

Tropic of Orange: A Novel Study Guide

Tropic of Orange: A Novel by Karen Tei Yamashita

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Plot Summary

The novel *Tropic of Orange* tells the story of a magical event that begins in Mexico on the Tropic of Cancer and spreads north to Los Angeles. The story is told from the perspectives of seven principal characters. The story begins on the longest day of the year near Mazatlan, Mexico.

Rafaela Cortez tends the house of a journalist named Gabriel Balboa. Gabriel works for a major Los Angeles daily newspaper and he has purchased a property on the Tropic of Cancer. Over the years, he has built a house and made improvements to the property, but it always seems to be an unfinished work. Rafaela needs a break from her marriage so she goes from Los Angeles to Gabriel's home to act as a sort of supervisor to the work being done on the property. Of the many trees Gabriel has planted, one is an orange tree planted directly on the Tropic of Cancer. The tree is believed to be a descendant of the first orange trees brought from Brazil to the Los Angeles area in the late nineteenth century. This tree produces a single orange and it seems to somehow capture the Tropic line.

In addition to Gabriel, the principle characters in Los Angeles include Bobby Ngu, the husband of Rafaela, Emi, a television producer, Buzzworm, a street activist and social worker, and Manzanar Murakami, a homeless person who believes he conducts the sounds of traffic from a freeway overpass. The seventh principal character is an old man named Arcangel who travels from Mexico to the United States. As the novel unfolds, these characters become more and more interconnected.

While the characters in Los Angeles go about their various jobs and lives, Arcangel comes into possession of the single orange from Gabriel's property. As Arcangel moves northward, so does the Tropic of Cancer. Time and space are distorted and the principle characters begin to notice strange events. Few if any of the characters know that the ensuing events are tied to the disturbance of the Tropic of Cancer.

In addition to the disruption to the world from the movement of the Tropic of Cancer, other plots develop that affect both principle and minor characters. First an outbreak of tainted oranges kills people in Los Angeles. The oranges are believed to be infused with cocaine as a means to smuggle the drug into the United States. In a sinister turn of events, some of the principle characters uncover a black market operation dealing in the internal organs of children.

Two separate but nearby accidents on a major Los Angeles freeway trap a mile long section of motorists. The motorists leave their vehicles, and thousands of homeless people who have lost their camps to the fire resulting from the freeway accidents occupy the abandoned cars. Most of the principle characters in Los Angeles join the homeless on the freeway and contribute to the television news broadcasts covering the event.

As Arcangel and the orange attached to the Tropic of Cancer continue to move north toward Los Angeles, events become more surreal, and all characters brace for what will be a violent climax involving all of the principle characters in different ways.



Monday: Chapters 1 and 2

Monday: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Tropic of Orange tells the story of seven different major characters and how their lives all connect through personal relationships and through shared experiences of external events. The story begins in both Mazatlan, Mexico and Los Angeles, California.

In Chapter 1, Rafaela Cortez begins the morning by sweeping out the house. Every morning the house is full of dust and animals that have wandered into the house. Some of the animals are alive, and some of them are dead. Previously Rafaela had used a vacuum cleaner for the task, but it broke and now she uses a broom.

When Rafaela speaks to Gabriel, a journalist, on the telephone, she tells him of the broken vacuum cleaner. He tells her not to worry, and the two discuss whether Rodriguez has begun work on the house. Gabriel spent his entire life savings on the property near Mazatlan, Mexico. He chose the property because the Topic of Cancer runs through it. For the past eight years he has been having work completed on the house. Rafaela makes suggestions about what house fixtures Gabriel should buy in the United States rather than trying to find in Mexico, and Gabriel asks about Rafaela's son, Sol.

After getting off the telephone, Rafaela speaks to Dona Maria who owns the house where Rafaela has walked in order to call Gabriel. Dona Maria is playing with Sol. Dona Maria comments on how Sol's Chinese and Latin mixture make him a beautiful child. Rafaela explains that her mother is from the Yucatan region of Mexico, and her father's family is from South America.

Rafaela has come to take care of Gabriel's house while she also takes time away from Sol's father, Bobby. While Rafaela and Sol walk from Dona Maria's to Gabriel's house, Rafaela thinks about how Gabriel has planted many trees over the years. Most of the trees have died, and only one of the citrus trees has produced any fruit. One unhealthy orange tree has produced a single orange. Gabriel had bought the tree in California and thought it might be a descendant of one of the first trees brought to California from Brazil in 1873.

As Chapter 2 begins, the reader can see immediately that the narration appears to come from a different source than in the previous chapter. The narrator tells the story of a time a man tried to steal Bobby's truck at gunpoint. Though Bobby was far smaller than his attacker, he beat the man badly and then went back to work as if nothing had happened.

Bobby is Chinese and he is from Singapore. He speaks fluent Spanish, and he lives in Koreatown. After his mother died and his father's business began to have trouble, Bobby and his brother began going to a refuge camp for Vietnamese in Singapore.



Eventually they got American passports and sent to the United States. Bobby now has a janitorial business and an extra job in the mailroom of the newspaper.

Bobby's wife, Rafaela, is Mexican. She and Bobby often argue about the amount he charges his customers, and Rafaela joined a labor union. This caused serious arguments between Bobby and Rafaela, and Rafaela left with the couple's young son, Sol. Bobby wants Rafaela and Sol to return, but Rafaela says that Bobby must stop smoking first.

Bobby financially supports his father and brother.

Monday: Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

In Chapter 1, a third-person narrator speaking from the perspective of Rafaela presents the story. To Rafaela it seems significant that her father's family came from South America.

Rafaela thinks some of the choices that Gabriel has made in improving his house and property have not been well thought out. This seems especially true in the case of the planted trees. Rather than import new varieties perhaps Gabriel should have planted local trees. The possible path of the ancestry of the orange tree from Brazil to California back south again to Mexico seems similar to the path of Rafaela's family. Her father's family came from South America, and she went north to the United States and now has come back south to Mexico.

In Chapter 2, the story is presented by a third-person narrator, but this narrator's tone and voice is significantly different from the narrator of the previous chapter. The perspective is that of Bobby Ngu.

Bobby has an incredible ability to focus on work. Even having to fight off a robber does little to distract him from his day of work. Bobby is a truly multicultural individual. He is Chinese but from Singapore. He passed himself off as Vietnamese to get to the United States. He lives in a Korean neighborhood and speaks fluent Spanish.



Monday: Chapters 3 through 5

Monday: Chapters 3 through 5 Summary

In Chapter 3, Emi and Gabriel sit in a restaurant discussing Gabriel's fondness for film noir. Gabriel and Emi sometimes date, though the exact nature of their romantic association is uncertain even to the two of them. Gabriel mentions that today is the summer solstice, which means that on this day the sun is directly over his place in Mexico.

Emi enjoys picking on Gabriel. She likes to be obnoxious and criticize Gabriel. Sometimes she goes too far, and he does not find the interaction enjoyable. Sometimes he even gets angry.

Gabriel mentions that he is considering going to Mexico in a couple of weeks. Emi gets a message from work and has to leave lunch immediately. It is raining as Emi departs the restaurant.

In Chapter 4, Buzzworm tries to counsel a younger man. Buzzworm is an experienced veteran of the streets, and he tries to impart some wisdom into what he sees as a rash young man. The two discuss the distinctions between the terms surviving, living, and dying. Buzzworm says that his definition of surviving does not include the use of drugs as a way to avoid reality. He thinks that is dying. Buzzworm believes that surviving and living involve making the best choices possible.

Buzzworm spends a great deal of time on the streets. He considers himself a self-appointed social service worker. He distributes cards with his name and pager number, and he will answer calls any time of day. Buzzworm often helps homeless people find food or medical care. Many find Buzzworm's assistance faster and more reliable than official organizations.

Buzzworm collects watches, and he wears several on both arms. He can tell stories about each watch. The watches that Buzzworm wears are not valuable in a monetary sense, but each has an interesting story. Another notable trait of Buzzworm is his ever-present audio device with headphones. Buzzworm listens to the radio constantly. He believes he spends more on batteries than some people do on drugs. Buzzworm credits constant listening to the radio with helping him get off drugs and help others to do the same.

Another of Buzzworm's interests concern palm trees. He is very knowledgeable about palm trees, and he believes that people do not do enough to take care of the trees that make his city more beautiful.

In Chapter 5, Manzanar Mukakami hears traffic noise the way other people hear music. He stands on a highway overpass with a baton and gestures with his arms to conduct the sounds in the same way a conductor leads an orchestra. Manzanar is a Japanese-



American, and he is homeless. Some other Japanese-Americans find Manzanar's behavior embarrassing.

Monday: Chapters 3 through 5 Analysis

Chapter 3

A third person narrator presents event from Emi's perspective. In tone and style the narration is similar to that of Chapter 1. As characters Gabriel and Emi seem to be opposites. Emi is aggressive, and Gabriel seems more reserved.

Chapter 4

A third person narrator presents the story from Buzzworm's perspective. In some ways the style of the narration is similar to Chapter 2, a chapter from Bobby's perspective. The same abrupt real-time style exists in both the narration from Bobby and Buzzworm's perspective.

Buzzworm is a truly interesting character. He seems to be a blend of eccentricity and altruism.

Chapter 5

The third person narration from the perspective of Manzanar is in a more detached, more philosophical manner than the narration in any of the previous chapters. Manzanar himself thus far is an enigma. Besides knowing that he is Japanese-American and possibly insane, the reader cannot yet tell much about him.



Monday: Chapters 6 and 7

Monday: Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In Chapter 6, Gabriel is at work and he receives a call from Emi inviting him to take a break. He is in the process of testing a new editor. Gabriel likes this new editor, so he does not pick on him too much. Gabriel writes local news. He worked his way up from messenger after being inspired by a Mexican-American reporter in the 1970s.

Emi playfully picks on Gabriel over the telephone. Gabriel thinks about how he knows that despite the constant playful criticisms Emi is truly a kind and generous person.

After getting off the telephone with Emi, Gabriel calls Buzzworm. Buzzworm is Gabriel's source for news of the street. Buzzworm tells Gabriel of how a recent flash flood killed a homeless transvestite. Buzzworm also tells Gabriel about a Japanese man that stands on a freeway overpass and gestures as if he is conducting an orchestra. Gabriel says that Buzzworm is more demanding than any editor in his desire to see stories of the homeless get into the paper. Gabriel once promised to give Buzzworm half the prize money if he ever won a Pulitzer Prize for writing a story based on Buzzworm's information about the homeless.

After getting off the telephone Gabriel thinks about his house in Mexico. He realizes that none of his friends in Los Angeles will want to go there. Gabriel leaves his office to go look for the homeless Japanese-American man named Manzanar.

In Chapter 7, an old man who claims to be from the farthest tip of South America is an enigma to many. No one knows where he really comes from or how old he really is. Some believe he is a street performer, and some believe he was once a famous performer of the stage. He claims to have performed in the greatest venues of Latin America. He claims to have performed for everyone from well-known authors to dictators to revolutionaries to notorious narcotics dealers. He goes by the name of Arcangel.

Arcangel has predicted doom on a variety of dates. No one knows if he is really a prophet with any knowledge of the future.

Arcangel has recently been working as a street performer in Mexico City, and now he is passing through Mazatlan on his way north.

Monday: Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Unlike all previous chapters, Chapter 6 is told in the first person with Gabriel as the narrator.



Perhaps Gabriel and Emi are more alike than they appear on the surface. Gabriel enjoys picking on editors, and Emi, even if known only to Gabriel, is actually a kind and generous person.

Connections between the many principle characters are being revealed. Thus far the reader has seen a connection between Rafaela and Gabriel, Rafaela and Bobby, Gabriel and Emi, Gabriel and Buzzworm, and Buzzworm and Manzanar.

Chapter 7 shows a return to the third-person narration. Here the perspective is that of Arcangel. The tone of this narration is more poetic, perhaps even more magical.

Arcangel seems to be the only major character that thus far lacks a connection to another major character.



Tuesday: Chapters 8 though 11

Tuesday: Chapters 8 though 11 Summary

In Chapter 8, from his usual vantage point overlooking the freeway, Manzanar witnesses a terrible accident involving a large truck carrying propane fuel and a sports car carrying two men eating oranges.

Years before Manzanar had been a surgeon. One day he walked out of the hospital and never returned.

In Chapter 9, while driving, Emi talks on the telephone to Gabriel. She is following a news van to the scene of the accident involving the propane truck and the sports car. Gabriel's car has broken down, and he desperately wants Emi to pick him up because he must get to the airport to follow a lead that Buzzworm has given to him. Emi sees that a traffic jam will prevent her from getting to the scene of the accident so he agrees to pick up Gabriel from the gas station where he is calling from.

Once in the car Gabriel mentions that something has not seemed right for the past two days. He says it is something about the passage of time or perhaps the angle of the sun. Emi is dismissive, but Gabriel says that Buzzworm also mentioned feeling like something is out of the ordinary.

Emi and Gabriel arrive at the airport, and she agrees to wait while he goes inside to investigate the tip that Buzzworm gave him.

In Chapter 10, Rodriguez works around the property as usual, but he seems troubled. He seems to want to apologize to Rafaela and plead with her not to give a bad report to Gabriel, but she does not understand what he is saying and cannot see that he has done anything wrong. She tries to calm Rodriguez, and he says he is not himself today. He says the strange things started with the crabs and the eggs.

Rafaela asks what he means, and he explains that all the eggs he cracked that morning had two yolks, and he saw two crabs in the house. Rafaela asks if the appearance of crabs is abnormal, and Rodriguez acts as if Rafaela is crazy. He says they are located much too far from the beach to have crabs.

Dona Maria arrives and gives Rafaela some herbs and seasonings. She asks about Sol who is sleeping. They go into Gabriel's house, and Dona Maria speaks of Gabriel in a maternal way. Dona Maria also says that in the morning she found a crab in her house. She says that in all the time she has lived there she has never seen a crab in her house. Before leaving Dona Maria tells Rafaela that a package for her has arrived at the hotel.

Rafaela and Sol walk to the hotel to claim the package. She discovers that it consists of faucets that Gabriel has sent from the United States. On the way back to Gabriel's



house, Rafaela and Sol are caught in a sudden rainstorm. Rafaela sees hundreds of crabs. Once back at the house Rafaela notices that the lone orange is no longer on the tree.

In Chapter 11, while standing on the Tropic of Cancer, Arcangel bathes in the rain. He sees a single orange rolling on the ground, and he sees a woman pushing a cart full of nopales, cactus, stop and pick up the orange. On his way through town Arcangel sees that a truck has stalled and caused a traffic jam. People are impatient and angry. Arcangel says he will move the truck, and everyone thinks he is a crazy frail old man. He attaches cables to the truck and attaches the cables to himself and pulls the truck. People are amazed. Many give gifts of coins, fruit, and vegetables.

Arcangel goes to the marketplace and sees the woman who had been pushing the cart full of nopales. He buys some nopales and asks the price of the orange. The woman says the orange is not worth anything and gives it to Arcangel.

Tuesday: Chapters 8 though 11 Analysis

In Chapter 8, although the freeway accident is horrific, Manzanar witnesses it in a detached emotionless fashion.

Though the reader receives more details about Manzanar's past, he is no less an enigmatic character. In fact, his past as a surgeon juxtaposed with his present as a homeless and seemingly mentally imbalanced person may add to the confusion.

In Chapter 9, external events are beginning to affect multiple characters. The explosion on the freeway first witnessed by Manzanar is already affecting other principle characters like Emi and Gabriel. Both Gabriel and Buzzworm share a peculiar and inexplicable feeling that something is out of the ordinary.

Emi and Gabriel share more than a casual or occasional romantic relationship. In fact, they seem to be very close. In addition to their romantic relationship they seem to rely on each other professionally, and they seem to be in constant daily contact.

In Chapter 10, the peculiar feeling that defies explanation is not confined to characters in Los Angeles. A non-principle character in Mexico feels confusion and an inability to express what has seemed troubling the past couple of days.

Mention of the crabs far from the sea is repeated by multiple characters. At this point the reader cannot know what it means, but it seems to relate to the overall feeling that things are not as they should be.

In Chapter 11, Arcangel continues to defy classification. Previously he seemed to be an aged performer, but in this chapter he exhibits super-human strength.

If the orange that Arcangel acquires from the nopales vendor is the same as the one that fell from the tree on Gabriel's property, this may be the beginning of a connection between Arcangel and the other principle characters.



Tuesday: Chapters 12 through 14

Tuesday: Chapters 12 through 14 Summary

In Chapter 12, Bobby receives a letter informing him that a distant cousin is stranded in Tijuana and needs assistance. Bobby is skeptical, but all the details in the letter seem to confirm that the person in question indeed knows Bobby's family. The letter names the province in China where Bobby's mother came from, and it mentions details about Bobby's connection to Singapore.

Bobby is disappointed that he still has not heard anything from Rafaela. Thinking of Rafaela makes Bobby think of Rafaela's brother who illegally entered the United States without any assistance from traffickers or payoffs. Bobby thinks back to the first time he met Rafaela ten years ago. Rafaela's brother did not want her to endure the same hardships he did in getting into the United States, so he had her wait in Tijuana until he found a way. He enlisted Bobby's help. Bobby went to Tijuana to check if Rafaela was well. As soon as Bobby saw Rafaela he was struck by her beauty. He began going to see her every weekend.

Bobby thinks about his disagreements with Rafaela before she left. She believed that he, like many other immigrants, worked for too little money and too little appreciation. Bobby was not interested in her larger political ideas and wanted simply to work and provide for those that depended on him. Rafaela wanted more, and so she left.

In Chapter 13, while Buzzworm makes his usual rounds he looks at a map of Los Angeles and thinks about how the city is so divided and how so many have different ideas on territory. He thinks about how the economically underprivileged have the least amount of ownership and pride in their neighborhoods. Buzzworm envisions a condition of improvement that would start with people taking pride in their neighborhoods.

Buzzworm visits Margarita's store and asks to buy peanuts. Margarita says Buzzworm always buys peanuts and tries to convince him to buy bananas instead. She says she also has some imported oranges. She says that if Buzzworm buys some bananas she will give him a free orange. Buzzworm agrees.

As Buzzworm leaves the store he hears gunshots, and when he rounds the corner he sees the same brash young man he spoke to in an earlier chapter shaken and afraid. Buzzworm asks the young man what happened. The young man says that someone shot at him from a moving car, but the bullets curved in the air and did not hit him. Buzzworm explains that no man can see moving bullets. To calm the young man Buzzworm gives him a watch and the orange.

In Chapter 14, Gabriel enters the airport and checks arrival times for flights from Mexico. He asks the airport to page a C. Juarez while he watches the area where people receive pages. He sees a woman with a child answer his page, and he follows



them outside the hospital. As the woman and child enter a taxicab, Gabriel tells Emi to follow the cab. Gabriel follows the woman inside the hospital and sees her give a cooler to a hospital employee. Gabriel speaks to a nurse at the hospital and discovers that the hospital specializes in infant organ transplants.

Once outside the hospital Gabriel sees Emi talking to a police officer. Emi has learned about the accident involving the exploding truck from the police officer. She says that the passenger in the sports car survived. The police determined that the sports car caused the accident, and they suspect drugs, but the passenger insists that the driver did nothing more than eat a piece of an orange.

Emi also managed to speak to the woman that Gabriel followed, and the woman claimed to have been delivering milk. Both Emi and Gabriel are skeptical.

Once back at the office Gabriel calls Buzzworm and says that he followed the tip Buzzworm gave, but he does not think the woman is involved in the drug trade. He asks Buzzworm to try to discover more information. Buzzworm asks if Gabriel has interviewed Manzanar, and Gabriel says that Manzanar refused to speak to him. Buzzworm agrees to come along for another attempt to interview Manzanar.

Tuesday: Chapters 12 through 14 Analysis

In Chapter 12, while on the surface Bobby may seem stoic and even cold, and focused only on work, he increasingly seems to be the provider for many. It is ironic that Rafaela criticizes Bobby for failure to recognize that others do not appreciate his work when she seems to fail to appreciate how many people, including herself, that Bobby provides for. She has the luxury of contemplating higher political ideals, but Bobby has a wife, child, brother, and father to support.

While others seem to yearn for more, Bobby seem to want only the opening opportunity, and he is confident that his own hard work will solve all problems.

In Chapter 13, although Buzzworm intentionally exposes himself daily to the constant hardships of others, he never loses his utopian vision of a future world. Buzzworm truly believes he can make a difference. His interaction with Margarita shows that he indeed values all people as individuals. His second encounter with the brash young man reveals Buzzworm's care giving and mentoring nature.

In Chapter 14, like a scene from one of his coveted film noir stories, Gabriel becomes the hard-boiled detective shadowing a subject in order to get to the bottom of the story. Neither the reader nor Gabriel have any idea what this investigation based on a tip from Buzzworm is about and Gabriel seems surprised to discover that C. Juarez is a woman. What begins as an investigation into a possible news story into something as common as drug smuggling, turns into something confusing and possibly far more sinister than Gabriel could have imagined.



Wednesday: Chapters 15 through 18

Wednesday: Chapters 15 through 18 Summary

In Chapter 15, Bobby waits in Tijuana to meet with the traffickers and consider paying to have his cousin smuggled into the United States. While waiting for the appointment time he looks in the Chinese medicine shops for herbs to help him stop smoking. At a restaurant Bobby meets with a trafficker. The man shows Bobby a photo, and Bobby is surprised to see that the person the trafficker claims is Bobby's cousin is a girl about twelve years old. The girl does bear a slight family resemblance. The trafficker says that the girl traveled with a nineteen year old brother, but the brother jumped off the ship off the coast of Mexico and is presumed to have drowned.

Bobby is suspicious. The trafficker produces a letter, and Bobby recognizes his father's handwriting. Still Bobby is suspicious. The trafficker is a tough negotiator. He insinuates that if Bobby does not pay the girl will be sold into prostitution. Bobby insists on seeing the girl before he agrees to pay. Reluctantly the dealer agrees, and he arranges a time the following day.

In Chapter 16, Buzzworm has learned that the young man who saw the curving bullets has died. The medical examiners say the cause of death was a drug overdose. Buzzworm accompanies the young man's mother to the morgue to identify the body. Afterward Buzzworm speaks to the young man's friends. Buzzworm asks a series of questions and comes to the conclusion that it is unlikely that the young man was using drugs.

Buzzworm would like to go visit Margarita, but he has learned that she has also died. Just like with the young man, the medical examiners say the cause of death was a drug overdose, but Buzzworm knows that Margarita did not use drugs.

In Chapter 17, with Buzzworm's assistance, Gabriel interviews Manzanar. Though Gabriel is resistant, Buzzworm and Manzanar insist that Manzanar must approve Gabriel's story before it is printed in the newspaper.

Gabriel does not believe Manzanar is the man's real name. Gabriel thinks he took it from the name of the infamous detention camp in World War II where the man claims to have been born, but Gabriel thinks the man looks too old to have been born during the time the camp was in operation. Gabriel does not believe that Manzanar is crazy.

Gabriel receives a telephone call from Emi, and he asks her if she has ever heard of Manzanar. She ridicules his question and goes on to tell Gabriel of a second explosion and fire on the freeway a mile away from the first accident. The two fires have trapped motorists on a section of the freeway. Gabriel calls Buzzworm and discovers that the motorists have abandoned their cars. Groups of homeless have abandoned their own burning camps and have taken refuge in the abandoned cars. Buzzworm also has



additional information on the C. Juarez story. He thinks whatever is going on has something to do with the drug cartels trying to diversify into other ventures.

In Chapter 18, Rafaela and Sol walk to Dona Maria's house. When they arrive they see a black Jaguar automobile parked in front of the house. It belongs to Dona Maria's son, Hernando. Hernando is using the telephone, so Dona Maria, Rafaela, and Sol walk to the cornfield. Dona Maria says her son imports and exports oranges. Rafaela remembers Sol's bottle of milk and asks if she can put it in Dona Maria's refrigerator. While she is in Dona Maria's kitchen, Rafaela overhears a conversation about selling the organs of children. She is horrified to hear that some people take the organs from healthy children and sell them. Rafaela looks in the refrigerator and sees a cooler. She takes the cooler and runs back toward the cornfield.

Wednesday: Chapters 15 through 18 Analysis

In Chapter 15, Bobby immediately feels the urge to protect the girl, but he has had experience with swindlers, and he knows he must act emotionless or the traffickers will take advantage of the situation and raise the price. Even after seeing the letter that he recognizes as coming from his father Bobby manages to remain detached and demands to see the girl before contemplating giving the traffickers money.

In Chapter 16, Buzzworm believes that the younger generation listens to the wrong kind of music, and he often tries to convince them to listen to Jazz. He also believes that the extra information presented by radio disk jockeys on jazz stations can teach young people about history.

Two recent deaths attributed to drug overdose in people that Buzzworm does not believe used drugs seem to be more than coincidence.

In Chapter 17, Gabriel feels a strange fascination with Manzanar. For some reason he thinks the man is wise and someone that can teach him something. Still, it is hard for Gabriel to let go of his preconceived notions and see Manzanar as anything more than an insane homeless person. He grants Buzzworm a courtesy that no other public figure gets from journalists, the right to approve copy before it goes to print.

With the news that a second explosion and fire has trapped cars on the freeway, events are unfolding faster than journalists like Gabriel can cover them.

In Chapter 18, although none of the principle characters yet realize it, the conversation Rafaela overhears seems connected to the story Gabriel pursued when he followed the woman to the hospital. Rafaela is understandably terrified when she hears that people steal organs from healthy children, and she has her own child the same age as the child mentioned in the conversation. What is less understandable is why Rafaela took the cooler from the refrigerator. Rather than simply flee, she has done something that will certainly mean that she will be pursued.



Wednesday: Chapters 19 through 21

Wednesday: Chapters 19 through 21 Summary

In Chapter 19, Manzanar witnesses the second truck crash and the resulting fire. He sees the fire sweep up the hillside, and he knows the homeless camps will be burned. He also knows that his own camp will be burned, but he has nothing of value there, so he remains in his position overlooking the freeway. Manzanar watches as the homeless come and claim the abandoned vehicles.

In Chapter 20, Emi and Gabriel are in a sushi restaurant. Emi uses the occasion to pick on Gabriel for not being an adventurous eater. The television is showing continuous coverage of the freeway fire, and Emi talks about her job. Emi suggests that her and Gabriel people watch, and this annoys Gabriel. Emi says the idea of cultural diversity is nonsense. A woman next to Emi overhears and tries to argue with Emi. Emi calmly points out some very insulting things about the woman.

In Chapter 21, Arcangel sits in a restaurant where he has persuaded the chef to cook his nopales. The waiter believes he recognizes Arcangel and offers to buy him a beer. After he leaves the restaurant Arcangel follows others to a cockfight. Arcangel is dressed in a wrestling costume others recognize as belonging to a famous wrestler.

Wednesday: Chapters 19 through 21 Analysis

In Chapter 19, Manzanar witnesses horrific events with a detached analytical view. He analyzes a world he no longer seems part of while at the same time being an integral part of the Los Angeles street and homeless environment.

In Chapter 20, Emi thinks about how residents of Los Angeles do not take pride in their city the way that residents of other cities do. This seems oddly similar to some of Buzzworm's ideas.

In her abrasive manner Emi successfully points out the folly of people like the woman sitting next to her. By claiming to value all cultures they sometimes oversimplify cultures in such a way that the value of the individual is lost and entire cultures become stereotypes.

In Chapter 21, there seems to be no end to the multiple identities of Arcangel. The more the reader learns about this character, the more mysterious he becomes.



Thursday: Chapters 22 through 24

Thursday: Chapters 22 through 24 Summary

In Chapter 22, Buzzworm thinks he senses a freeze in time. He also hears a news report that tells of contaminated oranges. Investigators think the oranges have been injected with cocaine. Buzzworm wonders if both Margarita and the young man died from ingestion of contaminated oranges. Buzzworm sees the results of the orange scare. Instead of avoiding them, people buy all they can, thinking that the oranges have value for containing illicit drugs.

In Chapter 23, Arcangel works for Rodriguez helping to build the wall. Arcangel says he can only work for that day before continuing his journey north. When the two men break for lunch, Rodriguez is amazed at all the food Arcangel has from when he moved the truck. Arcangel claims to have been traveling for five hundred years, and Arcangel tells Rodriguez that he reminds him of a gravedigger in Columbia. Rodriguez talks about his son who was killed after becoming involved in the drug trade. Arcangel remembers seeing the dead body of Emiliano Zapata.

In Chapter 24, Rafaela takes Sol and makes excuses to Dona Maria for having to depart immediately. As she hurries away, Rafaela wonders why she has taken the cooler, and she thinks that things have seemed strange ever since the orange disappeared. Once in Gabriel's house she empties the box of faucet fixtures and places the cooler inside. Then she takes Sol and the box and runs to the hotel. Near where Rodriguez had been building a wall, Rafaela sees a sleeping old man who seems to be entangled in a nearly invisible thread.

At the hotel Rafaela gives the manager the box to place in the outgoing mail, and she telephones Gabriel. Rafaela tries to tell Gabriel about the body parts, but she hears the sound of screeching tires, and she has to get off the telephone. Outside the hotel she encounters the old man she saw sleeping near the wall. She asks where he is going, and when he says he is catching the bus north she says she will come along.

From the bus Rafaela looks back and sees that the black Jaguar is following.

Thursday: Chapters 22 through 24 Analysis

In Chapter 22, with the news of contaminated oranges, Buzzworm is more convinced than ever that the deaths of Margarita and the young man were more than a coincidence. He remembers that Margarita gave him an orange, and he gave it to the young man.

In Chapter 23, the "innocent indigenous plant" from Columbia that Arcangel refers to is certainly the coca plant, the source of cocaine. While the reader cannot know if Arcangel should be taken literally when he says that he has traveled for five hundred



years, if he actually did see the dead body of Zapata, he is indeed old because Zapata died nearly eighty years before the time that Arcangel and Rodriguez inhabit.

In Chapter 24, too late to change course, Rafaela wonders why she has taken the cooler. The old man she encounters is obviously Arcangel, and this marks the spot in the unfolding plot where all principle characters are connected. The tension has increased beyond a mere sense of something being sinister. Now characters are in grave physical danger.



Thursday: Chapters 25 through 28

Thursday: Chapters 25 through 28 Summary

In Chapter 25, Gabriel is concerned about Rafaela's welfare even though he does not understand what she was trying to tell him. Normally Gabriel welcomes any excuse to go to Mexico, but he is currently too busy covering news in Los Angeles.

When Gabriel speaks to Emi, he is annoyed at her callous attitude concerning the recent tragedies. She seems to view the news as entertainment. Emi tells Gabriel that the homeless living in the abandoned cars on the freeway have formed a choir. Buzzworm confirms this news and gives Gabriel additional information about the situation on the freeway.

Buzzworm tells Gabriel that he has heard that the tainted oranges were injected with cocaine as a way to smuggle the drug into the United States. Buzzworm asks if Gabriel plans to go to Mexico City to follow up on the C. Juarez story. Gabriel says the planned meeting comes at a bad time, but he also says that Manzanar has approved his story.

Buzzworm says that he is calling from the telephone in an abandoned Mercedes and asks if Gabriel has heard if the police plan to move against the homeless occupying the cars. Gabriel says the police are currently occupied with the fires, but the homeless should be worried about police action once the fires are under control. Gabriel agrees to come and see the situation on the freeway.

Gabriel decides to go to Mexico City and then to go to Mazatlan and check on Rafaela.

In Chapter 26, Gabriel contacts Bobby and wants to speak about Rafaela. Bobby demands to know if anything is wrong, but Gabriel says he does not know. Bobby asks if Rafaela has gotten involved in revolutionary politics in Mexico. Gabriel says he will call again when he has more information.

Bobby travels to Tijuana and sees a short glimpse of the girl. She reminds him of himself and his brother twenty years ago.

In Chapter 27, while at the hairdressers Emi speaks to Gabriel on the telephone. She asks where he is calling from, and he says he is calling from a telephone in an abandoned Mercedes on the freeway, and Emi then sees him on the television. Gabriel asks if Emi can come to the freeway and take notes for him while he is away in Mexico. He also asks if Emi can watch for the package that Rafaela sent.

Emi arrives at the freeway location. Gabriel introduces Emi and Buzzworm, and there is immediate friction between the two. Gabriel and Buzzworm follow Emi to the news van and see that she has brought everything for the news crew. She has brought everything from food, to make up, to gasoline for the generator. Emi begins setting up a laptop computer and gives another one to Gabriel.



Gabriel asks the news personnel to communicate with the crew in the helicopter and have them focus their camera on Manzanar. Emi looks at the television screen and realizes that she knows Manzanar.

In Chapter 28, Manzanar watches events on the freeway, and Manzanar thinks about his own personal history. He thinks about how the entire world is interconnected. Manzanar resumes conducting.

Thursday: Chapters 25 through 28 Analysis

In Chapter 25, Emi and Gabriel are two very different kinds of journalist. Emi sees tragedy as an opportunity to report on something that will keep people viewing television sets, and Gabriel sees unfolding news as something he has a duty to report.

The tension on the freeway continues to build. The people there know that something bad is one the way. If it is not fire, it might be violent intervention by the police.

In Chapter 26, Bobby wonders if he should be jealous of Gabriel and if he ought to beat him up. He is surprised that Gabriel also does not suspect that Rafaela's troubles have something to do with politics because Gabriel tutored Rafaela, and all of Rafaela's school papers covered political topics.

In Chapter 27, despite Emi's seeming cavalier attitude, she takes her job seriously. Buzzworm finds sudden respect for Emi when he sees how well prepared she has come to the news van.

The reader cannot yet know what to make of Emi's recognition of Manzanar, but it is likely a significant event.

In Chapter 28, in his customary detached manner, Manzanar continues to witness events. Despite being regarded as a madman, Manzanar may have the most comprehensive and informed view of events.



Friday: Chapters 29 through 31

Friday: Chapters 29 through 31 Summary

In Chapter 29, Emi asks Buzzworm questions about his social ideas and takes notes on all that he says. Buzzworm criticizes Emi for delaying in interviewing Manzanar.

Emi receives word from the television network that she needs to start filming in three-minute segments so the network can resume breaking for commercials. Buzzworm takes the microphone away from the television reporter and begins conducting interviews. Emi is furious, and during a commercial break she tries to stop Buzzworm. Before Emi can stop Buzzworm the network contacts Emi and says that Buzzworm is a hit and to let him continue.

Gabriel calls from Mexico City and says that he sees Buzzworm on the television. Emi tells Gabriel that Manzanar is her grandfather.

The network is so taken with Buzzworm that they have named his show "What's the Buzz?"

In Chapter 30, Arcangel writes a poem on the back of a wrestling flier. He tells Rafaela it is for Sol. Rafaela asks Arcangel if he is a poet and he says that he is a character in a poem.

Rafaela notices that the scenery has not changed in many hours. Gabriel's residence is still in view. When she looks behind the bus she sees the black Jaguar, a church on wheels, the pyramids, and crowds carrying signs.

When the bus stops and people get off, Rafaela and Sol stay close to Arcangel. The man from the black Jaguar tries to approach, but he is held back by some invisible barrier. While Rafaela and Arcangel wait in line for food, Rafaela asks Arcangel if he will take care of Sol if anything happens to her during the journey. Arcangel agrees. After they have finished eating Arcangel gives Rafaela a beautiful pocketknife.

While Arcangel passes out flyers advertising an upcoming wrestling match, the man from the black Jaguar is still unable to approach, but Sol runs toward him. Rafaela panics and chases after him. Sol's attention is diverted by seeing Arcangel juggle. The man from the black Jaguar seizes Rafaela and forces her into the car. Rafaela watches Sol and Arcangel reenter the bus and the bus depart.

In Chapter 31, Emi talks to Buzzworm about the future of his show. Buzzworm reminds Emi that the police will likely intervene soon. Buzzworm looks into the distance and says that it seems like the Hollywood sign is getting closer, but no one else seems to notice. Homeless people have taken over all news broadcasts, but Emi still functions as producer. Again, Buzzworm reminds Emi that the police are likely to attack, and for a moment she appears concerned.



Manzanar conducts a choir of five hundred homeless people, and the network broadcasts the event.

Friday: Chapters 29 through 31 Analysis

In Chapter 29, despite the tragedy, the television network is concerned about sponsor revenue. It seems that everything in Los Angeles is regarded as entertainment, and nothing is real. This is similar to Emi's comments that upset Gabriel.

As things and people become more interconnected, Emi learns that the crazy conductor is her grandfather.

In Chapter 30, Arcangel states that he is a character in a poem. Nothing about this character is easily understood. Space and time seem to be distorted, and this seems increasingly true the closer one gets to Arcangel or perhaps the orange that he carries.

In Chapter 31, despite her constant sarcasm, Emi gives Buzzworm batteries, thus displaying the carrying generous side that Gabriel knows. Repeatedly Buzzworm has made reference to an impending move by the police to disperse the homeless. He seems to believe that the intervention will be violent.



Friday: Chapters 32 through 35

Friday: Chapters 32 through 35 Summary

In Chapter 32, Gabriel is in Mexico City's El Zocalo. Ever since arriving in Mexico he has been following instructions from unknown people, but he does not yet know what he is supposed to be looking for. While communicating with Emi on the internet, she says that the package from Rafaela has arrived. Gabriel asks what it contains, and while Emi is opening the package, Gabriel remembers that Rafaela said something about body parts. Gabriel tells Emi to stop opening the package and give it to Buzzworm.

Suddenly Gabriel is afraid for Rafaela. He decides to go to Mazatlan immediately. Gabriel calls Dona Maria, but no one has seen Rafaela.

A man approaches Gabriel and directs him to a location with a telephone. Gabriel connects his computer to the telephone line, and the man hands Gabriel some computer disks that he says list all the people who were killed or went missing from a village.

In Chapter 33, the bus breaks down near the border, and Arcangel uses the cables to move the bus just like he moved the stalled truck in a previous chapter. When Arcangel reaches the United States border and is questioned by customs agents, he says his name is Christopher Columbus and he is "five hundred and some years" old. He also claims to have studied at Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, and the U.S. Naval Academy. Along with Arcangel, Sol, and the orange, everything from the south and everything from the history of the south is pulled northward into Southern California.

In Chapter 34, Bobby pays the traffickers with a credit card. He has managed to negotiate the price in half. Bobby decides that for the border crossing, he will simply take the girl, Xiayue, across himself. He believes that she can pass for his daughter.

Xiayue asks Bobby many questions including questions about Social Security cards. Bobby remembers that when he was twelve he falsified his identification papers so he could get a job. When a social worker discovered his situation, he was sent to school. The school had many Mexican-American children, and that is how Bobby learned Spanish.

Bobby takes Xiayue to get a haircut and some new clothes. They pass through the border with no problems.

In Chapter 35, despite everything, all sporting events and entertainment venues in Los Angeles proceed as normal. Manzanar knows it will all soon end in one horrific traffic jam.



Friday: Chapters 32 through 35 Analysis

In Chapter 32, Gabriel has still said nothing about Emi's revelation that Manzanar is her grandfather. Perhaps Gabriel thinks this is yet another one of Emi's snide jokes. It is surprising that it has taken so long for Gabriel to suspect the sinister nature of Rafaela's message and package.

Gabriel's contact in Mexico provides him with more information than any journalist could ever dream of.

In Chapter 33, the magical realism element of the novel intensifies in this chapter. There is no way to know if Gabriel is speaking literally when answering the customs agents' questions or if he is making a point about the absurdity of artificial national and cultural borders.

In Chapter 34, Xiayue displays behavior that indicates that she may indeed be related to Bobby. She shows the ability to quickly adapt to new situations, and this is a skill that Bobby must have had in order to get to America and thrive once there. Xiayue is also immediately curious about how to secure a work permit.



Saturday: Chapters 36 through 39

Saturday: Chapters 36 through 39 Summary

In Chapter 36, Arcangel must no longer pull the bus. The crowd pushes it, and along with the bus and the orange they push the Tropic of Cancer. Those behind Arcangel cheer him and while those in front try to dissuade him from going any farther north. Sol follows Arcangel as he performs. As Arcangel juggles corn and the orange, the crowd is awed by sight of the last remaining orange. Sol, U.S. Customs agents, and the FBI run around Arcangel in circles.

In Chapter 37, Buzzworm walks toward Manzanar's overpass carrying a cooler. Manzanar examines the contents and says that it is the heart of a newborn baby. Buzzworm notices that landmarks seem out of place, and Manzanar says that things are shifting.

As Buzzworm passes through the area of the freeway with parked cars the homeless address him with concerns as if he is in a position of authority. Buzzworm wonders what to do with the baby heart. He considers giving it to a politician during an interview or simply burying it.

All over Los Angeles people walk. The whole city is locked in a traffic jam. Buzzworm sees an old man juggling, and he sees a little boy holding an orange and running in circles around the old man. Adults are chasing the boy to get the orange. Buzzworm is afraid the boy will be hurt, and so he intervenes. The crowd chases Buzzworm, and some think he has the orange hidden in the cooler. Buzzworm throws the cooler.

In Chapter 38, the man from the black Jaguar attacks and assaults Rafaela. She fights back. When she awakes battered by the side of the road, she discovers that she is holding the pocketknife Arcangel gave her in one hand and a human ear in the other hand. The car and the attacker are gone.

In Chapter 39, Gabriel drives a rented car from the airport in Mazatlan to his home. He thinks about a recent conversation with Emi. Emi's parents hid knowledge of her grandfather because the family was embarrassed. Emi warns Gabriel to drop the story.

Gabriel finds Rafaela on the side of the road. He helps her in the car and takes her to his house. Rafaela asks Gabriel to find Sol. She gives Gabriel the wrestling flyer with the poem and says that she believes Sol will be at the event. Rafaela asks Gabriel to contact Bobby. Dona Maria arrives, and Rafaela tells Gabriel not to mention that Dona Maria's son committed the assault.

Gabriel goes to Dona Maria's house and tries to telephone Emi. He cannot reach Emi, so he tries to get news from the television. All he sees is a map of Los Angeles and a moving "x." Gabriel believes this is some sort of satellite tracking for illegal activity.



Saturday: Chapters 36 through 39 Analysis

In Chapter 36, as in the previous chapter covering the actions of Arcangel and Sol, the element of magical realism is intense. Arcangel has become a champion of the downtrodden who seek refuge in a land of greater opportunity.

In Chapter 37, one of the most distinctive aspects of Los Angeles, its gargantuan network of freeways, has been rendered useless. Los Angeles has become a city of pedestrians. Now homeless and wealthy alike walk to get from one place to another.

The old man and the boy that Buzzworm sees are obviously Arcangel and Sol. Though Arcangel may not have needed, or even recognized, Buzzworm's attempt at helping, it is very much in Buzzworm's nature to do whatever necessary to ensure the welfare of others.

In Chapter 38, the ugly assault is portrayed through imagery of atrocities occurring over the last five hundred years since Europeans first came to the Americas. The use of magical realism in depicting the assault spares the reader from the gruesome reality.

It is possible that the pocketknife that Arcangel gave to Rafaela saves her life.

In Chapter 39, Gabriel thinks about a conversation he had earlier with Emi and wonders if he should heed her warning not to bring publicity to her family.

It is unclear if Rafaela's statement that she ate her attacker is an element of magical realism or a result of her trauma. Such is the nature of magical realism. It spans the divide between the real and the magical.



Saturday: Chapters 40 through 42

Saturday: Chapters 40 through 42 Summary

In Chapter 40, Bobby drives north with Xiayue. Xiayue asks many questions about the things she has heard about America, and Bobby tells her most are exaggerations. Xiayue mentions her brother, and Bobby thinks that the young man has likely drowned or been arrested, but he says nothing. Bobby notices that the drive to Los Angeles proceeds much faster than usual, but once he enters the city he notices that traffic is much worse than usual.

After Bobby arrives home, Gabriel calls and tells of the assault on Rafaela. Gabriel also tells Bobby that Rafaela believes that Sol can be found at an upcoming wrestling match. Gabriel agrees to fax the flyer and says that he will be in Los Angeles soon.

When Bobby receives the faxed document, he finds that Gabriel has sent him a poem, and Bobby is furious. While Xiayue is watching television, Bobby sees a commercial advertising the upcoming wrestling match. Bobby leaves on foot to go to the wrestling match and try to find Sol. He expects the trip to take an entire day.

In Chapter 41, Buzzworm climbs atop the news van and finds Emi sunbathing in a bikini. Buzzworm asks Emi how her and Gabriel became involved. She says that perhaps it is because he is a romantic and she is the opposite. Buzzworm speculates that perhaps the reason Emi has refused to interview Manzanar is because Manzanar is the ultimate romantic. Emi confides in Buzzworm that Manzanar is her grandfather, and he disappeared from her life when she was nine or ten years old. Buzzworm says that he intends to introduce the two, and he gives Emi one hour to get ready.

Once he is off the van Buzzworm hears the distinctive sound of gunfire. He leaps onto the van and pulls Emi to the ground.

In Chapter 42, Manzanar has witnessed a woman sunbathing on a van being shot. He sees that this is the beginning of a military and police attack on the homeless in the abandoned cars. Manzanar realizes that many of the homeless are military veterans, and he watches as they instinctively dive for cover. Cars explode and the air is thick with smoke from fire and from tear gas.

Saturday: Chapters 40 through 42 Analysis

In Chapter 40, Xiayue's questions about the United States, which Bobby calls exaggerations, all have some element of truth. Though she exhibits a talkative young girl demeanor, Xiayue shows some similarities to Bobby's character. She has the ability to immediately adapt to new situations and environments, and her first concern about the United States is how to get a permit to work.



In Chapter 41, Buzzworm's reaction to the gunfire is immediate. He is both a combat veteran and a life-long resident of poor neighborhoods where gunfire is common. It is tragic that this situation comes at a time just as Buzzworm finds something meaningful that he can do to help Emi.

Chapter 42

Just as out-of-the-ordinary events creped up on the characters in the novel, the novel has slowly lost its comedic element. The reader may notice that there is little left to laugh about, but this progression has been slow.



Sunday: Chapters 43 through 45

Sunday: Chapters 43 through 45 Summary

In Chapter 43, Gabriel sends faxes to his newspaper regarding the multiple stories he is covering. At the airport in Los Angeles he looks for C. Juarez, but does not find her. After calling a travel agency in Mexico, Gabriel learns that C. Juarez is Corazon Juarez.

Gabriel tries to contact Buzzworm and Emi repeatedly. He discovers that there is no way to track the imported and poisoned oranges because the customs paperwork has been falsified.

Gabriel thinks about his recent use of the internet, and he realizes that it is a powerful tool for a journalist.

In Chapter 44, Buzzworm shoves Emi in the news van and begins driving as helicopters fly overhead and shoot the abandoned vehicles. Buzzworm drives the van off the freeway and under the cover of a grove of palm trees. Buzzworm believes that Emi will die, and Emi also believes she is dying, but she tries to make jokes. Emi gives Buzzworm a final message for Gabriel. She says to tell Gabriel that she "went to The Big Sleep."

In Chapter 45, Rafaela wakes and begins walking toward the orange tree. She sees Bobby leaning against the orange tree. Rafaela finds the nearly invisible line and uses it to pull herself to Bobby. Bobby cries when he sees how badly she has been beaten. Rafaela wraps herself and Bobby in the line.

Sunday: Chapters 43 through 45 Analysis

In Chapter 43, in a macabre bit of irony, the name Corazon means "heart."

Though Gabriel has up to this point been resistant in joining the Internet age, he wastes no time getting caught up.

In Chapter 44, the palm trees that Buzzworm has long admired now provide refuge. Though Buzzworm does everything he can to render aid to Emi, he thinks about how the media will focus on Emi's death and forget about the thousands of homeless that will die.

The message that Emi gives for Gabriel is a reference to a famous film noir movie.

In Chapter 45, perhaps through the vision she had as a result of being attacked, Rafaela has learned the nature of the nearly invisible line. She uses this line to get to Bobby and to get to where they can reclaim their son.



Sunday: Chapters 46 through 49

Sunday: Chapters 46 through 49 Summary

In Chapter 46, Manzanar stops conducting, and he sees Buzzworm carrying a young woman toward him. The news helicopter crew has seen Emi shot, and they abandon coverage of the attack in order to try to rescue Emi. Buzzworm tells Manzanar to go along with Emi in the helicopter.

In Chapter 47, Arcangel as El Gran Mojado addresses the crowd. He welcomes them and gives a speech saying he is not fighting for politics. Arcangel carries Sol on his shoulders while he juggles until he sees Bobby. Arcangel gives Sol and the orange to Bobby. Bobby watches the wrestling match and sees both participants destroy each other.

In Chapter 48, the exploding airbags causes all residents of Los Angeles to pause and think about reconciliation. Buzzworm walks through the wreckage. He sees a group of hardened homeless drug addicts barbecuing, and he notices coolers just like the one that held the newborn's heart. Buzzworm walks home, bathes, sleeps, and gardens. He finds that he no longer gets joy from listening to the radio or his collection of watches. He gives away all of his watches.

In Chapter 49, Bobby arrives at the auditorium and finds a scalper who will accept a credit card as payment. After Bobby gets Sol, he decides to finish watching the match. Rafaela appears and says that the nearly invisible line is the cause of all recent events. Rafaela takes the orange from Sol and tells Bobby to cut it with the pocketknife that Arcangel gave to her. Bobby does as Rafaela says, and then he holds the two ends of the line. Rafaela feeds pieces of the orange to the dying Arcangel, and a joyous crowd picks up Arcangel. Bobby lets go of the line.

Sunday: Chapters 46 through 49 Analysis

In Chapter 46, immediately upon seeing Emi, Manzanar remembers the songs they used to sing, and he thinks how he never meant to leave his granddaughter when he left his previous life.

In Chapter 47, Arcangel's stage name for wrestling includes the word "mojado." This term meaning wet is also a slang term for illegal immigrants who enter the United States from the south. This is perhaps an example of Arcangel championing the underprivileged. Arcangel's opponent's name comes from the North American Free Trade Agreement. Some have criticized this trade agreement for being too advantageous to one side.

In Chapter 48, the homeless that have eaten the baby organs are perhaps merely doing what Manzanar said the homeless do in a previous chapter. They are recycling. It is



unclear why Buzzworm no longer finds joy in the radio or his watches, but it is unlikely that he has abandoned his hope for the future. Perhaps recent events have relieved him of the need for constant airwaves, and now he can focus solely on living things.

In Chapter 49, Bobby has made illegal purchases using a credit card twice. This is perhaps a statement about our increasing reliance on technology.

The pocketknife that Arcangel gave to Rafaela has not only saved her, but it may also have saved humanity.

Bobby's ability to let go of the ends of the line may be symbolic of his newfound ability to let go of work-related concerns and show a greater degree of affection to his family.



Characters

Rafaela Cortez

Rafaela is originally from Culiacan, Mexico. About a decade before the beginning of the novel, she moved north to the United States. Rafaela got into the United States legally because she married a citizen. Since moving to the United States, she helped her husband start a successful janitorial business and studied at a community college. Rafaela also had a son who is two years old at the opening of the novel.

Like her husband, Bobby, Rafaela is a hard worker. Unlike Bobby, Rafaela is interested in politics, particularly in the area of employment and labor relations. She constantly argues with Bobby about the low prices that he charges for his services. She believes that the janitorial services clients do not appreciate the high quality of work they receive and thus take advantage of Bobby. These arguments lead to other disagreements, especially in relation to Bobby's habit of chain smoking, and Rafaela decides to take time away from the marriage.

While taking time away from the marriage, Rafaela returns to Mexico to supervise work on the completion of Gabriel's property. She has all the necessary skills for this role. She possesses a practical outlook and advises Gabriel on what items to purchase locally and which ones to import from the United States.

In addition to being a competent worker, Rafaela is also a caring and devoted mother. She displays a great deal of patience when interacting with her two-year-old son. As time progresses, Rafaela finds that she is missing her husband more and more.

Bobby Ngu

Bobby did not have much of a childhood. He was thrust into a role of responsibility at an early age. Bobby is Chinese and originally from Singapore. After his mother died, and after his father's business began to fail, Bobby's father suggested that Bobby and his younger brother take advantage of the growing amount of Vietnamese refugees being housed in camps in Singapore while waiting to be allowed into the United States. Bobby and his brother began going to the camp every day and passing themselves off as orphaned Vietnamese children. In time they received clearance to move to the United States.

Bobby falsified his paperwork to make himself look sixteen and not twelve so that he could get a job. Bobby has worked endlessly his entire life. Sometimes Bobby thinks about what life would have been like had he taken offers to make a living from crime, but Bobby knows he could have never done that and supported his brother. Bobby's younger brother received a quality education that Bobby paid for with his labor, and though Bobby rarely shows emotion, it is likely that this is a source of pride.



When Bobby first met Rafaela, he was merely doing a favor for a friend that could not cross the U.S-Mexico border freely. Bobby immediately fell in love with Rafaela, and when Rafaela entered the United States she did so legally as the spouse of a citizen. Just like as Bobby has done for his brother and father, he works hard to provide for his wife and son.

Emi

Emi is the most jaded and cynical of all the characters. However, this cold persona may be on the surface only. At least one other character believes that the true Emi is a warm, caring, and generous person. A few hints of Emi's caring nature surface during the novel, such as her concern for Gabriel and her taking time to find batteries for Buzzworm, but for the most part Emi comes across as a thoroughly modern and thoroughly world-weary, Angeleno, or native of Los Angeles.

Some of the most insightful comments regarding the nature of Los Angeles come from Emi, and they are always delivered with her customary biting sarcastic wit. She observes that one never sees stickers bearing the message "I heart L.A." To her this is proof that residents of Los Angeles do not love their locale in the ways that people elsewhere adore their neighborhoods. Likely Emi is not saying that the people of Los Angeles so much dislike their city, as they are too aloof to profess a love for something so mundane as their place of residence.

Emi is more than merely competent at her chosen career. She seems to be the perfect person to be a television producer. She does not view human tragedy in emotional terms. She thinks about it in terms of how it can help ratings and encourage sponsors to buy airtime for their commercials.

Buzzworm

Buzzworm is a man who has seen much suffering in life. He was raised in urban poverty and then served as a soldier in Vietnam. After experiencing the carnage of that war, Buzzworm returned to Los Angeles and battled drug and alcohol addiction. After repeated attempts, Buzzworm managed to escape his addictions and self-destructive behaviors and since has made it his mission to help others. Buzzworm is the least likely character to be a perennial optimist, yet he persists in believing in a utopian vision of Los Angeles's economically depressed neighborhoods.

At well over six feet tall Buzzworm has an imposing appearance, yet he is completely altruistic in nature. He circulates business cards with his pager number and he answers calls no matter what time they come in. Buzzworm is known for arriving on the scene faster than police or medical personnel, and he is known for finding more practical solutions faster than any social service agency. Buzzworm never passes an opportunity to help others or mentor the younger generation.



Buzzworm has a few eccentricities. He constantly listens to headphones attached to a portable radio. He believes that constant listening to radio broadcasts help him achieve balance in life, and he even credits the radio with helping him to beat his chemical addictions. He also collects inexpensive watches and wears several on each arm. The trait about Buzzworm that most impresses Gabriel Balboa, the professional journalist, is Buzzworm's intelligence.

Manzanar Murakami

Manzanar is one of the more impenetrable characters. The reader can tell little about his life in the beginning and it is too easy to do what most Angelenos do, which is to simply dismiss him as yet another mentally ill homeless person. Manzanar stands on a freeway overpass every day and waves a baton as if he is conducting traffic noise the way a conductor would lead a symphony. Manzanar is Japanese-American and this causes some embarrassment for other Japanese-Americans.

As the novel progresses, we learn a little more about Manzanar, but he remains somewhat unknowable. He takes his first name from the Manzanar War Relocation Center, an infamous concentration camp where people of Japanese descent were held during World War II, the place Manzanar claims to have been born. When Gabriel interviews Manzanar, he finds this statement curious because it is very unlikely that Manzanar could have been born at the camp because he appears too old. Also, when we learn the identity of one of his grandchildren this claim seems even more difficult to believe because of Manzanar's apparent age.

Manzanar had been a surgeon who one day simply walked away from the hospital and seemed to vanish from his previous life. He became the homeless man that conducts a traffic symphony. In the novel Manzanar is a character that witnesses events. Because of his mental detachment and physical distance, he often has the most accurate vision of happenings and events to come.

Gabriel Balboa

Gabriel is a professional journalist who works for a major Los Angeles daily newspaper. He worked his way up to reporter and editor from the lowest job at the newspaper. Many years previously, Gabriel had been inspired to pursue journalism as a career by a famous Hispanic journalist in Los Angeles. He spends all of his income on improving a property in Mexico near the city of Mazatlan.

In some ways, Gabriel lives in two worlds. He lives in the modern world surrounded by media technology, such as computers and the internet, but he resists these innovations. He is fond of film noir movies from the 1940s and 1950s, and he likes hard-boiled detective literature, such as the novels and stories by authors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashielle Hammett.



Gabriel is in an "on again/off again" relationship with a Japanese-American woman, and these two characters seem to be opposites. Whereas Emi is aggressive and sarcastic, Gabriel is reserved and quiet. Gabriel has misgivings about the property in Mexico that he has spent the last eight years improving. He knows it would be the perfect place for a writer of novels, but he also knows that he is not that kind of writer. He is and always will be a journalist tied to Los Angeles.

In some ways Gabriel serves as a hub character. He knows most of the principle characters, and he is the point of introduction for many of these characters.

Arcangel

Like Manzanar, Arcangel is an unknowable character, but Arcangel is even more mysterious. He seems to appear out of nowhere yet has a history that stretches far into the past. At times Arcangel claims that this history stretches back hundreds of years, but the reader cannot know if these statements are to be taken literally or if Arcangel is making figurative statements to explain his cultural heritage.

Arcangel is a walking contradiction. He inhabits a frail and aging body, yet he is capable of feats of superhuman strength, such as when he moves large vehicles or participates in wrestling matches. He seems to be if not a prophet at least one with knowledge of the future, such as when he gives Rafaela a gift that both saves her life and perhaps saves humanity. Arcangel also seems to be the champion of the underprivileged, and this is reflected in the stage name he chooses for his wrestling character.

Though Arcangel provides transportation of the orange that has captured the Tropic of Cancer, it is never clear whether Arcangel is aware of this.

Rodriguez

This man works as a laborer on Gabriel's property in Mexico. He is one of the first to notice that unnatural events are occurring.

Dona Maria

This is the closest neighbor to Gabriel's property. Rafaela often visits in order to use Dona Maria's telephone.

Sol

This is Rafaela and Bobby's two-year-old son. He plays an important role in the climax of the novel.

Hernando

This is Dona Maria's son who is involved in a variety of illegal activities.

Margarita

This character owns a market in Buzzworm's neighborhood. Buzzworm enjoys teasing her about being Mexican when he knows that she comes from Central America.

Xiayue

This is the twelve-year-old girl that Bobby rescues from Tijuana. She may be Bobby's cousin from China.



Objects/Places

Mazatlan, Mexico

This is a port city on Mexico's Pacific Coast. It is a popular tourist destination and the closest city to the property owned by Gabriel Balboa.

Tropic of Cancer

This is a line of latitude circling the globe that marks the path of the sun during the summer solstice in the northern hemisphere.

Summer Solstice

This is the longest day of the year. In the northern hemisphere it occurs around June 20 or 21. The novel begins on this day.

Harbor Freeway

This major roadway runs from San Pedro, California to Los Angeles California. The two truck fires cause motorists to abandon their cars on a one-mile stretch of the freeway, and homeless people then occupy the cars.

Tijuana, Mexico

This Mexican city is located on the border with the United States south of San Diego, California. This is where Bobby must go to negotiate the release of his cousin.

Manzanar War Relocation Center

This was one of several camps where Japanese-Americans were detained during World War II. Manzanar Murakami, the homeless conductor, claims to have been born there.

Pacific Rim Auditorium

This fictitious location is where the wrestling match between El Gran Mojado and SUPERNAFTA takes place.

Koreatown

This is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Los Angeles. It is where Bobby Ngu lives.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

This is a trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico that went into effect in 1994. The agreement aims to eliminate trade tariffs between the member countries. Arcangel's adversary in the wrestling match takes his name from this trade agreement.

Pershing Square

The one square block park in Los Angeles is named after General Pershing, who in addition to commanding troops in World War I, led the Punitive Expedition into Mexico. This is where Gabriel and Buzzworm interview Manzanar.



Themes

Connections

One of the predominant themes of *Tropic of Orange* is that all things and all people are connected. Though few of the characters consciously realize it, they all live in the same world and they are all connected by the same needs and external forces. Ideas of separation, differences, and distance are artificial constructs invented by people either to preserve positions of privilege or to make understanding the world and groups easier.

The novel begins with seven separate protagonists. In the beginning only a couple of these principal characters have any sort of connection, but as the novel progresses a web is formed linking and interlinking each and every character. Some characters, such as Gabriel, at times serve as a hub, but in Gabriel's physical absence other characters step in to fulfill this function. At times it can be Emi and at other times it can be Buzzworm.

Even the characters who are seemingly on the periphery are connected, though we may not understand this at first. The two characters who seem to be the least connected are perhaps actually the most connected and in-tune with people and events. Arcangel seems to come from nowhere and be connected to no one. In time we see that he is a motivating force who can exert influence over many. Manzanar, perceived as a madman, serves as witness to many of the novel's significant events and he is perhaps the character that best understands the unfolding situation.

Technology and Distance from Reality

The modern world, especially in "developed" countries, revolves around the use of technology. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that our lives and our perceptions are dramatically affected by the use of technology. Each of the seven characters can be plotted on a continuum that concerns the person's use of technology and how it governs their perceptions of external events.

At one end of the spectrum is Emi. Emi is consumed by the presence and use of technology, and it colors her every thought. She has ceased to think of human tragedy as anything more than a device to drive ratings and attract corporate sponsors. She constantly berates Gabriel for his ignorance and resistance to technology, and when she finally succeeds in seducing him into being obsessed with technology, that obsession prevents him from being present when Emi needs him most.

Buzzworm fits somewhere near the middle of the continuum. His chief interest in life is the welfare of the street people, but he constantly listens to the radio. He relies on constant radio noise to keep his own inner demons at bay, and one of his hobbies is collecting watches, mechanical devices.



At the least technological end of the spectrum is Manzanar. Manzanar has nothing but the clothes he wears and the baton he waves. He is witness to all things, and he seems to have a greater understanding of events than other principle characters. Manzanar sees the connections that control people and events. It is interesting to note that with the possible exception of Arcangel Manzanar has the highest level of education, yet he rejects technology in order to find meaning.

Multiculturalism as a Modern Artificial Construct

Midway through the novel in Chapter 20, Emi says that cultural diversity is all nonsense. She says this while sitting in a sushi restaurant and having observed other restaurant patrons who are of various races, ethnic backgrounds, and countries of origins. Repeatedly she loudly proclaims that cultural diversity, or multiculturalism, is nonsense. Gabriel is horrified with embarrassment because Emi's proclamation is perhaps one of the least politically correct things a person can say without using racial slurs. Though the meaning of her message is lost on the people that hear, with the possible exception of the restaurant employee and Gabriel, it merits further consideration.

Emi says that cultural diversity is "a white guy wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and dreds." She, who is Japanese-American, says this to her date who is Hispanic, and to further drive home the point she asks the Japanese sushi chef if he does not also hate being multicultural. When another restaurant patron, a white woman, tries to disagree, Emi takes it as proof that to whites who think they celebrate Japanese cultural the individual is lost and all things Japanese, or any culture for that matter, can be reduced to distinctive cuisine.

In Emi's customary abrasive and shocking manner, she is trying to make a valid point. Whether or not her point is made depends whether or not a person can get past her caustic manner of delivery. The point that Emi makes is that in our celebration of all things multicultural we have a tendency to push too far, to try too hard to categorize cultures and end up losing sight of the individual and thinking in stereotypes.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel *Tropic of Orange* comes from the perspectives of seven different characters. There may even be as many as seven different narrators. The narration of one character comes in the first person while that of the other six comes as third person. It is uncertain how many third-person narrators there are, but it is probable that there is a minimum of two and likely several more. The narrators that present the perspectives of Bobby and Buzzworm demonstrate some similarities such as incomplete sentences, but there are distinct differences in the two, such as Mexican slang in the case of narration from Bobby's perspective. The narration from the perspectives of Emi and Rafaela display similarities in style, but they are often different in tone. Manzanar and Arcangel's narratives are similar in that they are both more philosophical, but Arcangel's includes poetry. Gabriel's narrative is in the first person.

It is fitting that the one character whose narrative is delivered in first person is professional journalist. As for the other characters, there are elements to their third person narratives that give some hints or flavor to their perspectives. Many times this concerns the subject matter of their respective worlds. Buzzworm's narrative often contains street slang, which reflects his daily milieu. Though it can be confusing at first, the presentation of multiple narratives gives the novel its distinct flavor, and after the first several chapters it is also one of the aspects of the novel that make it so enjoyable to read.

Setting

The main setting is, of course, the city of Los Angeles. This super-city full of so many different cultures seems in some ways to be a world unto itself. Emi often makes the most insightful comments on the nature of Los Angeles. In regard to the sports car convertible that caused the first major freeway accident, she said that no native of Los Angeles would buy such a car. She says a car like that in Los Angeles allows a person to breath smog and catch cancer as well as make the job of a car-jacker easier. Emi also observes that residents of Los Angeles do not proclaim civic pride like residents of other cities. She says one never sees signs proclaiming a person's love for Los Angeles.

There seems to be multiple portrayals of Los Angeles in the novel. There is the street level Los Angeles of Manzanar and Buzzworm. There is the promised land Los Angeles of Bobby Ngu, who through hard work makes a good life for himself and those that depend on him. And there is the bird's eye view of Los Angeles as seem by Emi and Gabriel. In most regards, the novel *Tropic of Orange* is a novel about the city of Los Angeles.



There are other minor settings such as Gabriel's house near Mazatlan, Mexico or the border city of Tijuana, Mexico, but these locales serve mainly to reflect back on the primary setting: Los Angeles.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Tropic of Orange* is varied as one might expect from a novel that comes from the perspectives of seven different protagonists. The rich and diverse language of the novel captures the flavor of each of the separate principle characters' perceptions and life experiences. Because the narration most often comes from a third person narrator other than the protagonist whose perception is being presented, the meaning of the language is often dependent on respective environments.

In the case of Bobby Ngu, a Chinese man from Singapore, the narrator of the chapters dedicated to Bobby's perspective is clearly from the barrio. Occasional Spanish, including street slang, indicates that the person telling Bobby's story knows him from the barrio neighborhoods. Often the sentences are incomplete, merely making a statement or presenting an image. Somehow this abrupt and unadorned presentation suits Bobby, a pragmatic man who is often accused of being too focused on work.

In a markedly different example, the narration focused on the events surrounding the character Arcangel contains language that varies from obscure to poetic. The chapters covering Arcangel are rich in historical references, and it is in these chapters that the element of magical realism is most pronounced.

The most distinctly different use of language comes in the chapters from the perspective of Gabriel Balboa. These chapters are told in the first person. Because Gabriel is a professional journalist these chapters are clear and easy to understand. Often these chapters serve to answer questions that may have been raised in the less transparent narrative of other chapters.

Structure

The structure of *Tropic of Orange* is one of the most distinctive and innovative aspects of the novel. The novel presents the perspectives of seven separate characters, and the novel covers a time period of seven days. Each of the characters has an equal number of chapters, one per day, which means that the novel has a total of forty-nine chapters. The order of each character's respective chapters does not follow the same order every day. On the first day of the novel, Rafaela's perspective is covered in Chapter 1, but her perspective is not covered again until Chapter 10, the third chapter of the second section, or day.

This lack of uniform order may seem confusing at first, but the author includes a table immediately after the Table of Contents titled "HyperContexts." This table, which is organized according to the seven days over which the novel covers, lists each character, setting, and chapter number. In time, this table is less necessary as the

reader gets used to the distinctive voices of the different narrators, but in the beginning of the novel it is useful.

Despite the unusually large number of protagonists and narrators, the plot progression is surprisingly linear and chronological. While in the earlier parts of the novel the reader will have to exercise patience and follow multiple storylines, as the character's lives become more interconnected the storyline becomes more seamless. In some ways the structure seems to begin at a broad point where the principle character's lives are completely separate, yet by the end of the novel everyone is associated.



Quotes

"Gabriel had actually brought this tree from Riverside eight years ago. It was a navel orange tree, maybe the descendant of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbets. This was the sort of historic detail Gabriel liked. Bringing an orange tree...from Riverside, California to his place near Mazatlan was a significant act of some sort. Gabriel had taken some pains to plant the tree as a marker—to mark the Tropic of Cancer" (Chapter 1, pg. 11.)

"She had started dating Gabriel because he was Latino, part of that hot colorful race, only to find out that, except for maybe his interest in tango (and even that was academic), he wasn't what you call the stereotype. But that was back in college (the things you learn in college); since then, they had been on again/off again" (Chapter 3, pg. 19.)

"'Summer solstice today,' Gabriel mentioned since the subject seemed to have changed to the weather. 'I was thinking about my place in Mexico. The tropic of Cancer runs right through it.' He picked up a knife and sliced the air. 'That means the sun is right there, directly on top of my place. Now.' He looked at his watch' (Chapter 3, pg. 20.)

"So one day he went to see his Korean friend, the hapkido master, and repeated some sounds he'd been hearing. "So Kwon, what's it mean? What am I saying?" But Kwon was laughing so hard, he couldn't talk. You ever seen a hapkido master fall over on the mat laughing? It was a scene. Turns out it was a commercial for a laxative" (Chapter 4, pg. 29.)

"It was the sort of place that writers love. But as time went on, I had to admit to myself that I was not really a writer: I was a reporter. The current event, the late-breaking story, the three o'clock budgets, deadlines, secret sources I had painstakingly built up over the years, and the cutting edge of the interview: I realized I could never abandon this life for the endless lull of a private paradise" (Chapter 6, pg. 45.)

"Manzanar considered himself a kind of recycler. After all he, like other homeless in the city, was a recycler of the last rung. The homeless were the insects and scavengers of society, feeding on leftovers, living in residue, collecting refuse, carting it this way and that for pennies. In the same manner, who would use the residue of sounds in the city if Manzanar did not?" (Chapter 8, pg. 56.)

"Bobby got time to kill. Time before he meets the Chinatown snakehead gonna set his cousin free. Still don't know this cousin. Got a call in to Singapore. Better talk to the folks. Find out the truth. Meantime, Bobby got time to kill" (Chapter 15, pg. 97.)

"Time was x was Malcolm. Newsweek said now it was Shaq; he being the x Generation. What did they know? Hood'd changed. Now it was la X. La equis la equis noventa y siete punto nueve!" (Chapter 16, pg. 97.)



"Manzanar concentrated on a noise that sounded like a mix of an elephant and the wail of a whale, concentrating until it moaned through the downtown canyons, shuddered past the on-ramps and echoed up and down the one-ten" (Chapter 19, pg. 119.)

"Gabriel stared at the TV screen in Mexico City. Emi stared at it in the van. They saw the same simultaneous image, give or take for satellite lag and time code correction. Did their eyes therefore touch?" (Chapter 29, pg. 181.)

"Bobby parks the Camaro. Locks in The Club. Automatic locks the doors. Introduces the cuz to her new home. Unlocks the security door. Unlocks the double bolts. House is stuffy. Locks the security door but keeps the front door open. Opens some windows. Cuz looks out the bars at Koreatown" (Chapter 40, pg. 232.)

"Little by little, Manzanar began to sense a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself and others like him. He found himself at the heart of an expanding symphony of which he was not the only conductor" (Chapter 42, pg. 239.)



Topics for Discussion

Rafaela's son is named Sol. Sol means sun. Considering the boy's role in the novel, what could be the significance of his name?

The novel comes from the perspectives of seven different protagonists. How does getting installments of the plot from seven different voices heighten the tension?

Prior the beginning of the novel, the author includes a table called HyperContexts. Do you find this table useful, and does it help you to mentally manage hearing a story from so many different points of view?

One of the minor characters is named "C. Juarez." Can you think of an entity that is often in the news today for illegal activity that goes by a similar name? How is this characteristic of the author's exhaustive knowledge and research in crafting the story?

Tropic of Orange contains elements of magical realism that intensify as the novel progresses. Do you find it difficult to balance traditional reading with the reading of magical realism, which requires a greater degree of suspension of disbelief? How do you know where the "real" ends and the "magical" begins?

In Chapter 7 Yamashita pays homage to what many regard as the king of magical realism by mentioning his name in reference to one of Arcangel's past performances. What is the name of this author and what do you know about his work?

Los Angeles means "the angels." Is there any similarity in this name and a particular character's name? What might be the significance of this relationship?