, austerity, somber, proselytes, arduous, estrangement, parody, impiety, arcane, pious, programmatic, partisan, ostentatious



# Chapter 10 and Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 10, Paul picks up the book from Mr. Sookhart. Paul apparently sends an email to Grant who responds by challenging Paul to take the genetic test and to look at the Ulms for himself.

Paul learns through news reports that Pete has completely shut down his business enterprises, walking away with millions in profit for himself after paying off his investors. Paul wonders what Pete might be planning to do next, but he realizes that he really doesn't know the man well enough to even guess. Then, Paul hears the news that Pete has committed suicide in the woods. Children followed the sound of the gunshot and found his body. Paul considers Pete's life and his state of mind.

Paul knows that Pete was searching for something when he found Grant Arthur. Paul believes Pete must have "soured" on the Ulms once he heard Mirav's story, but he doesn't know why. Paul says that Pete's reaction was extreme and made it clear that he was deep in despair. Paul now wonders if Pete believed that Paul was "a fellow dupe in need of the truth," and if that prompted Pete to arrange for Paul to hear Mirav's story. He wonders if Pete expected that Paul would also fall so deep in despair that he would commit suicide.

Paul thinks about Pete's final thoughts as he was about to kill himself. He wonders if Pete felt no one would really miss him once he was gone. That leads him to wonder if his father also felt that. Paul then wonders if he could have done something to change Pete's mind. Paul believes that Pete had simply lost the will to go on, and that nothing could change his life once that will was gone. Paul feels lost and alone, even though he's sitting very near Connie in the reception area. They don't share a single word, and he is aware of the barrier that separates people from each other.

He goes in to his next patient, and she announces immediately that she's pregnant. Paul finds that she has the beginning of a cavity. They agree that she will put off any major dental work until after the baby is born. In a sudden stroke of clarity, Paul realizes this is the kind of decision a normal person would make. He also sees that he has been viewing the world from a skewed perspective. He realizes that normal people ignore warnings about their health, decide that they don't want to floss, and skip a dental appointment in favor of a drink or a movie.

Paul summons Connie. He points out the pregnant patient and says that she's decided not to do any dental work until after the baby is born. He says everyone should make those kinds of decisions in life. He says he now understands that it's a simple matter to decide not to worry about things. He then asks if Connie will go out with him, giving him a second chance to be a part of her life. Connie announces that she's moving to Philadelphia with her boyfriend, the poet named Ben. She says she'll help Paul find and





train a replacement but he refuses to consider resumes, though she gives him a deadline.

Time passes. The Red Sox have a phenomenally bad year, and Paul is happy to again be a loyal fan of the underdog. By this time, Paul is paying a nightly visit to Eddie, the elderly patient no longer able to floss for himself. Each night, Paul flosses the old man's teeth. One night, Paul stops in and discovers that he won't be able to get home before the Red Sox game begins. Eddie agrees to let Paul watch the game. Paul goes through the typical rituals, including the correct meal and leaving the room for the sixth inning. Since there is a great deal riding on the game, Paul is on edge. He knows that a win for the Red Sox will not bring his father back. He also knows that he'll feel bad whether the team wins or loses. Paul makes the decision on the spot to find another way of life without following in the footsteps of his father or Pete. He turns off the television before the game is over and walks out of Eddie's apartment.

In the Epilogue, Paul spends three weeks at Seir. He attends classes, studies, and shares the duties of the compound with others living there. By the end of his time there, he's exhausted and finds the situation tedious. Still, he returns each year to spend time with the Ulms. Paul says he believes it's because he feels the need to stand up for something, even though he is risking being "wrong" in his stand. More information is published and accepted about the Ulms. The trend sparks debates about the right of people to make "loose claims about their historical legitimacy."

Paul's life goes on. He occasionally hears from Connie via email. He goes to Nepal with Mrs. Covoy each year where he does free dental work. One day, he is in Kathmandu when he sees a Chicago Cubs ball cap in a storefront. He says the Cubs haven't won a World Series in more than a century. He thinks about the fact that being a Cubs fan would mean longing for the day when they break that streak, and he sees it as something to "desperately want."

Paul goes inside and buys the hat. When he returns to the street, a little boy invites him to play ball with them. The boy recognizes Paul as the dentist and insists that Paul take the board, which serves as a bat. Paul asks what he's supposed to do and the little boy says the only goal is to hit the ball. Paul swings with "one eye on the ball, and one eye on heaven."

## Analysis

There is another example of Paul's loneliness seen in Chapter 10. He is sitting near Connie in the reception area of the dental office when he realizes that there's a barrier between them. Paul also realizes that there is a similar barrier between people everywhere but he doesn't follow this to the conclusion of looking for a way to break it down.

Paul's revelation that he can decide to be happy like other people is a true epiphany. This is a stark comparison to another patient Paul had earlier. That man decided not to



have any of the recommended dental work done because he didn't feel any pain from the cavities. He didn't see the need to get the work done and simply opted out. Paul doesn't understand it at all, and it actually makes him mad because the man seems so unreasonable. Paul has had the same kind of anger toward people who didn't floss or take care of their teeth as they should. But, when the pregnant woman decides to put off dental work until after her baby is born, Paul has a sudden, deep understanding that this is a decision made by a normal person. He compares that to the idea that some people decide not to floss on a given day or at all. Yet, they remain happy with their lives.

There is another epiphany when Paul decides that he won't follow the path set by his father and Pete. He realizes that his love of the Red Sox is a remnant of his childhood memories of his father, and that he's continued the tradition of following the team because he subconsciously hopes that it will bring him nearer to his father. In fact, Paul's father was manic-depressive and was probably never capable of connecting with Paul for more than brief periods of time, and then only on his own terms.

Some readers may be disappointed at the story's ending. It seems that Paul has searched for years for something that will fulfill him and it seems that he is finally starting to settle into a life that satisfies him. However, he's still missing that one "something" that he can focus on when he finds the Cubs hat. To some readers, it will seem that Paul is simply setting himself up for another situation in which the outward "something" doesn't live up to his long-term expectations.

The author chooses an interesting term with which to end the story. He says that Paul has one eye on the ball and the other "on heaven." This seems to be an indication that Paul believes in heaven after all, or that he's at least open to the idea that God and heaven are real. The reader is left to interpret the meaning.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Pete's death and Paul's reaction to it.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Paul stop following the Red Sox? Why does he buy the Cubs hat?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you believe is the significance of the final words of the book when Paul has "one eye on the ball, and the other eye on heaven?"

## Vocabulary

liquidated, eccentric, eradication, mundane, winnowing, sanctimony



# Characters

## Paul O'Rourke

Paul is a dentist with a thriving practice on the East Side. He is proud of his practice and what he can do for his patients, but he is dissatisfied with almost every other aspect of his life, including his own views on religion.

When he was young, Paul's father, Conrad, committed suicide. His dad was manic-depressive, and life was chaotic because of it. Paul learned his commitment to the Boston Red Sox by watching Conrad. However, every other aspect of his father's life was confusing and often frightening. As an adult, Paul comes to realize that his home life was not typical. That leads him to envy the home lives of other people. He falls in love several times, even at a very young age, and the girls' families are a major draw for him. He is enthralled by the family lives he sees, and he wants to be inside each of those families. This leads him to some serious relationship mistakes, and each breakup leaves him heartbroken.

Paul claims to be an atheist, but he touts God's comfort, God's blessings, and God's presence. He never quite makes a convincing argument for atheism and admits that one of his employees, Mrs. Convoy, has a valid point when she says he can't prove that God isn't real. The fact that he doubts makes him a prime target for the Ulms, a religious group of people who believe that God had commanded them to doubt.

Paul has an epiphany when he realizes that a pregnant woman should wait to deal with a cavity until after her baby is born. He suddenly understands that this is the kind of logic normal people have everyday. He follows the thought to its normal conclusion, applying that idea to other aspects of his life. He has refused to consider having children because of the heartbreak that might follow, but he realizes that's not what normal people think when they consider having children. He continues to live his life with this new understanding of himself and of other people, taking time to do free dental work for people in underdeveloped countries and spending time with the Ulms.

## Elizabeth Anne Convoy

Known throughout the book as Mrs. Convoy or Betsy, she is a dental hygienist in Paul O'Rourke's dental practice. She is extremely efficient, and he knows that a great deal of his success is because of Mrs. Convoy's guiding influence. She is a kind woman and shows a great deal of compassion and empathy for her patients and for other people. She is a driving force behind Paul's own path to self-discovery.

Mrs. Convoy is a devout Catholic, and she is quick to tout her beliefs, especially when she thinks that will make a difference in the life of someone else. She is also quick to understanding and acceptance. When Paul tries to talk to her about the posts being made online in his name, she asks if he made them. He says he didn't, and she makes



it clear that they really have nothing else to discuss on the subject. By this point in the story, Paul is defensive and tends to try to argue for his innocence each time the subject comes up. Mrs. Convoy doesn't understand that because she believes him when he says he isn't the one posting.

Mrs. Convoy is also a guiding influence in Paul's life with regard to his dental practice. He admits that he wanted her approval early in his career. By the time she tells him that he's the best dentist she's ever worked with, he is established and not nearly as needy of her approval; But, it still means a great deal to him. At the end of the book, Paul admits that he travels to foreign countries, providing free dental care to underprivileged, all because Mrs. Convoy insists that he do this.

## **Pete Mercer**

Pete is a billionaire who is a genetic member of the Ulm though he publicly denies it. He is a very public figure and has earned his money through investments. Some people felt that some of his investments were uncanny. For instance, he always had a great deal of money in gold when gold hit a peak high or when other aspects of the market fell.

Pete seemed to be searching for something that he was never able to find. At one point, he arranges for Paul to hear the story of Grant Arthur's love affair with the young Jewess from the woman. It's not clear what he hopes to gain with that action and he never takes any more of Paul's phone calls after that point.

Pete cashes in his entire business and Paul wonders what he plans to do next. Pete's share of the business ventures is some 5 million dollars and Paul considers that Pete could easily change or do anything he wants. Instead of any of the scenarios Paul imagines, Pete goes into the woods and commits suicide.

## **Grant Arthur**

Grant Arthur is the current leader of the Ulms. He recruits descendants of the Ulm race of people, providing them with proof of their heritage. He has established a community of Ulms in Seir. The community remains very primitive but harmonious. No one is forced to remain there but all are provided the opportunity to study and learn from each other. Grant was always an atheist, even when he tried to convert to the Jewish faith. At one point, he fell in love with a young Jewess and even began studying toward becoming a rabbi. However, even with this level of commitment, he always denied God's existence.

He uses unorthodox means to contact lost Ulms, known as reclaimants. In many cases, he contacts them directly or sends someone with their lineage which is supposed to provide proof of their ancestry leading back to the Ulms. In Paul's case, he creates an online presence and posts lines from the Ulms' "bible" meant to make Paul study, which leads him eventually to the Ulms.



## Connie Plotz

Connie is Paul's ex-girlfriend, and she works in Paul's dental practice. She is from a family of devout Jews but claims to be an atheist because Paul convinces her to question her own beliefs. She and Paul break up because of fundamental differences, including the question of whether to have children. She eventually marries someone else and has a family.

## Al Frushtick

Al is a patient who visits Paul's dental practice because of a toothache. He says he has the ability to meditate through pain and asks Paul to do the procedure without anesthetic. He changes his mind and begs for gas to help ease him through the pain. As he's leaving, he says he's headed to Israel. Paul learns that the website set up for his dental practice was established in Al's name just before Al shows up for another appointment. At that point, Paul demands answers and gets some minor information about the Ulms.

## Abby

Abby is Paul's dental assistant, and she's also an aspiring artist. She is seated across from Paul for hours every day as he works on patients, but he knows virtually nothing about her. Abby seldom talks to Paul at all, and the others in his office indicate that she's intimidated by him.

## Carlton B. Sookhart

Mr. Sookhart owns a rare book store and Paul contacts him in search of information about the Ulms. He is initially skeptical. He argues that it would not be possible for a secret race of people to exist because someone in the scientific community would have written about them by this point in history. Once he finds the Cantevicles, he tells Paul that he now believes the Ulms exist. He seems to be a reputable dealer, and Paul seems to trust him.

## Uncle Stuart

He is Connie's uncle and Paul greatly admires him, though he can't really say why he feels this way. Uncle Stuart visits Paul after the anti-Semitic remarks posted online in Paul's name. He tries to reason with Paul, and he's obviously concerned about Paul.

## **Mirav Mendelsohn**

Mirav is Grant Arthur's former girlfriend. She was shocked when she learned that Grant didn't believe in God. Mirav is a devout Jew until she comes to question her own belief in God. Without God, she sees no reason to follow the Jewish traditions. Ironically, she leaves the Jewish traditions behind despite the fact that Grant clings to them. She eventually returns to the Jewish community, teaching Jewish law to women planning to convert into the faith.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Ulms

The Ulms are a religious group of people who believe God commanded them to doubt his existence. They have been on the verge of extinction for thousands of years and have been so secret that most people have never heard of them. They seek out “reclaimants” who are descended from members of the tribe but are no longer living among the Ulms. Paul is one of those.

## The Me-Machine

This is what Paul calls the cell phones. Paul has a love/hate relationship with technology and claims that he hates that everyone spends so much time on the “me-machine,” but he also finds that he can't do without it.

## The Cantevicles

These are the books governing the Ulms and containing the history of the people. They resemble the Bible in some ways except that they command that their people doubt God's existence.

## Park Avenue, New York

Paul describes this as the “most civilized street in the world.” He has a dental practice here and is working hard to make it profitable and successful.

## Ulm, Germany

Ulm, Germany, is where Albert Einstein was born. The country does not appear in the story other than the mention that it was Einstein's birthplace and that it shares a name with the Ulm religious order.

## Something can Be Everything

Paul has the idea that “something can be everything” in his life and that he will be happy once he finds it. He spends a great deal of time looking for that thing. He focuses on his loyalty as a fan of the Red Sox but finds that isn't fulfilling, especially once the Red Sox win the World Series. He focuses on other activities, work, and people, but he finds that no one thing can be completely fulfilling.



## **Rubber Soul**

This is a Beatles' album that Paul has owned in all formats, from vinyl to digital. He finds it in a music store and wants to feel the excitement that had claimed him when he first bought it. He can't reclaim that excitement for himself but buys it anyway, hoping that someone will be excited to get it as a gift. He winds up leaving it on a bench. This album represents a lost time for Paul and his search for something to fulfill his life.

## **The Amalekites**

This was an ancient group of people. They Jews consider the Amalekites a moral enemy and part of their history includes the order to always remember this enmity.

## **The Thunderbox**

This is the name Paul uses to refer to the bathroom. Mrs. Convoy is not pleased by the choice, but Paul continues to use it.

## **YazFanOne**

This is Paul's online identity. He uses it to post to forums about the Red Sox and as an email account. He never uses his real name in any of his online dealings. This is the argument he uses in his claim that the person posting online as Dr. Paul Rourke is a fake.





# Settings

## Seir, Israel

This is the place where the Ulms live. It appears only as an ideal until near the end of the book when Paul says he has been there. There are not many descriptions of the place. It is very primitive, according to Pete Mercer. The people who live and visit there spend their evenings in debate and conversation. Paul spends much of his time there in study.

## Paul's Dental Office

Paul's office is located on Park Avenue and it's an upscale office. When he began renovating the space for his practice, he ignored the advice of others and made five exam rooms rather than four exam rooms and a private office. The office consists of a waiting room and small office space where Connie and other staff members worked, in addition to the exam rooms. A couple of times, Paul takes a seat in his waiting room and looks at the office from that perspective. He is pleased by the décor and the overall effect.

## The Mall

Paul visits several malls over the course of the story. The mall is a symbol of him, reminding him of childhood and the feelings of excitement and happiness. He remembers being in malls as a child and knowing that he couldn't have all the things that he saw. As an adult he hates that he no longer feels that excitement about anything.

## The Bathroom in Paul's Childhood Home

This is where Paul's father, Conrad, committed suicide. Paul remembers the room vividly because of his father's suicide and it comes to represent that loss and the changes it brought to Paul's life. Paul remembers Conrad's manic-depressive states before his suicide, but life without his father was much worse than living with his chaotic behavior.

## Brooklyn

Brooklyn is the region of New York City where Paul lives. He can see the Promenade from his home and sometimes watches the people there. One night, he falls asleep on his balcony and he is very upset for a short time when he wakes to find that no one is there.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Desire for Fulfillment

Paul has never really known happiness or stability in his life, and he feels that as a tangible loss. He tries many things as an adult to achieve the level of fulfillment. He sometimes visits malls in an effort to recapture the happiness he'd occasionally felt as a child. Most of the time, he goes just to look around in the hope that he'll find that contentment. He had visited malls as a child with his parents and one of their treats was to visit TGI Friday's. As a child, his parents were poor and they all ordered the cheapest things possible from the menu. As an adult, Paul is comfortably wealthy, and he relishes ordering the most expensive steak from the menu.

During one particular visit, Paul finds that he is unable to connect with the happiness he craves. He visits a number of stores, hoping that he'll find what he's looking for. When he arrives in a music store, he finds a Beatles album that he'd owned since its release, years earlier. He buys the album on CD because it represents that excitement he'd felt upon buying it for the first time. He hopes that he'll find some level of happiness by giving the album to someone, but even that doesn't work out for him.

Paul admits in the opening pages of the book that he's searching for something and that "something could never be everything." He is talking about his search for fulfillment. He already knows that no one thing can fulfill him completely. He says that his dental practice is thriving, but it isn't enough to fill his life. He commits himself to giving his patients quality care and advice for healthier lives, but that also isn't enough. He has some other hobbies and interests, including playing the banjo and watching the Red Sox, but those also can't complete his life.

Paul isn't the only character demonstrating this theme. When he meets billionaire Pete Mercer, he discovers that Mercer is also looking for that same happiness. Paul goes to Mercer's office where he discovers that Mercer has given away a priceless piece of art. While Mercer had probably been excited throughout his life by making money, he says that he has tired of that work, indicating that it no longer brings him contentment or happiness. Paul says it seems as if Mercer has "visited a mall," indicating that he's found some other way of achieving what he wants from life.

Paul says that a belief in God might be enough to fulfill him, but he is an atheist. Paul comes to realize that his heritage, as part of the Ulm tribe of people, might bring him nearer fulfillment. He spends time with them but apparently never fully commits to moving into the Ulm way of life.

## Fatalism

Paul has a fatalistic view of the world, and this impacts many aspects of his life. One important example of this theme is seen in Paul's attitude on aging. When he gets an



older patient, he wants to show Connie the signs of aging. He believes that no one can stop the aging process, which is a correct belief. However, he takes it another step and says there's no need trying to slow the signs because the end is inevitable. Paul sees Connie's efforts at taking care of herself, such as the use of lotion, as useless because she is eventually going to grow old and look old. What Paul can't see is that Connie is simply taking good care of herself and that she really doesn't deny that she's going to grow old someday and die.

One of Paul's patients arrives after a lengthy absence. When he sees the woman, he can hardly recognize her because she has aged so dramatically. What Paul notices most is that she doesn't seem to be aware that she's aged so much. He can only see that she acts as if nothing is different and, to Paul, that's a denial. Paul thinks the woman probably isn't aware. He wants to tell her that she's aged but can't find the words. This is an important example of Paul's fatalistic view of life. He can't imagine that someone would simply accept the aging process, even though he knows it's going to happen to everyone. Paul never comes to address this view of life, and he never comes to terms with his own aging. Ironically, Paul spends time at the gym for a short period. It's not clear if he sees some long-term benefit to working out other than a tenuous friendship with another member of the gym.

Another example of this is seen when Paul visits a mall after his meeting with Pete Mercer. Paul had decided to stop being a mass consumer and began living a more minimalistic life. He planned to donate the money he saved to some cause, hoping to make a difference in the world around him. However, he soon came to believe that his small donations weren't going to make any significant difference in the world overall. Paul can't see that he's making small differences, and that those lead to bigger things. He can only see that he can't make a huge impact on the world and that makes him believe that his donations are insignificant. This is a fatalistic view because Paul can only see the negative, big picture. It's also important to note that Paul goes to the mall after visiting with Pete. His conversation with Pete, including the comment Pete makes that Paul's indoctrination into the Ulms might just be a hoax, leads Paul to go to the mall, putting aside his previous desire to make a difference.

Yet another example of this theme is seen when Paul and Pete Mercer are talking about the Ulms during their second face-to-face meeting. Paul asks if the Ulms have asked Pete for money. This indicates that Paul fully expects that the group has ulterior motives and that they are hoping to find Pete is willing to offer financial assistance. Pete says they haven't, which goes against Paul's fatalistic expectations.

## Loneliness

Paul physically fears loneliness. The first sign of this is seen in his memories of the months after his father's death. Paul's father, Conrad, committed suicide when Paul was very young. He longed for his father back and became easily attached to other families in the years after that, and these actions do not seem out of the range of normal behavior, given the circumstances. However, Paul also became very fearful of being



alone at night. When he and his mother were going to bed, Paul was terrified that his mother would go to sleep before he would manage to fall asleep. He would try to keep her awake, just to avoid that possibility. His fear was that he would be the last person in the world who was awake. He never explains why he was afraid of that scenario, but he was. As an adult, he knows that his mother was probably tired and struggling to hold everything together, and that it was understandable that she eventually always lost her temper with his bedtime rituals. She eventually told him that people in China were just waking up as Paul and his mother were going to bed, so there was no way he would ever be the only person in the world who was awake. As an adult, Paul says that helped him.

Another example of this theme is seen when Paul falls asleep on his balcony one night. He has a view of the promenade and he is watching the people walking along the path late into the night. He falls asleep on his balcony and the promenade is completely empty when he wakes. He is frantic when he makes that discovery, wondering where all the people have gone. Even as an adult, he sometimes succumbs to this fear of being alone.

Paul's relationships are another example of this theme. He falls in love several times during his lifetime. Each time, the girl's family is an important part of the situation. The first "love" was as a child, and Paul was very attached to the girl's father as a fill-in father figure. It seems likely that he was still looking for a father of his own, and that his attachment to the girl's were often a means of filling that void in his own life.

Paul cites the fact that he has nothing to do most evenings after work. He is obviously lonely during those evenings but says he doesn't want to go out alone because he hates being "gawked at" by others out for the evening. He talks derisively about professional functions. He's invited to these functions on a regular basis but always turns them down, partly because he feels the others who attend will be nerdy scientists. Then, on the evening of the event, he realizes that those nerdy scientists have something to do while he's at home, alone. This attitude is an important aspect of Paul's character and is at least part of the reason he's lonely.

Ironically, Paul believes Mrs. Convoy is probably lonely because she's a widow with no close family. The story is written entirely from Paul's perspective and he never learns whether she really is lonely, but it seems likely that she isn't.

## **Paul's Relationship with his Father**

Paul's father, Conrad, was manic-depressive and the family's life was chaotic because of it. Paul recounts moments in his childhood when his father did completely off-the-wall things, such as buying every iron in a store. The family wasn't wealthy, so Paul's mother would have to return the irons. Conrad would cry while she was gone on that errand. It seems obvious to the modern-day reader that Conrad needed to be under medical care and probably could have been treated with medication, but it's likely this all happened in



the 1970s or 1980s when medical and social understanding of mental illness was not nearly as advanced as in today's world.

Paul learned to be a Red Sox fan from watching Conrad, who remained a loyal fan even when the Red Sox were on a lengthy losing streak. Paul spent time with Conrad in front of the television during the games. Even though Conrad often wasn't aware that Paul was still there, Paul was attuned to his father's every move and action. Conrad had a series of superstitions, including the fact that he would leave the room for the sixth inning, depending on Paul to tell him what happened during that part of the game. It seems that this was the most important positive aspect of the relationship between Paul and his father, which made a huge impact in Paul's life.

Conrad committed suicide in the family's bathtub. This naturally affected Paul in a tremendous manner, skewing his ideas of family and love forever. When Paul and Connie began talking about their future, Paul shied away from the idea of having children. Analyzing his response later, he says that he didn't really understand at the time how much Conrad's suicide impacted his fear of having a child. Paul says that he has never considered suicide but that having a child would take the possibility off the table forever. Paul is a stable adult but he seems to fear that he might someday fall into the depression his father suffered. He never voices this fear, but it seems to be just under the surface as he reveals this thought about having a child of his own. This is an important and lasting effect of Paul's relationship with his father.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in Paul's frantic need for a family. He falls in love three times, though the first is when he was very young and didn't really know the meaning of love. When he recounts that short-lived love, he talks about the girl's father more than about the girl herself. Paul was obviously searching for a father figure at that point, but that search doesn't end when Paul becomes an adult. He becomes enamored with the idea of being part of his girlfriends' families and wants very much to be accepted as a member of the family. Paul doesn't seem to be able or willing to give the relationships time to grow, and he's devastated when the relationships end.

## **The Existence and Beliefs of the Ulms**

The Ulms are a religious group that believe they were mandated by God to doubt God's existence. Paul quickly focuses on the fact that God appeared to the group, then demanded that they doubt His existence. He says that's a contradiction that can't be explained. Grant Arthur says that most religions have similar contradictions. The Ulms are required to focus on their doubt and, ironically, Grant Arthur says that they lose many of their members to belief. The people who spend a great deal of time studying about God often find that they believe in God; therefore, they are unable to follow the main directive, which is to doubt God's existence.

The Ulms have been persecuted throughout history and have been pushed to the edge of extinction on several occasions. By the time Paul is recruited, Grant says there are only about 2,000 or 3,000 Ulms left in the world. The Ulms compare themselves to the



Jewish people; but, they say the Jews' history has been well documented, a direct contrast to the Ulms. The Jewish references offend Paul to some degree, especially before he learns that they are using the Jews as a "point of reference." When Paul begins researching the group, he finds a rare book dealer named Mr. Sookhart. Mr. Sookhart argues that the Ulms can't exist because someone would have documented them by this point. He continues his research on Paul's behalf, and comes to believe that the group is real.

Paul has a love/hate relationship with technology. He finds that he is often unable to set the technology aside, even to do his work at his dental practice. At one point, he is so caught up in some recent articles he's read online that he forgets who his patient is and why he's working on her. He turns off the internet service and throws away his phone, but reconnects a few days later. Part of the issues with technology become intense because of Paul's interaction with the Ulms. He is undoubtedly searching for a deeper meaning for his life when the Ulms begin recruiting him, using technology as a means of capturing his attention. The fact that the Ulms use this is a statement of their belief that there is a specific way to reach out to each person. Pete Mercer says that he would not have been receptive to information given to him through this method, but realizes that Paul has been open to it precisely because of the delivery. Others are contacted directly, usually with information about their family trees that lead back to the Ulms.

The Ulms have a base in Seir, Israel, and Pete believes they are there because of an agreement with that government. Pete says the Ulms, if their history is correct, were the first recorded genocide and that entitles the modern-day group to reclaim the land owned by their ancestors.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of Paul O'Rourke. He is a dentist with a thriving practice on Park Avenue in New York City. He lives in a duplex in Brooklyn and seems to be a successful, career-oriented man with everything going for him. Paul is, in fact, lonely and searching for something to fulfill him. This loneliness defines him during the first part of this book and the search for the one thing that will bring him happiness takes up all his time and energy. That sets a great deal of the tone for the story with Paul talking about the things that are lacking in his life. An important part of the tone is Paul's fatalistic view of the world. He doesn't see the sense in things such as Connie's tendency to use lotion on her hands and arms, citing the inevitability of the aging process.

In some ways, the book seems to be a lengthy conversation between Paul and the reader. At one point, he talks about what happens when someone loses a tooth. He then says, "If you ever lose a tooth, just toss it." That seems to be directly addressed to the reader. Throughout most of the story, Paul is confused and struggles to find happiness. The first-person perspective means that some of the story is chaotic with rambling monologue and points that seem to conflict. He claims to be an atheist but seems to admit that God is real. He talks about his loyalty as a Red Sox fan but says the worst day of his life was the day they ended a long losing streak to win the World Series. Most of these ideas and thoughts are eventually explained. The reader may, however, need to figure out some of the ideas without a black and white explanation.

The overall tone of the book is one of hope and Paul does eventually realize that he has to find happiness within himself rather than depending on an outside source. The journey to that discovery is one of chaos and confusion, much like the lives of many people who struggle to reach Paul's conclusion. There is no clear resolution at the end of the book as Paul learns that life is filled with change and that his own life will continue to evolve as he lives it. An important aspect of the tone is Paul's fatalism.

## Language and Meaning

There are some interesting structural aspects to the writing, including a couple of sections in which Paul recounts conversations. One of these appears in Chapter 2. Paul smokes and Mrs. Convoy doesn't approve. The conversation reads, in part, "'Don't you wish you had more self-control?' I'd tell her, she'd say, 'Of course I will not join you. What are you doing. Do not light that cigarette!' I'd put the cigarettes away with an offhand remark, she'd say, 'How am I on trial?'" These conversations go on for lengthy paragraphs when they appear. In each, none of Paul's comments are presented in quotes, but Mrs. Convoy's responses give the reader clues about Paul's part of the conversation.



There are some obvious literary techniques seen in the story, including the use of foreshadowing. The first example of foreshadowing is seen in Chapter 1. Paul says his life really begins when he meets with Al Frushtick for the first time. At the end of the chapter, Al says that both he and Paul are Ulms. Paul says that many of his patients say “funny things” while under the influence of gas. He then says that he “didn't think anything of it,” and the chapter ends with those words. The author is making certain that the reader remembers this encounter when Al becomes an important character later in the story.

There are many curse words used in the book. These are not necessary for understanding the story but are apparently intended to create higher levels of emotion and to make the characters seem more realistic. Some readers may be offended by the language, but most will not find the curse words to be overbearing. There is also a great deal of talk about religion. At one point, Paul says that he's not trying to offend anyone who does believe in God, but some Christians may find the atheist viewpoint disturbing.

## Structure

The book is divided into two sections. The first is titled Son of a Stranger. This title might refer to Paul's father, who was manic-depressive and committed suicide when Paul was very young. The first sections include Chapters 1 through 5. In Chapter 1, Paul meets Al Frushtick for the first time and reveals details about himself and his life. In Chapter 2, the reader learns more about Paul's dental practice and his relationships with the others in his office. By the end of this chapter, the reader knows more about Paul and has learned some basic information about the Ulms.

The second section is titled Ersatz Israel. Chapters 6 through 10 are in this section. In this section, Paul learns that the Ulms are real, and he comes to accept that he is part of the group. By the end of this section, Paul has come on a lengthy journey of self-discovery and has accepted that he cannot expect any single thing to create a sense of fulfillment in his life.

The book concludes with an Epilogue. The reader learns some about Paul's life after his epiphany regarding happiness, but there is no clear-cut conclusion. One of Paul's greatest lessons is that he will continue to change as he lives his life. He is aware that many things in these changes will bring him some level of happiness.

The chapters are titled by number only. This means there is no clue about the contents of any given chapter. The chapters vary in length and content. Some chapters are filled with information while others are briefer and contain much less relevant information.





## Quotes

I'm an Ulm, and so are you!

-- Al Frushtick (Chapter 1 paragraph 57)

**Importance:** This is the first time Paul has heard anything about the Ulms, and it's a foreshadowing of the events that follow.

How I loved that frightening man. How he was everything awesome and good, until one day he sat down in the bathtub, closed the shower curtain, and shot himself in the head.

-- Paul (Chapter 2 paragraph 75)

**Importance:** Paul is talking about his father, who was manic-depressive and committed suicide when Paul was very young. Paul's relationship with his father is an important theme in the book. The suicide greatly affected the rest of Paul's life.

And heaven forbid you should like something, knowing what's coming, knowing they just turn liver spotted and die. Better never do it at all than to do it, enjoy it, and lose it in the end.

-- Connie (Chapter 3 paragraph 21)

**Importance:** Connie has a good grip on Paul's fatalistic view of the world. He is constantly talking about the fact that people grow old and die. In this passage, Paul is trying to understand why Connie enjoys putting lotion on her hands.

I loved Sammy and wanted to marry her, but I also loved Mr. and Mrs. Santacroce and wanted to be adopted by them and live under the spell of their blessed good fortune forever and ever.

-- Paul (Chapter 3 paragraph 41)

**Importance:** This is the first real look the reader has of Paul's desire to belong. He is desperately lonely, and his father's suicide has left him longing for a family.

I'm not a computer program, but a person with a beating heart, reaching across this divide to say I feel for you. I am your brother.

-- Grant Arthur (Chapter 5 paragraph 25)

**Importance:** Paul has just accused Grant of being some sort of computer program pulling information from a database somewhere. Paul still doesn't know that it's Grant Arthur writing to him, but Grant's comments and insights keep Paul engaged.

I knew I was in love with the Plotzes when I felt embarrassed to be an atheist, and instead of insisting upon it as a declaration of my essential self, around them I kept it under wraps.

-- Paul (Chapter 5 paragraph 73)



**Importance:** The Plotzes are Connie's family and they are practicing Jews. Paul had previously always insisted on making it known that he was an atheist but now he sees that as an "affront" to this family. This is yet another look at Paul's character and an example of his desire to be part of a family.

Then why has no one heard of them? Why have the vultures in every history department across the world not seized upon them and picked this unique, this truly marvelous history clean for all to see?

-- Mr. Sookhart (Chapter 6 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** Mr. Sookhart is posing a question that's asked by many during this book. He believes that it's impossible in the modern world for a group of people to remain secret, even if they are trying to do so.

They approached you in a way that would have put me off forever, but you remained open to it.

-- Pete Mercer (Chapter 7 paragraph 75)

**Importance:** Pete is referring to the fact that the Ulms have contacted Paul by posing as Paul online, and Pete says he would not have been open to being contacted in that manner. They brought Pete his family history as proof that he belonged to the Ulms. This is an example of the fact that Grant Arthur is doing thorough research as he recruits new members of the group.

They're subjects of fate no less than anyone else, the difference being they're spared the offense of ascribing it to God's will.

-- Paul (Chapter 7 paragraph 78)

**Importance:** Paul is reading from information emailed to him about the Ulms, and he's interested in the fact that the members of the group are free from the need to say that their misfortunes are the will of God. The fact that the group is destined to remain doubtful of God's existence means they are also free to doubt He has the power to control events.

We are our own worst enemy. We abandon doubt. We become believers.

-- Grant Arthur (Chapter 9 paragraph 19)

**Importance:** Grant is referring to the fact that some people eventually find they can no longer doubt God's existence, which is the one law of the Ulms. Once they become true believers, they are no longer part of the group.

He bought a gun, walked out into the woods, and shot himself in the head. It may not have been productive or charitable or imaginative or fun, but the act did make plain the extent of his despair.

-- Paul (Chapter 10 paragraph 22)

**Importance:** Paul is referring to Pete Mercer's suicide. He doesn't really know why Pete



killed himself but puts it down to the fact that he soured on the idea of the Ulms for some reason.

The world new again! Something to desperately want!  
-- Paul (Epilogue paragraph 19)

**Importance:** Paul has just seen the Cubs hat in the store and realizes that he can get excited about following this team because they have had a lengthy losing streak. He is pleased that he has found this “something” that piques his interest.