

Until I Find You: A Novel Study Guide

Until I Find You: A Novel by John Irving

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Plot Summary

Until I Find You is a novel about an actor named Jack Burns who is told as a young boy that his father abandoned him and his mother, but is reunited with his father as an adult when he learns his mother had not told him the entire truth.

The story begins in the 1960s as four-year-old Jack Burns and his mother leave Canada to travel through Northern Europe, supposedly looking for Jack's father, William Burns, who works as a church organist. Jack's mother is a respected tattoo artist who goes by the professional name Daughter Alice. Alice finds work in Amsterdam, Helsinki and Oslo as she leads Jack in search of his father who seems to move from place to place in search of grand church organs to play, usually leaving a trail of heart-broken women in his wake.

They seem to lose the trail in Amsterdam and Jack and his mother return to Toronto, where Jack is sent to a private school, then off to a boarding school in Maine. Meanwhile his mother becomes the lover of a wealthy divorcee named Leslie Oastler, who has a daughter named Emma. Although much older than Jack, Emma introduces him to sexual activity, which both arouses and confuses him. He is further confused when he is sexually abused by an adult woman at a young age.

Jack discovers a talent for acting while in school and works as an actor after college. He follows Emma Oastler to Hollywood, where she works reading screenplays and is writing a novel. Emma's first novel is a bestseller, as is her second novel. Jack turns his talent for playing women into a successful acting career. When Emma dies suddenly, she leaves a screenplay of her first novel for Jack, instructing him to modify it and present it as his own work. This he does, winning an Oscar award for his screenplay.

After the death of his mother in Toronto, Jack begins to learn more about his childhood. He returns to Northern Europe and retraces his journey as a boy. He is shocked to learn that his mother had not been chasing his father, but that his father had been chasing them. His mother had used Jack as bait to convince William to return to her and had sabotaged William's attempts to form new relationships. He discovers he has a half-sister living in Scotland, and his sister sends him to see their father, who is living in a facility in Switzerland. Jack learns that his father had been following his life very closely, even as a young boy.



Part I, Chapters 1-3

Part I, Chapters 1-3 Summary

Part I of the book is entitled "The North Sea." The opening chapter is called "In the Care of Churchgoers and Old Girls." Jack Burns is four years old as he stands on a sidewalk in Toronto with his mother, watching several uniformed school girls walk to St. Hilda's School. Jack's mother informs him that he will be attending the school himself the following year when the all girls school begins admitting boys.

Before that, Jack's mother intends to take him with her to Northern Europe in search of William Burns, Jack's father who she tells him has abandoned them. Jack's mother, whose name is Alice Stronach, had met William Burns in their native Scotland at the church where he worked as an organist and she sang in the choir. William had left for Canada after Alice became pregnant and she had followed him, first to Halifax, then to Toronto.

In Toronto, Alice finds work as a tattoo artist, a skill she learned from her father in Scotland. She is taken in by a woman named Mrs. Wicksteed who is one of the "Old Girls" who formerly attended St. Hilda's. While staying with Mrs. Wicksteed, Alice hires a teacher named Caroline Wurtz from St. Hilda's to help her lose her Scottish accent. Miss Wurtz often stares at Jack with an intense expression.

Chapter 2 is called "Saved by the Littlest Soldier." Jack and Alice go to Copenhagen where Alice finds work with a tattoo artist called Tattoo Ole, who gives her the tattoo name "Daughter Alice," in reference to her well-known father. Tattoo Ole tells Alice he had given William a tattoo of a piece of music, adding to the several tattoos he already had. He tells her he has heard William is playing the organ at the Kastelskirken, an old military fort in the city. Ole's assistant, Lars, also tells Alice he has heard there was some kind of scandal with William and the wife of an officer there. Alice and Jack go to the Kastelskirken and while she talks to one of the organists, Jack goes exploring. He wanders out onto the ice of the moat around the fort and falls in. He is rescued by a small soldier who slides out onto the ice on his stomach.

Afterward, Jack suggests his mother might give the soldier a free tattoo in thanks for saving him. Later that night Jack is having a nightmare about drowning and goes into his mother's room. There he finds the young soldier in his mother's bed. He surprises them and the soldier dresses in a hurry and leaves. Jack does not see any tattoo.

Chapter 3 is called "Rescued by a Swedish Accountant." Alice and Jack go to Stockholm, Sweden, next, where they stay at the Grand Hotel while they look for a tattoo artist named Doc Forest and seek news of Jack's father at a large church where he had been employed playing the organ. Alice learns that William had been involved in a scandal with some choir girls and had left.



Alice sets up a temporary tattoo operation in their hotel room at the Grand. She looks for potential customers at the hotel restaurant, having learned in Swedish how to ask if they have any tattoos and if they would like to get one. At breakfast she and Jack meet Torsten Lindberg, who has several tattoos and hires Alice to give him another one, which she will not let Jack see. Jack spends evenings alone in the hotel room and sometimes finds his mother is gone at night. During the day he is taken skating by a woman named Agneta Lindstrom, who he is told is Torsten's wife.

Jack and Alice go next to Oslo, Norway, staying at a hotel called the Bristol. One night in the hotel restaurant, Jack sees a young couple enter, acting very amorous toward one another. He encourages his mother to approach them about getting tattoos, but she says she will not. Taking the initiative, Jack approaches them himself. They answer him in English and seem amused but puzzled at his questions. Jack's mother comes up behind him and hurries him away, calling him her "little actor." He sees that his mother is crying. The man at the table covers his eyes as Jack leaves.

Part I, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces Jack Burns as a young boy of four, as well as his mother, Alice. These chapters in the first part of the book are told as if they are based on Jack's memories rather than on actual fact. The author frequently makes reference to things perhaps not being exactly as Jack remembers them. The dramatic turn the book takes in later chapters is set up by this uncertainty, when Jack learns that not only were his memories incorrect, but that he was being manipulated and given false information by his mother. Other events are foreshadowed in the first chapter. The intense scrutiny that Miss Wurtz gives Jack as a boy hints at her involvement with Jack's father.

Jack and Alice's adventure in Northern Europe begins in Chapter 2. This trip is a formative experience for the young Jack as he is introduced to the often seamy world of tattoo artists and prostitution. It is suggested that Alice is working as a prostitute as they move from city to city, but in keeping with Jack's innocent point of view, this is only hinted at. Jack will later discover that his mother was indeed probably working as a prostitute well before the episode that takes place in Amsterdam in Chapter 7. The episode with the "littlest soldier," also told from Jack's innocent point of view, is another hint at Alice's activities. This episode is also part of the recurring theme of child sexual abuse that runs through the tale.

Jack's father is absent from most of the book, but he makes an unknown appearance in Chapter 3. As Jack will later realize, the man he approaches in the restaurant of the Bristol Hotel is William Burns, his father, who has been given permission by Alice to view Jack. He will also learn later that the woman he is told is Torsten Lindberg's wife is actually his father's mistress. Alice only allows William to see Jack if his mistress takes him skating. This seemingly innocent part of Jack's childhood will later be revealed as a somewhat sinister manipulation by Jack's mother.



Part I, Chapters 4-7

Part I, Chapters 4-7 Summary

Chapter 4 is called "No Luck in Norway." Alice goes to the church in Oslo where she has heard William was playing. She speaks with a young organist there and learns about a girl named Ingrid Moe who was involved in some kind of scandal with William. She finds Ingrid Moe and agrees to give her a tattoo of a heart on her breast. As Jack recalls it, Ingrid had asked for a torn heart, but his mother had given her a whole heart, saying there was nothing wrong with her heart. In exchange for the tattoo, Ingrid tells them William has gone to Helsinki.

Chapter 5 is called "Failure in Finland." Alice and Jack go to Helsinki and stay at a hotel with a bar popular with Americans where Alice finds tattoo clients. Jack has a memory of two young women coming back to their hotel, named Ritva and Hannele, and they are music students who want matching broken heart tattoos. Jack believes they are somehow connected to his father, since they seem to know who he is and remark that he looks like William. Jack is drifting in and out of sleep as his mother gives them tattoos. Alice learns William has gone to Amsterdam where there is a well-known organ at the Oude Kerk in the red light district.

Chapter 6 is called "God's Holy Noise." In Amsterdam Alice finds work in the shop of Tattoo Peter, a well-known artist near the red light district. Alice speaks to the assistant organist at the Oude Kerk who suggests she speak to some of the older prostitutes about William, who used to play for the prostitutes late at night. Alice takes Jack to the church at night to listen to the assistant play.

Chapter 7 is called "Also Not On Their Itinerary." Two prostitutes named Saskia and Els help look after Jack and tell Alice to speak to a woman named Femke. Alice has told Jack that prostitutes are women who are paid to give men advice, and he thinks Femke is also a prostitute although her nicely-furnished rooms are not like those of the other prostitutes. In a puzzling conversation with Alice, Femke seems to suggest that she become a prostitute to bring Jack's father out into the open. She mentions that William has seen Jack, but Alice immediately tells Jack she is lying.

With the help of Saskia and Els, Alice registers at the local police office as a prostitute. She borrows some clothes and a room and stands in the red light district singing hymns she knows are William's favorites. A crowd gathers and Saskia takes Jack away. The next day Alice tells Jack that William has gone to Australia and they will not follow him. She is taking him back to St. Hilda's where he will be "safe with the girls" (p. 122).

Part I, Chapters 4-7 Analysis

Jack is further led unknowingly astray from the truth in Chapter 4. The author also misleads the reader to a certain extent in these early chapters. Alice has painted a



picture of William Burns as a philanderer who preys on girls before leaving town, always on the run from Alice who only wants him to take responsibility for his son. While the author drops many hints that things are not exactly as Jack remembers them, he does not explicitly contradict Alice's portrayal of William. So, in Chapter 4, when the sad Ingrid Moe is somehow wrapped up in a scandal involving William, Jack and the reader assume that William had possibly seduced the young woman and then left her, breaking her heart. In reality, the scandal was that Alice had seduced Ingrid's fiance intending to shame William. A similar assumption is made in Chapter 5 with the two music students in Helsinki.

Chapters 6 and 7 take place in Amsterdam where Alice is more overtly involved in prostitution, although Jack is largely ignorant of her activities. Once again, the author misleads the reader to an extent by portraying Femke as a high-class prostitute when she will later be revealed to be a lawyer. The author is perhaps making a small joke here about the similarity between the two professions. He also has Alice describe the job of a prostitute as someone who gives advice to men, which is also an apt description of a lawyer's job.

The scene with Femke is unclear to Jack, and it is not clear to the reader, either. It seems as though Femke is encouraging Alice to become a prostitute, but in retrospect she must already know of Alice's activities because she is representing William and wants to make a deal with Alice to stop. The episode in Amsterdam marks the end of their adventure in Europe and the end of Part I.



Part II, Chapters 8-10

Part II, Chapters 8-10 Summary

Chapter 8 opens Part II, which is called "The Sea of Girls." Chapter 8 is entitled "Safe Among the Girls." In Toronto, Mrs. Wicksteed has Jack driven to school at St. Hilda's in her limousine by her Jamaican driver, Peewee.

Arriving at the school, Jack's door is opened by a large older student, a girl named Emma Oastler. Jack also meets Mrs. McQuat, a breathless older teacher nicknamed The Gray Ghost. Emma takes Jack under her wing.

Chapter 9 is called "Not Old Enough." Emma has started riding home with Jack after school, where they are alone in Mrs. Wicksteed's house except for her housekeeper, Lottie. Alone in Jack's room, Emma asks him if he ever feels like touching girls. Jack says he does not, and Emma asks him to show her his penis, which he does.

Chapter 10 is called "His Audience of One." Jack begins to act in school plays directed by Miss Wurtz, the third grade teacher. He is often cast in female roles and does well. He starts to have sexual stirrings for Miss Wurtz. He confides in Emma that he sometimes has dreams of Miss Wurtz in her underwear. Emma shows him her naked body, but he is confused. She brings him a bra that belongs to her mother and Jack sleeps with it in his bed. When his mother finds it, he explains where it came from. She says she will speak to Mrs. Oastler about it. Alice is often gone in the evenings, but Jack does not know where.

Part II, Chapters 8-10 Analysis

Chapters 8 through 10 describe Jack's first experiences at St. Hilda's, the girls' school where his mother enrolls him after they begin accepting boys. In Chapter 8, he meets Emma, the girl who is to become an important part of his life. Emma is curious about Jack and his sexual development. He cooperates when she asks to look at his penis and answers her pointed questions. In Chapter 10, Emma encourages Jack's sexual stirrings by bringing him some of her mother's underwear. This event seems to be the occasion that brings Alice and Leslie Oastler together for the first time.

Jack shows early promise as an actor in Chapter 10, under the direction of Miss Wurtz, foreshadowing his future career and lifelong obsession with the woman.



Part II, Chapters 11-13

Part II, Chapters 11-13 Summary

In Chapter 11, called "His Father Inside Him," Jack is in grade three. He is seated behind a girl named Lucinda. His teacher is Miss Wurtz, who often loses control of the class and has to be rescued by Mrs. McQuat, who takes disruptive students to the school chapel where they are made to kneel in the aisle and pray.

Emma, who is mad at Jack for telling her mother about the bra, tells Jack that Lucinda wants him to kiss her. In class he leans forward and kisses Lucinda on the back of the neck. She immediately stiffens and falls to the floor, wetting herself and biting through her lip.

Mrs. McQuat takes Jack to the chapel and speaks with him, asking if he has ever done more than kiss girls. He tells her about Emma and the bra. She tells him to keep praying. Later, Emma is impressed with Jack's story but she says she will have to teach him to kiss.

Chapter 12 is called "Not Just Another Rose of Jericho." Mrs. McQuat is Jack's teacher in grade four. He struggles with math.

Emma speculates about Miss Wurtz, who wears clothes that are nicer than a teacher can afford but does not seem to have a boyfriend. Emma teaches Jack to kiss. Despite the incident with the bra, Emma and Jack are still allowed to be alone together. She shows Jack her vagina and Jack says he recognizes it from one of his mother's popular tattoos called a Rose of Jericho.

While kissing, Jack snags his lip on Emma's braces and they are discovered by Mrs. Oastler. She cleans Jack up. She also shows Jack that she has a Rose of Jericho tattoo.

Chapter 13 is called "Not Your Usual Mail-order Bride." Jack learns from Mrs. McQuat that his mother is considering sending him to an all boys school after he finishes at St. Hilda's. Mrs. McQuat does not seem to like the idea.

Emma and some of the girls who board at St. Hilda's sneak Jack into the residence area. They make him lie down and take off his pants and underwear. Jack is confused and a bit frightened. One girl, Bonnie Hamilton, who walks with a limp, stands up for Jack.

Jack is cast in a play as a mail order bride on the Canadian frontier. He brings the house down with his dramatic performance, which is seen by his mother who sits close to Leslie Oastler in the front row. Jack's mother is upset after the performance, but Jack does not understand why.



Part II, Chapters 11-13 Analysis

Jack's sexual development continues in Chapters 11 through 13. In Chapter 11, a spontaneous kiss of a girl in his class has an uproarious effect. In Chapter 12, both Emma and Leslie Oastler expose themselves to him and he has a painful accident while kissing Emma. Chapter 13 includes a terrifying episode of sexual abuse when Jack is taken into the residential area of St. Hilda's and examined and abused by a group of girls, including Emma.



Part II, Chapters 14-15

Part II, Chapters 14-15 Summary

Chapter 14 is called "Mrs. Machado." Jack and his mother move into the large house of Emma and Mrs. Oastler, each with their own bedroom in a large wing of the house. Concerned about Jack's smallish build, his mother enrolls him in wrestling lessons at a gym where he is taught by a Thai kickboxer named Krung and a Ukrainian wrestler named Chenko. Jack is a good wrestler, but smaller than all the other students, who are adults. He is paired with an older woman named Mrs. Machado, who is thickly-built but short.

It is summer and Emma's mother sends her to a camp to lose weight. Mrs. Machado is hired to be Jack's nanny while Emma is gone. While she and Jack are alone at Mrs. Oastler's she accidentally kicks him in the groin while practicing. She removes his pants and underwear and ices his groin, but then begins to fondle him. Before Jack understands what is happening, she is on top of him having sex with him. She leaves, telling him what they have done is a secret.

One night, Jack has a bad dream and goes looking for his mother in her bedroom. He finds her in Mrs. Oastler's room, in her bed. He does not fully understand, but Emma explains they are lovers. They want to be alone, she tells him, which is why he is being sent away to Redding and she is to become a boarding student at St. Hilda's.

Chapter 15 is called "Friends for Life." Jack's sexual encounters with Mrs. Machado continue and Jack determines to keep everything secret even though Emma suspects something. Mrs. Machado takes Jack to her small apartment after going to the gym. She tells Jack she is learning self defense because of her ex-husband. In her apartment are photos of her two sons at about Jack's age. She does not want to talk about them.

Jack has a sexual dream one night about Miss Wurtz and says some things in his sleep that Emma overhears. She presses him on what he knows about sex and he explains about Mrs. Machado. Emma tells him what she is doing is abuse.

Emma accompanies Jack to the gym the next morning and introduces herself to Chenko. She asks the rules of wrestling and what is not allowed. Chenko tells her a few of the dangerous moves that are against the rules. When Mrs. Machado comes in to the gym, Emma announces to everyone that she is abusing Jack; then she attacks Mrs. Machado with the illegal moves Chenko has just told her about, breaking her finger and choking her nearly to unconsciousness.

Emma says she is Jack's new workout partner. She goes with him to the gym and gets strong by wrestling with Chenko.

It is decided that Jack will go to a boys school in Redding, Maine. Mr. Ramsey, a homosexual teacher at St. Hilda's, will drive him there. Emma tells Jack about



masturbation, saying it will save his life at the boys school. She gives him some nude pictures of herself to take with him.

Part II, Chapters 14-15 Analysis

The theme of sexual abuse comes to the forefront in Chapters 14 and 15 as Jack becomes involved with Mrs. Machado, a woman who goes to the same gym where they are learning to wrestle. While Jack's earlier sexual encounters might be considered curious play, Mrs. Machado is most definitely taking advantage of Jack, although Jack does not fully understand the import of what is going on. Emma comes to his rescue in Chapter 15 in a funny and dramatic encounter with Mrs. Machado.

Jack is also exposed once again to the sexual activity of his mother when he walks in on her and Leslie in bed together, but he does not fully understand what is happening. Emma explains it to him.



Part III, Chapters 16-17

Part III, Chapters 16-17 Summary

Part III, called "Lucky," begins with Chapter 16, which is called "Frost Heaves." Jack is increasingly interested in learning about his father, but his mother consistently tells him he is not yet old enough to learn everything. Mr. Ramsey takes him to the boarding school in Maine, giving him the advice that the school seems to value "attitude over aptitude."

In his first few minutes after arriving and meeting his roommate, Noah Rosen, Jack is confronted by an older student. Jack is polite at first, but the student continues to be insulting. Confidently, Jack walks out into a common area where other fifth-graders can see him, and when the older student makes a move Jack quickly subdues him in a wrestling hold. Another older student sees Jack's move and invites him to try out for the wrestling team.

Jack does well on the wrestling team, although the school has a tough schedule. He continues to do well acting in school dramas, usually playing women. The school plays are directed by Mrs. Adkins, the wife of the headmaster. She will have an affair with Jack when he is older. Jack enjoys the school. For the first time he feels as though he fits in.

Chapter 17 is entitled "Michele Maher, and Others." After Redding, Jack goes on to Phillips Exeter Academy, a prestigious prep school in New Hampshire where his Redding roommate Noah also attends. They are roommates at Exeter. Noah helps Jack with the more demanding schoolwork at Exeter, and Jack sleeps with Noah's older sister, Leah. He keeps this fact from Noah, but Noah finds out after Leah has an abortion after getting pregnant with Jack and drops out of school. She will later die in Chile.

While filling in for Noah at his cafeteria job at the school, Jack meets a dishwasher named Mrs. Stackpole and begins having an affair with her. They go to her house during the day while her husband is at work. She is not an attractive woman, but Jack is regularly attracted to sad, older women. She is eventually found dead in the nearby Exeter River, where her body was thrown after she was killed by someone.

Emma moves to New York City to study film, then quits film school and goes to the University of Iowa to study writing. Jack is attracted to the prettiest girl in his class, a young woman named Michele Maher. After some inadvertent flirting, they begin to see each other and she invites him to spend a weekend at her parents' home in New York City. While alone there, Michele wants to sleep with Jack, but he believes he has a venereal infection from Mrs. Stackpole so he declines. Michele takes this the wrong way and dismisses him as "too weird."



Part III, Chapters 16-17 Analysis

Part III begins as Jack goes to Maine to start 5th grade at an all boys school. Despite his mother's apprehensions, his wrestling training serves him well on the very first day when he is able to thwart a bully and make a connection on the wrestling team.

Chapter 17 covers Jack's time at a prestigious prep school and introduces Michele Maher, who will become something of an obsession for him. Because of a misunderstanding, she rejects him. He will go through a similar episode with Michele as an adult.



Part III, Chapters 18-20

Part III, Chapters 18-20 Summary

Chapter 18 is called "Enter Claudia; Exit Mrs. McQuat." After Exeter, Jack's grades are not good enough to go to Harvard like many of his classmates, and he goes to the University of New Hampshire, where he does fairly well. He is heavily involved in the drama department and meets a young woman named Claudia who is also an actor. During the summers they both work in small theater productions. They take a trip to visit Emma in Iowa City.

In Toronto, Alice has opened her own tattoo shop called "Daughter Alice," which becomes very popular. Jack takes Claudia to Toronto to attend a large film festival and introduces her to his mother and the teachers at St. Hilda's. Mrs. McQuat suggests they take Miss Wurtz with them to the festival. Later, after leaving Toronto, Jack learns from his mother that Mrs. McQuat has died. She was never married.

Chapter 19 is called "Claudia, Who Would Haunt Him." Jack, Claudia and Miss Wurtz go to a Japanese film and are mistaken for celebrities. Outside the theater are Catholic protesters protesting a French film. They think the three are emerging from this film and Miss Wurtz is confused. She tries to explain the Japanese film to them, resulting in a comical scene.

Claudia hangs out at Daughter Alice, and gets a tattoo of a dagger on her inner thigh. As they are driving back to the US, Jack jokes with the customs official at the US border that Claudia has a dagger to declare. She is taken in and examined for her tattoo. Angry about the joke, Claudia fights with Jack on the drive back to New Hampshire. She blames him for using his father as an excuse never to want children or to stay with a woman for long. She promises to haunt him after she dies, or perhaps even before she dies.

Chapter 20 is entitled "Two Canadians in the City of Angels." Despite their fight, Jack and Claudia live together for the remainder of college. She has an affair, but Jack does not care since they have been drifting apart for some time. They break up after college, and Jack goes to LA to live with Emma, who has moved there to work as a writer.

Emma is working as a first reader of screenplays, making notes and passing along those with promise to movie executives. She helps Jack invent a resume to get waiter jobs. Jack loses a job parking cars at an expensive restaurant when he discovers a couple in a silver Audi has left their 4-year-old named Lucy in the car while they eat. He carries the girl into the restaurant, giving her to her parents, then is fired after her father makes a scene.

Emma asks a favor of someone she knows in the movie business and gets Jack an audition for a film. When he arrives at the audition, he finds out it is a pornographic



movie that is being made by a woman named Milly Ascheim. He leaves the audition slightly humiliated. Later he is put in touch with Milly's sister, Myra, a rough and colorful woman who agrees to help him find a part in a movie.

Emma is working on a novel with a main character named Michele Maher. The character is a small, thin woman who works as a first reader of screenplays, like Emma. The fictitious Michele Maher falls in love with a bodybuilder who stars in pornographic movies. They have a non-sexual relationship that is nonetheless fulfilling.

Part III, Chapters 18-20 Analysis

Chapters 18 through 20 describe Jack's years in college and his first attempts to get into movies in Los Angeles.

Jack continues to pursue acting in Chapter 18, and becomes involved with Claudia, who becomes his first and only real long-term relationship with a woman. The title of Chapter 19, "Claudia, Who Would Haunt Him," makes reference to an episode later in the book when Jack does indeed seem to believe he is being haunted by Claudia.

In Chapter 20, Jack and Emma are reunited again in Los Angeles, setting the stage for their mutual ascension to stardom.



Part III, Chapters 21-22

Part III, Chapters 21-22 Summary

Chapter 21 is called "Two Candles, Burning." Myra gets Jack a part in a movie directed by "Wild Bill" Vanvleck, a director known for making somewhat campy and sensationalistic films. Jack plays a transvestite hitchhiker in what will become a defining type of role for him.

Emma's novel is accepted for publication and she quits her job reading screenplays. With money from her book she buys the run-down house she and Jack are renting and starts working on a second novel. Jack is asked to appear in another film by Vanvleck in which he will also appear dressed as a woman.

Emma confides in Jack that she has a condition called vaginismus which can give her painful muscle spasms during sex unless her partner holds perfectly still.

Chapter 22 is entitled "Money Shots." Jack's next movie for Vanvleck is called "The Tour Guide." It is not a great movie, but it gets him noticed.

Emma's second novel is written with the intention that it be made into a movie, and she negotiates her contract so that Jack will have the role of a cross-dressing husband who stars in it. The movie is made and Jack is nominated for an Oscar, but he does not win.

Jack gets more parts and begins to make considerable money. He sends money to his mother, wondering if she will close the tattoo parlor since she need not work any more. Alice has become more involved in the tattoo culture, however, and goes to conventions all over the world to meet with other artists and enthusiasts. Jack goes to visit her in her shop, finding her just as closed off from him as before.

Part III, Chapters 21-22 Analysis

Emma uses her early success as a writer to help Jack get into movies, first arranging an audition for him through a connection. The audition goes comically wrong, and the scene where Jack is asked to show his penis to the producer of a pornographic film is another humiliating echo of the similar incidents he went through as a boy with Emma and her classmates.

Jack becomes troubled about his relationship with his mother in Chapter 22. As she has become more independent she has also become less forthcoming with Jack about his past and about his father. Her promise to tell him more when he is older has not been kept. Alice's reluctance to be completely honest with Jack will be revealed in the last parts of the book.

Jack and Emma's rise to stardom is condensed in time in Chapter 22, which ends Part III.



Part IV, Chapters 23-26

Part IV, Chapters 23-26 Summary

Part IV is called "Sleeping in the Needles." It begins with Chapter 23, entitled "Billy Rainbow." Jack is in New York City doing interviews for his latest movie. Emma calls him in the middle of an interview. She is upset about her weight and complains loudly to Jack. Jack tells her she should diet, and she angrily tells him she has taken good care of him in her will and hangs up. The woman interviewing him writes it all down.

Soon afterward, Jack is in his New York hotel, where he is registered under the name "Billy Rainbow." He gets a phone call early in the morning from his mother in Toronto, who tearfully tells him Emma has died. She tells him Emma went out to a nightclub and brought an apparently under-aged boy home with her. During sex, she had what seems to be a heart attack. She tells Jack that Mrs. Oastler has flown to Los Angeles and Jack replies he will go there as soon as he can.

In Los Angeles, Jack learns that Emma had a rare heart condition that probably caused her death. Leslie Oastler is staying in the house with Jack and climbs into his bed one night. While they are attracted to each other, Jack does not sleep with her, having promised both his mother and Emma he would not. Jack tries to thank Leslie for her generosity in the past, paying for his school clothes and supporting him and his mother. She scoffs and tells him not to thank her, but to talk to his mother "while there is still time" (p. 445). Jack calls his mother the next day. She is upset, convinced that he has slept with Leslie. He insists he has not and relates what Leslie said about speaking with her. She replies that there is nothing to talk about. She still suspects he has slept with Leslie.

Chapter 24 is called "The Button Trick." Although Emma made no designation, Leslie decides to hold a memorial service for her in the chapel at St. Hilda's and asks Jack to speak at the service. Emma's will does provide well for Jack, as she promised. She leaves him sole rights to the film version of her first novel, and has also written much of the screenplay already, although she instructs Jack to write it out himself, adapt it, and present it as his own.

Many of Jack's schoolmates come to Emma's memorial, including Bonnie Hamilton, the girl who stood up for him. Jack gives a short but emotional speech. Because he is now famous, many of the current students also hang around outside the chapel, and Jack goes off with them in search of the boys' room, to which he imagines he knows the way. He is alone in the hallway when he has what he believes is an encounter with Mrs. Machado, who seems to appear from nowhere, circling him and biting off one of the buttons of his shirt. She disappears as quickly as she appears and Jack turns quickly to see Bonnie Hamilton at the end of the hall. They have an emotional reunion and Jack leaves with her, returning to her hotel room where he spends the night with her.



Chapter 25 is called "Daughter Alice Goes Home." Jack is at Leslie's home while his mother is at the tattoo shop. Leslie gives an envelope to him that has photographs of a nude woman's torso. Jack notices a heart tattoo over one breast. It is a torn heart with the words "Until I Find You" across it. He knows it is not his mother's work, but it looks well-done, he notes. Leslie points out that the other breast has a small surgical scar on it and mentions Alice. Jack suddenly realizes he is looking at photos of his mother. Leslie tells him she has breast cancer, and had surgery when Jack was away at Redding. She has kept it a secret from Jack, along with the fact that she has a tattoo.

The cancer has spread, Leslie tells Jack, and has entered her brain. She has had mood swings and may experience seizures, she tells him. Alice is upset that Leslie has told him, but Jack presses her for information. He learns from her that his father had been in Toronto when he was a child and that Alice would sometimes let him see Jack from a distance. He is shocked to learn from her that their trip to Northern Europe was not to look for William, because Alice already knew where he was. She was using Jack as bait to convince William to take her back. Jack realizes everything he thought he knew about his father might be wrong and he tells Alice he might go back to Europe and look for the truth.

Alice's condition worsens and she gets angry with Jack and Leslie. Leslie tells Jack that it had been his father who provided the money for his schooling and his clothes. His father had even helped him his first few years in Los Angeles until he became famous, she says. He even bought Alice the tattoo shop. Leslie tells Jack she should talk to Caroline Wurtz. She thinks Caroline may have had a relationship with William that Alice does not know about.

Alice interrupts their conversation and tells Jack she wants to "go home." Leslie replies that she is home, but Jack knows she means she wants to go to her tattoo shop to die.

Chapter 26 is called "A Faithless Boy." Alice passes away in her sleep after staying a few days at her shop. In her instructions to Leslie and Jack she tells them to hold her memorial on a Saturday so the liquor stores will be open if they run out of booze, and to inform a few of her tattoo friends. They begin to plan for the memorial, to be at the St. Hilda's chapel and in the dining hall afterward. It soon becomes apparent that Alice had many, many friends and people come streaming in on motorcycles from all over the country. The service and party afterwards are a loud and drunken affair, with many of the attendees coming back to Leslie's house to stay.

Before the service, Jack speaks with Caroline Wurtz, who explains she had been in love with William and that he is a wonderful man. It is he who had given her the nice clothes she wears. She does not know where he is, she tells him, but encourages him to look for him.

Jack wakes up the morning after the memorial party and resolves to begin his search for the truth and for his father in Copenhagen.



Part IV, Chapters 23-26 Analysis

Jack learns some important and previously unknown things about Alice and Emma in the first chapters of Part IV. The sudden death of Emma in Chapter 23 from an undiagnosed heart condition is an important turning point in the novel. Jack is now without his main protector, although Emma tries to continue to care for him after her death by leaving him her screenplay for her first novel.

Emma's death takes Jack back to Toronto, where he learns from Leslie in Chapter 24 that his mother is dying from cancer, and that she has been in treatment for many years without his knowing. She also has a tattoo, although she had always told him she had none. These revelations about his mother are a foreshadowing to Jack that she has kept other very important information from him. Leslie encourages Jack to ask his mother and perhaps Miss Wurtz for more information. Leslie apparently knows more than she is willing to tell, but wants Jack to find out the truth. She does tell him that his father is the one who has been providing money for his upbringing and schooling and even supporting him when he was starting out in Los Angeles. William had also been supporting Alice, buying her the tattoo shop. This is a shock to Jack and he starts wondering about what kind of person his father truly is.

Jack resolves to find William in Chapter 26 after speaking with Caroline Wurtz, who he learns had once been involved with William.



Part IV, Chapters 27-28

Part IV, Chapters 27-28 Summary

Chapter 27 is called "The Commandant's Daughter; Her Little Brother." While in Toronto, Jack has been working at adapting Emma's screenplay and he sends it off to Hollywood. He receives a note from Michele Maher, for whom he still has a kind of obsession. She is now a dermatologist.

Jack goes to Copenhagen and finds Tattoo Ole's shop. Ole is gone, but an artist named Bimbo is there and seems to be expecting Jack. He tells him he has heard stories about his mother and father, and that Ole said Jack had been given a lot of "misinformation" (p. 523). He tells him where to find Lars, the man who had worked with Alice and Ole.

Lars fills Jack in on what happened in Copenhagen. William had been engaged to marry the daughter of the commander of the Kastelskirken. Alice had tried to ruin the engagement by seducing the commander, but he rebuffed her. Then Jack fell in the moat and the commander sent his young son out on the ice to rescue him. Jack recalls the incident and realizes that the person he thought was a young soldier was really a boy of about 12. He recalls seeing the boy in his mother's bed afterward. She had sex with the boy in order to scandalize William's fiance's family.

Jack goes to Stockholm, where he learns that the woman who had taken him skating, who he had thought was the wife of Torsten Lindberg, Agneta Nilsson, had actually been his father's mistress. Alice had made a deal that William could only see Jack if he agreed to have his mistress take him skating. His mother had been fairly openly working as a prostitute at the Grand Hotel, he learns, intending to embarrass William into taking her back to save Jack from that lifestyle.

Chapter 28 is called "The Wrong Tattoo." In Oslo Jack recalls the incident from his childhood when he walked up to the young couple in the restaurant and offered to have his mother give them a tattoo. He realizes that the description he has received of his father in those days matches that of the man at the table. He confirms this when he meets with Ingrid Moe, who tells him it had indeed been his father at the table, and that Jack was being put on display by his mother. Jack learns from Ingrid that William had not seduced her, but that it had been Alice who had seduced Ingrid's fiance, causing a scandal. Ingrid has hated Alice ever since, and she sleeps with Jack as a kind of revenge.

Part IV, Chapters 27-28 Analysis

Jack begins his journey toward learning the truth in Chapters 27 and 28. He returns to Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo, where he tracks down some of the people who had known him and his mother when they were there before. The first major revelation he encounters is about his memory of being saved from drowning by a young soldier. He



learns that the soldier was actually a boy of about 12, which means that his mother had sexually seduced a boy much in the same way Jack himself had been abused as a child. This had been part of Alice's continuous campaign to shame William into taking her back by ruining his relationships and reputation.

The second major revelation Jack receives is that the man he approached in Oslo was his father. He verifies this with Ingrid Moe, who also tells him the truth about the scandal Alice created by sleeping with her fiance. Ingrid's hatred for Alice is mirrored by Alice's apparent hatred for William.



Part IV, Chapters 29-30

Part IV, Chapters 29-30 Summary

Chapter 29 is called "The Truth." Jack goes to Helsinki and finds Ritva and Hannele, the two women he remembers were students of his father's and who had his mother give them tattoos. He learns from them that Alice had tried to get at William by sleeping with them, but it didn't work. They had stayed together. They show Jack a photograph of his father, the first he has ever seen.

Chapter 30 is called "The Deal." Jack goes to Amsterdam and connects with Els, the prostitute he remembers as a child, and the local police officer who had registered Jack's mother as a prostitute. He meets with Femke, who is not a prostitute, as he had recalled, but a lawyer who negotiated a deal between Alice and William that if Alice would take Jack away and stop her life as a prostitute, William would support him with money and send him to school. He also had to agree never to try to contact Jack. Jack learns that his father had watched him leave on the ship with Alice, and had collapsed in tears.

Part IV, Chapters 29-30 Analysis

Chapters 29 and 30 close out Part IV. In Chapter 29, called "The Truth," Jack is able to piece together most of what really happened in Europe after speaking with Ritva and Hannele. He confirms the final part of the story in Chapter 30 after meeting again with Femke in Amsterdam, as well as with the police officer who had registered his mother as a prostitute. He learns about the deal between his parents that has kept William away from him his entire life.

Part IV sets up the story for the resolution in Part V. Jack has learned the truth about how his mother lied and kept things hidden from him for his entire life. He has good reason to doubt what he has been told about his father. He is angry, frustrated and confused and he has lost both his mother and his best friend, Emma. How Jack comes to grips with this startling turn in his life will be taken up in Part V.



Part V, Chapters 31-33

Part V, Chapters 31-33 Summary

Part V is called "Dr. Garcia," and it opens with Chapter 31, called "Therapy." Jack is internally troubled by what he has learned about his childhood and his mother and begins going to therapy sessions with a psychiatrist named Elena Garcia. Her method is to have him recount his life in chronological order, giving her as many details as possible and not interjecting or wandering into other subjects. When the movie is made from Emma and Jack's screenplay it is a hit, and he is nominated for an Oscar award for best adapted screenplay. At Leslie Oastler's suggestion, he invites Caroline Wurtz to attend the Oscars with him and flies her out to California.

Chapter 32 is called "Straining to See." Jack and Miss Wurtz attend the Oscars and he wins the award. He takes her to the round of parties afterwards. He finds he can explain to her everything that happened to him in Europe without getting upset. He recalls when he and Alice were leaving Amsterdam on the boat and he asked her to lift him above the railing to see, but she refused.

Chapter 33 is called "Signs of Trouble." Jack hears again from Michele Maher, who invites him to come to Boston to see her. Dr. Garcia thinks it is a bad idea, but Jack decides he will go to Halifax, where he and his mother went first after Amsterdam, and return to California by way of Boston.

Leaving Dr. Garcia's Jack finds a pretty young woman in the back seat of his car. It is Lucy, the girl he rescued when he was parking cars several years before. She wants to go to his house, and he agrees after she threatens to disrobe in the back of his car. At his house, she looks around and tells him that her parents split up after that night in the restaurant. She takes off her clothes and calls her mother, leaving a message that she is naked at Jack Burns' house. Jack insists that she get dressed and calls the police, learning that Lucy's mother has already called them to report a rape in progress.

The police come and take Lucy away. Jack is not arrested, but an officer notes that he has the pictures of his mother's torso on his refrigerator, as well as the naked photo of Emma. He throws them away, along with Lucy's underwear that she left behind.

Part V, Chapters 31-33 Analysis

Part V is named after the character Dr. Elena Garcia, to whom Jack narrates his life in chronological order as a kind of therapy. This method of therapy seems to be a parallel of the novel itself, both reliving the events earlier in the book, but also is a kind of storytelling. It comes after Jack has some success as a screenwriter, although that results from his adapting Emma's story, and is not fully his own. As Dr. Garcia has Jack tell his story, she insists that he not interpret or deviate from the narration, asking only for the details in the order they occurred.



Jack's memories from childhood begin to make more sense to him as he fits them with what he has learned as an adult. The scene as he and Alice were leaving Amsterdam on a boat and she refused to lift him above the rail to watch as they left he now sees as a cruel act by his mother, who did not want William to see Jack, or Jack to see William.

The episode with Lucy in Chapter 33 is a bizarre coincidence that threatens to scandalize Jack's career. It will also have the somewhat humorous effect of sabotaging Jack's attempt to reconnect with Michele Maher.



Part V, Chapters 34-36

Part V, Chapters 34-36 Summary

Chapter 34 is called "Halifax." Jack goes to that city and is captivated by the story of the Halifax disaster, an explosion that killed many people. He has a meeting with a writer and director about making a film about the disaster, but he dislikes the screenplay and gets into a public fight with the writer. Jack learns that a tabloid has gone through his trash and found the nude pictures. Michele Maher now wants nothing to do with him. He calls Dr. Garcia.

Chapter 35 is called "Forgettable." Jack makes more films over the next three years. Michele Maher writes to tell him she will be in Los Angeles for a convention and would like to see him. They go out and she becomes very drunk, but after she is more sober they have sex. Jack will later realize that the encounter will be forgettable.

Chapter 36 is called "Claudia's Ghost." Jack continues to unravel in public. He gets in a bar fight with a transvestite. One night he comes home to find Claudia sitting on her old suitcase on his front lawn. She appears not to have aged at all, but to still be in her early 20s. Uncertain whether she is real or not, Jack has her come in and they sleep together. The girl tells him afterward she is actually Claudia's daughter, and is only in her teens, despite looking older. Claudia has started a small theater, she tells Jack, and suggests he think about supporting it with a donation. He writes a check.

Jack learns from Miss Wurtz that his father is alive and that he has a half sister in Edinburgh, named Heather. He contacts Heather, who is wary, but says William needs help. She asks him to come meet her first in Edinburgh. He leaves a note for Dr. Garcia.

Part V, Chapters 34-36 Analysis

Jack's life begins to unravel after the incident with Lucy, as in Chapter 34 when he gets into a very public fight with a writer in Halifax and the Lucy episode is blown up in the tabloid press. He does reconnect with Michele Maher in Chapter 35, but the encounter is clumsy and forced and neither one is satisfied.

The episode with Lucy is mirrored in the odd incident with Claudia's apparent ghost in Chapter 36. The strange vision Jack had of Mrs. Machado at St. Hilda's after Emma's memorial has raised the possibility that he may hallucinate from time to time, making it plausible to the reader that the young woman he finds in his front yard may be imaginary. It is soon apparent to the reader she is real, although it is not clear what Jack really thinks until afterward.

A major turning point takes place in Chapter 36 when Jack learns that his father is alive and that he has a half sister living in Edinburgh. It is Miss Wurtz who is the unlikely messenger of this news.



Part V, Chpaters 37-39

Part V, Chpaters 37-39 Summary

Chapter 37 is called "Edinburgh." Jack goes to meet his half-sister, Heather, in Edinburgh. She explains that William is in a sanatorium in Zurich, and that he suffers from arthritis and some mental issues. After they share the stories of their lives, they form an emotional connection and Heather tells him exactly where to find their father. She needs Jack's help paying for the expensive hospital.

Chapter 38 is called "Zurich." Jack goes to the sanatorium where William lives and meets the team of doctors and professors who care for him. They try to prepare him for his meeting with his father by explaining some of his behavioral oddities that are set off by certain "triggers." Heather has already warned Jack that he will appear normal, but that he has some strange behavior that requires him to stay at the sanatorium. The doctors arrange for two of them to accompany Jack and his father to a restaurant for dinner that evening; then they take Jack to see William.

Chapter 39 is called "The Musician." Jack is led into William's comfortable room in the private part of the sanatorium, where William is reclining in his bed, reading. Although it is a warm day, he is fully dressed in warm clothes. William does not look up from his book until one doctor announces that they have brought Jack. Jack is surprised to see dozens of photographs of himself on William's walls. They are not just recent photos taken from magazines, but also of when he was a boy at school, as well as photos of himself with Emma in Los Angeles. He realizes Emma must have sent them to him. His father has been in close touch with all of the important people in his life, but has never made direct contact with him.

William has forgiven Jack's mother, and he encourages Jack to forgive her, too. During their conversation, Jack says the word "skin" which William tells him is one of his "triggers." He begins taking off his clothes until he is completely naked, covered completely in his tattoos. A doctor comes in and calms him down, getting him dressed again.

Jack and his father go to an expensive restaurant that evening for dinner, along with two of William's doctors, both women. Jack has been warned that mirrors are one of William's triggers, and he tries to avoid them when he takes him to the men's room, but William sees himself. He does not strip, but stares at himself and begins talking about himself in the third person. As he does, he wets his pants, but one of the doctors, anticipating the episode, soon knocks at the door with a change of clothes, which Jack helps his father put on.

The next morning, Jack goes to listen to his father play the organ at a nearby church. He still plays, but his arthritis makes his fingers cramp after a while and he begins to make mistakes. A large crowd gather to hear him play.



Afterward, Jack calls Heather in Edinburgh, overjoyed that he has reconnected with her and his father. Although he realizes it is the middle of the night in Toronto, he cannot wait to call Miss Wurtz to tell her he has found William.

Part V, Chpaters 37-39 Analysis

Things move quickly in the final three chapters of the novel. In Chapter 37, Jack has an emotional meeting with his half sister, Heather. He learns from her that William has followed his career closely, which he might have expected since he has become famous, but he has yet to learn just how closely William has been involved in his life.

Chapter 38 describes Jack's solo trip to Zurich to meet his father and is a somewhat humorous interlude involving the team of doctors and professors who insist on having a long discussion with Jack before taking him to see William. The chapter serves to both relieve some of the character's tension, but it also suspends the resolution of the book, creating some additional tension in the reader.

Chapter 39 is the final chapter, in which Jack is finally reunited with his father. William is a charming man, although slightly disturbed. He is obsessed with his tattoos, or perhaps his tattoos are a manifestation of his obsessions. When provoked, he will remove his clothes and go over his tattoos, each one of which holds a certain meaning to him. There is a parallel here to what Jack is doing with Dr. Garcia by reliving his life in chronological order, filling in all the smallest details as a tattoo artist might complete an image.

Jack finally understands the extent to which William has been involved in his life when he looks through the photographs William has from every part of his life. He realizes that Emma and Leslie must have cooperated with William, as well as his teachers and coaches who sent William photographs.

The dinner scene with Jack and William is both funny and a little sad as William's mental weaknesses are on display. Jack quickly reconnects with his father and resolves to become more involved with him and Heather, helping to care for William. The novel ends on a happy note as he is eager to share his happiness with Miss Wurtz.

Characters

Jack Burns

Jack Burns is the central character in the novel, which traces his life from childhood to adulthood. As a young boy, Jack is told by his mother that his father abandoned them, leaving them to fend for themselves. At the age of four, Jack's mother takes him with her on what she says is a search for his lost father. They travel through Northern Europe, always seemingly one step behind Jack's father. He is then brought to Toronto, where he is sent to a girls' school that has started accepting boys. Jack shows a talent for acting at a young age and participates in school dramas through college.

After college, Jack goes to California and lives with his stepsister, Emma Oastler, who is a writer. He manages to make his way into movies and becomes very successful. He feels at loose ends in California, however, and uncertain about his identity and purpose. When he learns his mother is dying from cancer, he returns to Toronto to be with her when she dies. He begins to understand, after talking with his mother's partner Leslie Oastler, that the version of his childhood his mother told him is not true. His father did not abandon them but wanted to be part of Jack's life. His mother had forbidden it unless he would also take her back.

After his mother's death, Jack begins to see a therapist who has him tell her about his entire life in chronological order. This therapy appears to help him cope with many of his conflicted feelings, but his life takes a sudden turn when he is contacted by a woman who says she is his half sister. She is a musician, living in Scotland.

Jack's half sister informs Jack that their father is living in a sanatorium in Switzerland. Jack goes to see his father, who suffers from an obsessive disorder but is otherwise mostly normal. Jack learns that his father has been tracking him his entire life, with the help of people close to him like Emma and Leslie. He decides to buy a home in Switzerland so he and his sister can be close to their father.

Daughter Alice

Daughter Alice is the "tattoo name" of Alice Stronach, the mother of Jack Burns. Alice grows up in Aberdeen, Scotland, the daughter of "Aberdeen Bill," a well-known tattoo artist. She meets William Burns in Scotland at the church where he plays the organ and she sings in the choir. She becomes pregnant and moves to Canada to have Jack after William will not marry her.

Alice raises Jack to believe that his father abandoned both of them and had shirked his responsibility to help raise the boy. In reality, as Jack discovers as an adult, William had wanted to help raise Jack but Alice would not allow him to see the boy unless he took her back. Alice takes Jack to Northern Europe when he is four years old and moves from city to city forcing William to follow her. She ends up in Amsterdam, where she



starts working as a prostitute in an attempt to force William to take her back in order to save Jack. In response, William makes a deal that he will never contact Jack if she will leave Amsterdam and make sure he is raised with a good education.

Alice moves to Toronto, where she puts Jack in a private school. After some time the two of them move in with Leslie Oastler and her daughter, Emma. Alice and Leslie are lovers, which they try to conceal from Jack for a time. Alice continues to live with Leslie as Jack goes through school in Maine and New Hampshire. She never tells him that it is his father who is paying for his schooling and much of his support.

Alice claims she has never been tattooed, but as an adult Jack learns from Leslie that she does have a tattoo of a broken heart on her breast that reads "Until I Find You," which gives the novel its title. He learns this at the same time he learns his mother is dying of cancer. Alice's funeral is held in Toronto and attracts hundreds of people from all over the world in the tattoo community.

Emma Oastler

Emma Oastler is the daughter of Leslie Oastler and a kind of stepsister and friend to Jack Burns. She is a student at the private girls' school where Jack is sent as a boy, and she takes him under her wing. Emma is curious about Jack's sexual development. She talks to him about sex and touches his genitalia, a practice she continues as the two grow into adulthood.

After college, Emma becomes a writer and moves to California where she invites Jack to come live with her. While working as a first reader of screenplays, Emma writes a novel that becomes a best seller. Her second novel is made into a movie starring Jack, launching him on his successful acting career.

Emma dies suddenly while Jack is away, from an undiagnosed heart condition. In her will she leaves a screenplay for her first novel to Jack, instructing him to polish it and present it as his own work. Jack does so, and Emma's screenplay wins an Oscar award.

Leslie Oastler

Leslie Oastler is the mother of Emma Oastler and the partner of Alice Stronach, Jack's mother. She was formerly married to a wealthy doctor and lives in a large house in Toronto. Leslie is sexually attracted to Jack and has occasional brief sexual encounters with him as an adult.

Caroline Wurtz

Caroline Wurtz is a teacher at St. Hilda's, the school where Jack Burns goes as a boy. She is hired by Jack's mother to help her get rid of her Scottish accent. She is a high-strung person who sometimes has trouble maintaining order in her classroom.



Jack's earliest sexual fantasies are about Miss Wurtz, and he maintains an attraction to her his whole life. He invites her to be his date at the Academy Awards ceremony where he wins an Oscar. Jack later learns that his father and Miss Wurtz had been romantically involved when his father was a music instructor at the school.

William Burns

William Burns is Jack's father. Originally from Scotland, William is an organist who works at churches playing large organs. He is also fully tattooed over most of his body, having received his first tattoo from Alice's father. William follows Alice and Jack across Europe in hopes of being able to see Jack, but agrees to give up all contact with him if Alice agrees to take him back to Canada and see that he is given a good education. While he does not contact Jack directly, he follows him closely with the help of others who are close to him, such as Leslie and Emma Oastler and the teachers at his schools.

William marries a German woman and has another child, a daughter named Heather, who later contacts Jack to tell him where his father is living. He develops an obsessive disorder later in life where he removes his clothing and displays his tattoos when certain triggers are present. He becomes a patient at an exclusive and expensive sanatorium in Switzerland, where he is living when Jack reunites with him.

Mrs. Wicksteed

Mrs. Wicksteed is an "Old Girl," an alumna of the St. Hilda's school where Jack attends school. Jack and his mother live with Mrs. Wicksteed when he starts school.

Mrs. McQuat

Mrs. McQuat is a 4th grade teacher at St. Hilda's. She is also in charge of discipline. She speaks with a halting, whispering voice which may be from living through a gas attack as a nurse in World War I.

Mrs. Machado

Mrs. Machado is a small, thick woman whom Jack meets while taking wrestling lessons in Toronto. She eventually begins to sexually abuse Jack until Emma finds out and puts an end to it.

Chenko

Chenko is a large Ukrainian wrestler who teaches Jack and Emma to wrestle.



Tattoo Ole

Tattoo Ole is a well-known tattoo artist in Amsterdam who employs Alice when she and Jack are living there.

The Swiss Doctors

A team of meticulous Swiss doctors takes care of William Burns in the exclusive sanatorium in Zurich where he lives.

Claudia

Claudia is Jack's girlfriend through college and for some time afterward. She is an actress who goes on to get married and form a theater group after leaving Jack.

Dr. Garcia

Elena Garcia is Jack's therapist. She insists that he tell her his entire life story in chronological order, leaving out no details.



Objects/Places

Toronto

Toronto is large city in Ontario, Canada, where Jack and his mother live until he goes away to school in Maine.

Copenhagen

The largest city in Denmark, Copenhagen is where Jack and Alice go looking for William Burns and where Jack nearly drowns.

Stockholm

Stockholm is a large city in Sweden where Jack and Alice go looking for William Burns.

Oslo

Oslo is a large Norwegian city where Alice and Jack live for a time on their journey to find William Burns. Jack speaks with his father in Oslo, although he is unaware of it at the time.

Helsinki

Helsinki is a large city in Finland that is on Alice and Jack's itinerary through Northern Europe.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a large city in the Netherlands with a popular red-light district where prostitutes work openly. Alice works as a prostitute and tattoo artist in Amsterdam until William makes a deal with her convincing her to take Jack away.

Redding

Redding is a small remote town in Maine where Jack goes to school beginning in 5th grade.



Los Angeles

Los Angeles is the large Californian city that is the home of the movie industry. Jack and Emma move to Los Angeles to pursue their careers as an actor and writer.

Zurich

Zurich is a city in Switzerland where Jack discovers his father is living in an exclusive private sanatorium.

St. Hilda's

St. Hilda's is an all-girls school in Toronto that begins allowing boys to enroll through the 4th grade. Jack meets Emma Oastler at St. Hilda's. It is also the location of the memorial services for Emma and Alice.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh is the city in Scotland where William Burns is originally from, and where Jack finds he has a half sister living.

Lieth

Lieth is the seaport town in Scotland where Alice is from.

Halifax

Halifax is a large city in Nova Scotia, Canada, where William and Alice go after she becomes pregnant. Jack returns to Halifax as an adult and becomes interested in the history of the city.



Themes

Tattoos

Tattoos create a theme that runs through the entire novel, which takes its name from the words that Jack's mother has tattooed on her chest. She herself is a tattoo artist who works continuously and gains a widespread reputation for being a good artist.

Interestingly, she tells Jack she has never been tattooed and that she does not want him to ever get a tattoo while she is alive. As she is approaching death, however, Jack learns she does have a tattoo she has hidden from him. It is a broken heart with "Until I Find You" written across it.

William Burns, Jack's father, is what tattoo artists call "full-body." He is a certain kind of obsessive who has every unexposed inch of his body covered with tattoos. In the case of William, he seems to have used tattoos to chronicle the pain and joy in his life, and in his later life when he has become somewhat unstable mentally, he sometimes removes his clothes and looks over his tattoos, reliving the events with which they are associated. His tattoos are in the form of musical notation and lines from the hymns he plays on church organs. His tattoos are his real clothing, Jack determines after meeting his father after years of not knowing him.

Jack does not get a tattoo, although he is allowed to give one even as a child of four years old when one of the assistants in a shop where his mother works allows him to cover over some old tattoos on his ankles.

Memory and Uncertainty

Only in the final section of the novel do the main character and the reader learn that much of what has come before is not exactly as it seems at first. Jack's childhood and young adulthood are colored by his belief that his father abandoned him, but he later learns this is not entirely true. His recollections of his trip through Northern Europe with his mother turn out to have been manipulated by his mother, with the help of others. He learns that the people closest to him, such as Emma and Leslie Oastler, Caroline Wurtz, and his teachers and coaches have all helped his father track his life without ever telling Jack what they are doing.

While much of this comes as a surprise to the reader, the author several times drops hints that the conclusions Jack draws from certain incidents are not completely correct, or that he has remembered something wrong. These hints prepare the reader for the sudden revelation the main character receives near the end of the story.

While Jack is portrayed as a kind of victim of these deceptions and misapprehensions, he also practices them himself. He is an actor, after all, and is very successful at pretending to be what he is not. He goes along with Emma's scheme to pass off her screenplay as his own, and often speaks to people using lines from his movies.



Jack cannot bear the strain of being merely a character, and he begins to unravel. By going through his memories since childhood with his therapist, he eventually gets on the right track when he learns that many of his memories are false. He takes off on his own and tracks down his half sister and finally his father, who, in a happy coincidence, has been watching him all along, just as Jack had imagined.

Sexual Abuse

Jack Burns is sexually abused at a young age by an adult woman who insists he keep their meetings a secret. This turns out to be a central event in his life, although he does not fully realize it until he reaches adulthood. The theme of sexual abuse is one that runs through the whole novel, and is explored from various angles.

Jack's encounter with the adult Mrs. Machado is not his first exposure to sexuality. As a younger boy, Emma Oastler and her friends have a focused interest in Jack and his sexual development, and Jack is introduced to sexual activity through them. Because the girls involved are in their teens and Jack is just in grade school, the touching and kissing between them might be described as the innocent experimentation of children, however the girls are enough older than Jack that it seems they should know better than to take advantage of him. One character, Bonnie Hamilton, realizes this and stands up for Jack. Ironically, her defense of him is the impetus for a sexual encounter between Bonnie and Jack after they are both adults.

Jack also learns as an adult that his mother has abused children sexually in a similar way to that in which Jack was abused. She seduces the young boy who saves Jack from drowning. This is also an ironic revelation to Jack, since his mother has implied several times that his father regularly became sexually involved with the girls to whom he taught music.

While the novel explores some of the repercussions of Jack's early sexual abuse, such as an attraction to older women, it does not draw clear moral lines on the subject. Jack is not completely unwilling in his relationship with Mrs. Machado, or in the early explorations with Emma and her friends. Likewise, the young boy seduced by Alice in Copenhagen is perhaps a willing participant. In all of these cases, though, the child was being manipulated by an older person in a sexual way.

In a final ironic situation, Jack himself becomes an apparently unwilling sexual abuser when he sleeps with Claudia's underage daughter. He apparently believes he is hallucinating or dreaming, and the girl is definitely a willing participant, but the facts remain that she is not of age and he is an adult. This episode further blurs any possible moral conclusions on the subject in the book.



Style

Point of View

Until I Find You is told from the point of view of Jack Burns, the main character, but is narrated from an omniscient standpoint in the third person. The narrator of the story explains the thoughts and motivations of Jack, but also can see into the future and the past and comment on the larger context of what Jack experiences.

For example, in the early chapters of the book, the narration uses phrases such as, "As Jack would one day learn," and, "In reality, Jack understood little of what had happened there. Although he didn't know it, a pattern had begun" (p. 36). These early chapters are presented as the character Jack remembers his childhood, but the narration hints that his recollections are not completely accurate. The revelation of what actually happened during his childhood is a dramatic part of the later portions of the book.

As the character of Jack matures and learns more about his past, his point of view changes. Having blamed his father for leaving his mother and him, he learns that it was his mother who kept his father away and that his father was more involved in his life than he ever knew. As these revelations are made, Jack's point of view becomes reflective as he reconciles his memories as a child with what he later understands actually happened. The earlier events of the novel are revisited by both the character and the narrator with a new perspective.

Setting

Until I Find You is set in many places around the globe, as Jack travels widely with his mother as a child and then recreates his childhood journey as an adult. Much of the novel takes place in Toronto, Ontario in Canada during the 1970s. It is in Toronto that Jack spends his early years of school. From there he goes to a school in rural Maine, then prep school and college in New Hampshire. After college Jack moves to California, where he becomes a successful actor.

Before settling in Toronto, Jack and his mother tour through the northern European countries of the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Norway in what he believes at the time is a hunt for his father who deserted them. Later he discovers that his mother was not following his father, but instead leading his father from place to place using Jack as bait. Jack recreates his journey as an adult, looking up the people he remembers as a child. He discovers he has a half sister in Edinburgh, Scotland and travels there to meet her. The story ends in Switzerland, where his father has gone to live in a comfortable mental asylum.



Language and Meaning

John Irving writes in an "omniscient" style in *Until I Find You*. The narration provides details about the characters that are not apparent from their actions and dialogue alone. The author also provides background and historical information about the settings and events the characters experience. This background information is directed at the reader, and is meant to enhance the reader's understanding of what is taking place in the book. These asides to the reader are sometimes ironic or sarcastic, as if the author is sharing an inside joke with the reader. For example, at the end of Chapter 8, entitled "Safe Among the Girls," is the line, "Oh what a lucky boy Jack was! Safe among the girls, no doubt" (p. 141). In the preceding chapter, Jack's mother explains to him she is sending him to the all-girls school because he will be "safe among the girls." Chapter 8 describes how Jack and the other younger students are terrorized by the older girls, however, giving the line at the end of the chapter a sarcastic tone. This kind of tone persists throughout the book as Jack is seen as the unknowing victim of others who take advantage of him.

Structure

Until I Find You is made up of 39 titled chapters divided into five sections. It is generally told in chronological order beginning when the main character, Jack Burns, is a child of four years and ending when Jack is an adult. It is told mainly in retrospect, in the past tense and in the third person, with the narration hinting at events that are to come.

The book opens in Toronto as Jack is about to begin his first year of school at an all-girls Catholic school that is accepting boys for the first time. The story then moves back in time by two years or so and describes Jack's journey through Northern Europe with his mother that preceded their settling in Toronto. This makes up the first section of the book.

Part 2 follows Jack's years at the girls' school and at the all-boys school in Maine where he attends afterward. Part 3 describes Jack's years after college, his first relationships with women as an adult, and his move to California where he becomes a successful actor.

In Part 4 Jack's mother becomes sick and dies, and he learns the truth about his early childhood and his father. The book concludes with Part 5, where Jack begins to reconstruct his past with the aid of a therapist and goes in search of his estranged father. The book ends with Jack reuniting with his father in Switzerland.



Quotes

"According to his mother, Jack Burns was an actor before he was an actor, but Jack's most vivid memories of childhood were those moments when he felt compelled to hold his mother's hand. He wasn't acting then." Chapter 1, p. 3

"It was the first time anyone had said Jack looked like his father. Jack's mother stared at him as if she were aware of the resemblance for the first time." Chapter 4, p. 54

"To a four-year-old it was a very confusing story. Then again, maybe you had to be a four-year-old to believe it." Chapter 7, p. 102

"Jack Burns took from Miss Wurtz a lifelong lesson: life was not a stage; life was improv. Miss Wurtz had no tolerance for improvisation; the children learned their lines, speaking them exactly as they were written." Chapter 10, p. 163

"With Mrs. Machado as his regular workout partner, Jack's wrestling noticeably improved - although not as noticeably as hers." Chapter 14, p. 242

"Alice should have talked to him; she should have told Jack everything. But in lieu of conversation, she sewed." Chapter 16, p. 267

"Miss Wurtz was still beautiful in her damaged way, but she not only looked a little unhealthy; she seemed ashamed of something, although Jack couldn't imagine what she had ever done to be ashamed of." Chapter 19, p. 333

"Emma seemed determined that he take the utmost advantage of his fame. To that end, she persuaded Jack to say he was writing something - though of course he wasn't." Chapter 22, p. 406

"It was exactly where, in Alice's opinion, a tattoo of a damaged heart could best be hidden - and binding this broken heart together, like a bandage, were the words Until I Find You. The words were in cursive on a scroll." Chapter 25, p. 475

"As a psychiatrist, Dr. Garcia was the opposite of an editor. Jack was not supposed to delete anything - he was instructed to leave nothing out." Chapter 31, p. 615

"When that last unmarked area of skin has been tattooed and their bodies become a completed notebook, full-body types don't all react the same way." Chapter 38, p. 748

"It was four-thirty in the morning in Toronto, or some ungodly hour like that. Caroline would still be sleeping, but she wouldn't mind a wake-up call from Jack - not if it was about his father, her dear William. In fact, Jack couldn't wait to tell Miss Wurtz that he had found him." Chapter 39, p. 820



Topics for Discussion

What role do tattoos play for the various characters in the novel?

Why does Alice keep her tattoo a secret from Jack? What does her tattoo mean, do you think?

What questions does the novel raise about sexual abuse? Does it offer any conclusions?

In what ways does Jack realize he is like his father?

What role does religion play in the novel? Is it an important theme?

How does the author create uncertainty in his narrative? What purpose does this serve?

Can Alice's actions be justified? What motivates her?