

A Visit from the Goon Squad Study Guide

A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan

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Plot Summary

"A Visit from the Goon Squad" by Jennifer Egan follows the lives of several loosely connected people over the span of forty years. The two main characters in the book and the most closely linked for a time are Bennie Salazar and Sasha. Throughout the majority of the book, Bennie works as a record producer and Sasha is his assistant.

Bennie Salazar's tale starts off at middle age. He is the former owner of Sow's Ear Records, a label he started and then sold off. Bennie still works at the label but is eventually fired. Bennie is divorced with a young son. Bennie suffers from panic attacks and impotency which he is working hard to cure by drinking flakes of gold in his coffee. Bennie thinks he might be in love with Sasha.

Bennie's story starts in San Francisco in 1979. Bennie and his friends Scotty, Rhea, Alice, and Jocelyn are in a punk band. The band gets a break from record producer Lou Kline, a man that Jocelyn met while hitchhiking. Lou is Bennie's beginning. It seems that he might also be Jocelyn's end as she spends the next 25 years as an addict.

Lou is the typical sleazy producer. He is divorced with six kids. Lou is always throwing parties, taking drugs, and seducing the next young thing. Lou eventually has two strokes.

Sasha's life is dark indeed. Sasha's entire background is revealed in various chapters. Sasha ran away, did drugs, had many injuries, and a rough life on the streets or in run down places all over the world, including Naples. Sasha's father did everything in his power to put Sasha back on the right path. It seemed to work despite Sasha's unbeatable compulsion for stealing, which is finally what leads to her being fired by Bennie. Sasha eventually ends up getting married, having two kids and moving to the California desert.

The story is somewhat difficult to follow in that there is no real chronology. Each chapter is about a different person or aspect. Many of the stories involve people seeking some form of redemption. One good example of this is the tale of La Doll, who is the boss of Bennie's ex-wife Stephanie. Dolly was once a high level publicist who manages to redeem herself after the horrible accident and losing everything. It takes that tragedy to make Dolly realize that she has a soul and that there is more to life than money and fame.

The story ends sometime in the near future. There is no real denouement to speak of. However, there is a sense that each person has gone as far as he or she will go and if someone is going to be redeemed, it has already happened. Egan offers a final glimpse into the rapidly changing world of social media and how it affects the music business and public relations in general.



Chapter 1: Found Objects

Chapter 1: Found Objects Summary

In Chapter 1: Found Objects, the story opens with a 35-year-old woman named Sasha who eyes a wallet in an open purse in a restaurant ladies' room. Sasha thinks about stealing the wallet. Sasha likes to steal. Sasha thinks about her therapist, Coz. Coz wears funky sweaters, is fond of his blue leather couch and says that making eye contact all the time is tiring. Sasha's tendency to steal has accelerated over the past months. Sasha no longer steals from stores, however, she steals from people. The green leather wallet would be a nice thing to steal. Coz tries to convince Sasha that not stealing is more of a challenge for her and that it might be an interesting way to think about her kleptomania. Still, Sasha, sees the woman's stupidity as an invitation.

"We live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?" (Chap. 1, p. 8).

Sasha steals the wallet and returns to her date, a man named Alex that no longer seems nearly as boring as he had before the theft. Sasha and Alex leave the restaurant. The woman whose wallet was stolen comes out onto the street and asks if anyone has seen her wallet. Sasha panics and agrees to look for it in the ladies' room. Sasha pulls the wallet out of her bag when the woman walks in. Sasha tells the woman she has a problem and is getting help, to please keep it between them. The woman agrees.

Sasha and Alex go to her apartment on the Lower East Side. Alex is fascinated by the apartment which is iconic old New York in style, right down to the bathtub in the kitchen. Alex surveys the items in the apartment from the knickknacks and souvenirs to the tables piled with stolen items. When Alex asks Sasha what the items are and what they mean, Sasha kisses Alex. They soon make love on the living room floor. The contrast is evident: "All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she'd been gouged" (Chap. 1, p. 17).

Alex asks if he can take a bath in the claw foot tub. Sasha tells him to go ahead. When Alex is in the bathroom, Sasha goes through his wallet. She finds several unremarkable things. One curious item is an aged piece of paper that says "I believe in you." Sasha takes the paper. Sasha intends to put it back but never has the chance. Later Coz asks Sasha about the incident. Sasha tells Coz not to ask her how it made her feel.

Chapter 1: Found Objects Analysis

Sasha is a kleptomaniac that is attempting to get help from a psychiatrist who goes by the nickname Coz. Sasha once had dreams of doing many things from managing bands to playing the harp but now seems to put most of her focus on stealing. Coz says that Sasha is not without empathy for the people she steals from. This can be seen in the



way Sasha behaves with the woman in the bathroom as well as her need for Xanax. Sasha realizes that it is not the things she wants but the experience. Sasha also feels guilty about stealing from the plumber and from Alex, although she has never seen him again. There is a part in Sasha that wants to confess and to get help but she usually stops herself.

Sasha also seems to have low self-esteem and relies on stories of her famous boss, Bennie Salazar, to get attention.



Chapter 2: The Gold Cure

Chapter 2: The Gold Cure Summary

Chapter 2 begins with Bennie Salazar having a morning meeting. Bennie is the president of Sow's Ear Records.

"The shame memories began early that day for Bennie, during the morning meeting, while he listened to one of his senior executives make a case for pulling the plug on Stop/Go, a sister band Bennie had signed to a three-record deal a couple of years back." (Chap. 2, p. 21).

Bennie had great faith in the group at first but now the sisters were losing their schoolgirl charm. They were pushing thirty and one had a 9-year-old girl. The group had problems with producers and still had not produced an album. The talk of the sisters prompted a memory in which Bennie had met with a Mother Superior at a convent. Bennie had kissed the nun, who immediately pulled away in shock. Bennie had never made a recording of the nuns.

Bennie's executive producer, Collette, asks Bennie what to do about the sisters. Bennie offers to visit them.

Bennie puts gold flakes in his coffee. Bennie had read that the Aztecs used gold to improve potency and Bennie seemed to have lost his sex drive. Bennie drinks the coffee and stares at his assistant, Sasha, to gauge if the gold is working. It is not.

Bennie drives and listens to music. He thinks about how the industry has changed. Bennie is not happy with the music he is putting out because it is too clean.

"The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. An aesthetic holocaust! Bennie knew better than to say this stuff aloud" (Chap. 2, p. 24).

Bennie picks up his 9 year old son Christopher from school. Chris does not have any particular desire to do anything special, so once again father and son will "do whatever" which means a lot of driving around. Bennie allows Chris to have a Frappuccino which is directly against his ex-wife's wishes. Chris sees the gold flakes and asks many questions until Bennie allows him to try some of them.

Bennie decides to go and visit the sisters. Bennie and Chris drive to Mount Vernon to meet with Sasha and Louisa and Chandra, aka the sisters. The sisters are alive with excitement over a new book filled with material. Louisa, Chandra, Bennie, Sasha, Christopher and Louisa's daughter, Olivia, go downstairs to a recording studio. The group begins to play, even Bennie and Christopher. For a while Bennie is on top of the world. He has an erection. Suddenly he remembers that it was the making of the music



that made him feel so alive. Suddenly, Bennie begins to think of things from his past like Christopher getting lice and being caught by a date while he was in the bathroom. Bennie feels like he is going to have a heart attack and must get out. Bennie feels that he has ruined everything. The group goes outside and the sisters apologize profusely for the airless studio.

On the way back to the city, Sasha says the sisters are horrible and "unlistenable." Bennie says they were signed only five years ago. Sasha is shocked at Bennie's change in attitude. After Bennie drops off Christopher, he shows Sasha the list of things he has been remembering but does not explain. As Sasha is ready to exit the car, Bennie professes to Sasha that he is crazy about her. Sasha politely shrugs it off.

Chapter 2: The Gold Cure Analysis

Like Sasha, Bennie is also in therapy. Bennie is plagued by anxiety attacks and flashes of memories that almost completely debilitate him at times. This occurs during his morning meeting and again at the sisters' house. Sasha understands more about Bennie than anyone but even Sasha does not know the depth of Bennie's problems. Additionally, Bennie hates what his career has become. It may lead to a break down or something worse if Bennie cannot reconcile his current life to his former life and plans for his future and the record label.

Bennie worries a great deal about his impotency. His sudden realization that he loves Sasha is important as Bennie always thought it was simple lust. Sasha does not take it seriously and points out that they need each other. Bennie does not fully understand Sasha and is baffled by her behavior.



Chapter 3: Ask Me if I Care

Chapter 3: Ask Me if I Care Summary

This chapter is from the point of view of Rhea, a friend of Bennie's in his younger years.

Scotty drives his truck to Alice's house. Alice points out the all-girls school she attended. Alice's sisters go to school there now. Once the group of people - Scotty, Bennie, Jocelyn, Rhea, and Alice are in the house, Scotty asks if he can see Alice's sisters who are asleep. Jocelyn tells Rhea that she bets Alice's sisters are blonde because all rich girls are blonde. It has something to do with vitamins. Jocelyn turns out to be wrong as one of the girls has dark hair. When Rhea points out the girl with dark hair, Jocelyn says the girl is a black sheep.

Rhea explains the era:

"Nineteen eighty is almost here, thank God. The hippies are getting old, they blew their brains on acid and now they're begging on street corners all over San Francisco. Their hair is tangled and their bare feet are thick and gray as shoes. We're sick of them" (Chap. 3, p. 38).

The kids are still in high school. It is a relatively tight knit group although Rhea and Jocelyn do not seem to have a bond with Alice except that none of them likes to be onstage with their band, The Flaming Dildos. Bennie and Scotty are in charge of the band. The bond between Scotty and Bennie is somewhat mysterious, perhaps fueled by ESP.

"The Flaming Dildos have had a lot of names: the Crabs, the Croks, the Crimps, the Crunch, the Scrunch, the Gawks, the Gobs, the Flaming Spiders, the Black Widows. Every time Scotty and Bennie change the name, Scotty sprays black over his guitar case and Bennie's bass case, and then he makes a stencil of the new name and sprays it on. We don't know how they decide if they should keep a name, because Bennie and Scotty don't actually talk." Chap. 3, p. 38

Bennie transferred from another school the previous year. He works at Revolver Records. Rhea is in love with Bennie. Unfortunately, Bennie is in love with Alice, who is in love with Scotty, who is in love with Jocelyn. Jocelyn loves Scotty but is not in love with him and chooses to wait for a man that picked her up when she was hitchhiking. The man lives in LA. The man, Lou, is a music producer.

Jocelyn tries to reassure Rhea that Bennie will never get Alice.

Jocelyn and Rhea's childhood is recounted.



The Flaming Dildos is a punk band. They record in Alice's garage. The main goal at this point is to get a gig at a place called the Mab. The group goes there to slam dance. Bennie tends to stay back to listen to the music.

Rhea is at Alice's house without Jocelyn. Alice is even less friendly than usual.

Jocelyn calls Lou. Lou is not pleased, saying that he had told her he would make the calls. Lou tells Jocelyn he will go to the gig at the Mab. He does not promise a record contract but says he will listen. Regardless, Lou says, they will have a good time.

Lou takes Rhea and Jocelyn to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Lou gives a vial of coke to Jocelyn and she and Rhea partake of the drug before dinner. Rhea says she feels like she has a thousand eyes and is hyper aware. She cannot eat.

The gig at the Mab starts off a disaster. People throw drinks at Scotty. Marty, the new violinist, is sorely out of place. Lou, Jocelyn and Rhea stand at the back. Suddenly, Jocelyn starts to perform oral sex on Lou. Rhea is horrified and begins to cry. After the show, everyone but Joel, the drummer, goes to Lou's apartment. Jocelyn barely looks at Rhea. Jocelyn falls asleep. Alice and Scotty are cuddled up in the living room. Rhea knows this will distress Bennie. Lou talks to Rhea on the terrace, telling her that her freckles are the best part of her. Rhea wants to know why someone as old as Lou - someone with six kids - wants to be with kids her age. Lou says he will never grow up.

Bennie no longer goes to the Pit, probably because of the relationship between Scotty and Alice. Two weeks after the gig, Jocelyn runs away. Her family tracks her to Lou's house in LA. Lou says he will bring her back the following week.

Rhea notes that Alice is friendly and calm now that Scotty loves her.

Chapter 3: Ask Me if I Care Analysis

Rhea is a confused young girl who has fallen in a crowd of punk rockers. The only ones who seem to be serious about the band are Scotty and Bennie, although Bennie seems to have the most interest. While the others are playing and having fun, Bennie is always very aware of what is going on around him, taking in everything he can. This is particularly obvious at the Mab and at Lou's apartment when Bennie goes off to the studio on his own.

Rhea is clearly smitten with Bennie. The intermingled feelings and relationships are common at that age. Rhea worries about Bennie when Scotty and Alice get together and she worries that the friendship between Bennie and Scotty has been ruined.

Jocelyn goes through many changes after she meets Lou. She is smitten with Lou, who is a slimy record producer. As long as he supplies Jocelyn with coke and a little attention, he can get virtually anything from her. Jocelyn is much too naïve to know that she is being used. Rhea realizes it but feels that Jocelyn has chosen Lou over their friendship.

Jocelyn, Scotty and Rhea are going off to college the following year which means that the group and friendships will certainly end.



Chapter 4: Safari

Chapter 4: Safari Summary

Rolph talks to Charlene about being on the beach in Hawaii. The family is currently on safari in Africa. Rolph calls Charlene "Charlie" because she hates her real name. While they talk, their father, Lou, sits nearby. Charlie watches her father interact with Mindy, his girlfriend. Charlie reminds her father that he was married to her mother at the time of that trip. Rolph is too young to understand his father's behavior. Charlie is 14 and in a defiant stage. During the ten days of a twenty-one day safari, Charlie feels as if she has changed.

Lou and Rolph take a walk during which they discuss how women can be crazy, Rolph, 11, does not really understand what the right amount of crazy is, nor does his thirty-something father.

He says, "Lou puts his arm around Rolph. If he were an introspective man, he would have understood years ago that his son is the one person in the world with the power to soothe him. And that, while he expects Rolph to be like him, what he most enjoys in his son are the many ways he is different: quiet, reflective, attuned to the natural world and the pain of others." (Chap. 4, p. 55).

When Rolph returns to the hut he finds that Charlie has been crying.

The author discusses one of the warriors present and how his grandson will eventually move to New York, go to Columbia, and buy a loft in Tribeca.

Mindy is in a PhD program at Berkeley. Although she takes her books with her on the trip she has yet to read them. Mindy thinks about Cora, Lou's travel agent, who openly despises her. Mindy has coined a term for this resentment, referred to as Structural Hatred. A forty-something Cora cannot help but hate a twenty-three year old Mindy with an older, powerful boyfriend. Mindy also relates her theories to Charlie and Rolph:

"Structural Resentment: The adolescent daughter of a twice-divorced male will be unable to tolerate the presence of his new girlfriend, and will do everything in her limited power to distract him from said girlfriend's presence, her own nascent sexuality being her chief weapon.

Structural Affection: A twice-divorced male's preadolescent son (and favorite child) will embrace and accept his father's new girlfriend because he hasn't yet learned to separate his father's loves and desires from his own. In a sense, he, too, will love and desire her, and she will feel maternal toward him, though she isn't old enough to be his mother" (Chap. 4, p. 56-57).



Mindy's theories also carry through to her relationship with Lou. Lou can't understand her ambitions. Mindy will be drawn to the nearest single male that disdains Lou's power and credibility.

Chronos, one of the musicians from one of Lou's bands gets out of the jeep and begins to take close up pictures of a lioness eating a zebra. Chronos is attacked. There is a gunshot, a series of screams echoes, and for a time, no one knows if Chronos is alive or dead. Chronos ends up with nothing more than a line of stitches on his cheek. The entire group has a story to tell until the end of their days.

Albert, the Englishman who is second in command behind Lou's friend Ramsey, will most likely get fired for letting Chronos get out of the jeep. There is an unspoken animosity between Albert and Mindy.

Back at the hotel on the hill, Rolph complains of being tired. Mindy takes him up to bed.

Lou takes Rolph spear fishing. Lou does not invite Charlie, who seems to be largely ignoring him. Rolph tells Lou about the incident with Albert and Lou becomes angry. Lou spouts off about women and Rolph becomes upset. He swims back to shore.

Rolph and Charlie discuss Mindy. Rolph is ambivalent about Mindy but Charlie does not like her. Charlie says Lou will marry Mindy.

Later the kids go dancing. Rolph feels embarrassed at the way Charlie is dancing. Rolph and Charlie both feel as if they are growing up on this trip.

The author flashes forward to the years ahead. Mindy and Lou will marry and have two daughters, one of which will inherit Lou's business. Mindy will become miserable and think of Africa as her last happy moment. Charlie, aged 18, will join a cult, almost die from salmonella, and undergo reconstructive surgery due to a cocaine habit before becoming a lawyer. Rolph will eventually kill himself in Lou's house at age 28.

Chapter 4: Safari Analysis

The family dynamic is examined in great detail. Mindy would not become Lou's wife and in fact they most likely would go their separate ways until it is clear that there is sexual tension between Mindy and Albert. Marrying Mindy is Lou's way of "winning."

Rolph is in a strange stage of childhood, adopting his father's desires as his own. Still, he is confused about Mindy's role in his life. Rolph likes and dislikes Mindy and is torn about her presence and authority. Rolph is also homesick.

Charlie is the typical teen in that she will do whatever is necessary to anger Lou and to distract him. Charlie dislikes Mindy as is expected and is explained by Mindy.

The futures of Charlie and Rolph certainly have bleak moments - Charlie joining a cult, becoming an addict and almost dying, plus Rolph's estrangement from Lou and

eventual suicide. The bright side is that Charlie will exchange her persona for that of a professional woman named Charlene who is determined to make something of her life.

The reader may surmise that the impending divorce between Mindy and Lou will encourage Lou to continue with his lifestyle well into and beyond middle-age, creating a cliché.



Chapter 5: You (Plural)

Chapter 5: You (Plural) Summary

This chapter is told from the point of view of Jocelyn. Jocelyn and Rhea go to Lou's house to visit. Lou is dying. Jocelyn and Rhea are 43 years old now. It was Bennie that had called with the news. Lou had a second stroke and it seems as if it would be his demise. Lou struggles to breathe. Jocelyn struggles with the scene: "It's turning out to be a bad day, a day when the sun feels like teeth" (Chap. 5, p. 75).

Rhea is married and has three children and lives in Seattle. Bennie managed to track everyone down, all except for Scotty. Scotty has vanished.

Jocelyn had moved back to San Francisco to live with her mother. She has been clean for a year and is attempting to get her degree. Jocelyn has deep regrets over her past:

"I'm back at my mother's again, trying to finish my B.A. at UCLA Extension after some long, confusing detours. "Your desultory twenties," my mother calls my lost time, trying to make it sound reasonable and fun, but it started before I was twenty and lasted much longer. I'm praying it's over. Some mornings, the sun looks wrong outside my window. I sit at the kitchen table shaking salt into the hairs on my arm, and a feeling shoves up in me: It's finished. Everything went past, without me." (Chap. 5, p. 73).

Lou still flatters "the girls" and is pleased to see them. No one really knows what to say. Lou asks to be taken outside for the first time in weeks. Both Jocelyn and Rhea can envision the old Lou, not this old man with an IV in his arm. Jocelyn thinks a lot about her former relationship with Lou as well as the close relationship she had with Rolph. Jocelyn did not know that Rolph had committed suicide. When Jocelyn learns about Rolph, she throws Lou and the bed into the pool and starts to drown him. Jocelyn lets him go but tells Lou that he deserves to die. Lou says it is too late. Lou asks for the girls to stand on each side of him just like they used to do.

Chapter 5: You (Plural) Analysis

Rhea seems to have settled into her life with ease while Jocelyn is filled with regrets and rage, at herself, Lou and the world. She particularly regrets all of the time she has wasted doing drugs and letting her life fall away. The news of Rolph's death is extremely upsetting as Jocelyn sees him not only as a portrait of youth and of innocence but also sees his death as a metaphor for her own demise.



Chapter 6: Xs and Os

Chapter 6: Xs and Os Summary

This chapter is written from the point of view of Scotty Hausman. Scotty sits on a park bench in Tompkins Square Park reading something he has swiped from the Hudson News. Nearly every woman that walks by reminds him of his ex-wife. Scotty thinks about Bennie Salazar, his old friend. Scotty had read an article about Bennie in Spin magazine and was surprised to learn that Bennie was a record producer. Scotty thinks about his own job as a janitor.

"I felt no shame whatsoever in these activities, because I understood what almost no one else seemed to grasp: that there was only an infinitesimal difference, a difference so small that it barely existed except as a figment of the human imagination, between working in a tall green glass building on Park Avenue and collecting litter in a park" (Chap. 6, p. 79).

After a week, Scotty decides to write Bennie a letter. Bennie writes back a few days later.

Scotty thinks about the information age and how we all spend our time deciphering Xs and Os. One could use a computer to find out information on anyone so Scotty makes it a point not to be found. Scotty carefully notes many things about human nature and the way people behave.

"Like all failed experiments, that one taught me something I didn't expect: one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out" (Chap. 6, p. 82).

Scotty goes to visit Bennie at his office. He takes the large striped bass he caught in the East River that morning. Sasha greets Scotty suspiciously. Bennie comes out of his office after a while. He is puzzled that Scotty brought him a fish. While the pair chats, each realizes that they are not really friends any more and never would be. Scotty asks Bennie what happened between A & B, meaning then and now.

Scotty leaves and the next day goes fishing again. He gives Bennie's card to a couple of musicians. Scotty gets ready to go to work and plans to have his suit jacket cleaned again.

Chapter 6: Xs and Os Analysis

Scotty's life has taken a drastic turn and is almost a complete opposite of Bennie's life. Bennie is married with a baby and Scotty is divorced from Alice. Bennie is famous and Scotty makes is a point to be a complete nobody. The pair no longer has anything in

common. Bennie almost seems embarrassed to be seen with Scotty and pities him. Scotty seems to be content with his life even though he realizes how much Bennie has and how much he does not have.



Chapter 7: A to B

Chapter 7: A to B Summary

Stephanie and Bennie Salazar move to Crandale, New York, a place where they do not fit in but have the right to be due to their successes. Stephanie is in PR and Bennie has just sold his record label. The couple tries to fit in at the country club and finds themselves snubbed. Stephanie finally makes friends with Kathy, a neighbor, after Kathy sees Stephanie play tennis. The pair begins to play together often and win. Although people begin to begrudgingly accept the Salazars, it is clear that there is prejudice and dislike in the air. Still, Bennie refuses to move.

Stephanie's brother, Jules, comes to live with the couple after being released from Attica. Jules is a shadow of his former self, depressed and with no ambition. Stephanie feels uncomfortable being around her own brother.

Stephanie begins to lie about playing tennis with Kathy because it makes Bennie upset. Stephanie cancels a game to go into the city to meet with Bosco, one of the couple's oldest friends and the guitar player for the Conduits, the group that Bennie had signed at the beginning of his career. Jules begs to go along.

Stephanie only keeps Bosco as a client because of their former friendship. Bosco has a new album coming out in a few months and wants to go all out on the PR, including a national tour. Stephanie thinks that Bosco is crazy because he is old, an alcoholic, and suffering from cancer. Bosco says it will be like a Suicide Tour and a perfect way to go out. Jules signs on to be Bosco's writer and documentarian. Stephanie is not pleased by this turn of events but Bosco tries to convince her:

"This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?" (Chap. 7, p. 105).

On the way home, Stephanie feels renewed. She picks up Christopher from soccer. While getting undressed to take a shower with Bennie, she finds one of Kathy's gold bobby pins in his pants pocket. Stephanie leaves and goes out into the yard to lay on the grass while she tries to process the information.

Chapter 7: A to B Analysis

Bosco says that time is a goon. That is the perfect way to sum up where Stephanie and Bennie have gotten themselves in their lives. They used to be wild and free. Now the couple lives in a community they do not like just because it is prestigious and they can get away with it. All in all life seems good but it is a far cry from staying out until dawn to having barbecues with Republicans and playing tennis at a country club.

Learning about Bennie's probable affair with Kathy hits Stephanie so hard that she cannot cry. It seems the only person that can offer comfort is Noreen, the crazy lady from next door.



Chapter 8: Selling the General

Chapter 8: Selling the General Summary

Selling the General is the story of Dolly, aka La Doll, a former heavyweight PR queen that has hit the skids. Dolly was sued after a catastrophe wherein 500 guests - mostly famous people and those with some importance, were doused with hot oil during a party. Now Dolly lives in a shabby apartment with her daughter Lulu. In addition to losing everything, including the respect of her daughter, Dolly only sleeps three hours a night to make ends meet. Dolly also spent six months in jail for criminal negligence.

Just as Dolly is in deep despair, she gets a phone call from Arc, an employee of General B., a genocidal maniac in need of some good PR. Dolly is desperate and takes the job. There are several set backs in Dolly's plan and she realizes that she should have charged a lot more for her services. Dolly's best plan yet involves linking General B. to a Hollywood starlet in hopes of portraying him in a good light. Dolly makes plans and takes the starlet and Lulu to the General's compound where she gets all the necessary pictures. The starlet, Kitty, berates the General about genocide and is kidnapped but unharmed. Dolly's plan works and soon she is back on top. However, Dolly decides to move to a new town, outside New York and open a gourmet shop.

Chapter 8: Selling the General Analysis

This story shows the transitory nature of what's in and what's out in popular culture. Dolly's mistake in decorating for the party of the year costs her everything from her massive fortune to her career as well as her daughter's respect. Dolly still has what it takes to do the job, if given the chance. Once given that chance, however, Dolly realizes that Lulu and self respect are much more important than money and fame.



Chapter 9: Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!

Chapter 9: Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon! Summary

This chapter begins with a report by Jules Jones, recounting his interview with starlet Kitty Jackson.

"Movie stars always look small the first time you see them, and Kitty Jackson is no exception, exceptional though she may be in every other way" (Chap. 9, p. 133).

Jules seems to talk about himself in the article as much as Kitty, discussing how he is working hard to get her to stop being so very nice. Jules talks with his mouth full and hints that Kitty may be having an affair with Tom Cruise, her latest co-star, which she vehemently denies.

"Why do I keep mentioning—"inserting," as it may seem—myself into this story? Because I'm trying to wrest readable material from a nineteen-year-old girl who is very, very nice; I'm trying to build a story that not only unlocks the velveteen secrets of her teenager's heart, but also contains action, development, along with—God help me—some intimation of meaning. But my problem is this: Kitty's a snooze" (Chap. 9, p. 137).

The conversation goes on and Jules is bored. Finally, he suggests a walk in Central Park. After sitting in the grass for a while and talking about horses, Jules attempts to seduce Kitty. It turns into an assault and ends up with Kitty stabbing Jules in the leg and getting away. Jules is sent to jail.

Chapter 9: Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon! Analysis

The reader learns that this story is a flashback as Jules had been released from prison shortly before he moved in with Stephanie and Bennie and signed on to be Bosco's writer and documentarian. Jules is full of himself without cause and feels the need to manipulate a nice girl who is full of life and promise. The reader learns in chapter 8 that Kitty loses her innocence and becomes a more haggard - and burned - version of herself. Still, Kitty does not bear ill will against Jules.



Chapter 10: Out of Body

Chapter 10: Out of Body Summary

Chapter 10 is written in the second person point of view with the reader as Robert Freeman, Jr. a friend to Sasha and Drew. The group is smoking pot in Lizzie's apartment. Drew makes jokes about not inhaling as it may ruin his chances of becoming a senator and eventually, the President of the United States.

Rob goes out onto the terrace for fresh air. Bix tells Rob that Lizzie is upset. Rob apologizes to Lizzie for calling her mother a bigot, for his failed suicide and many other things. Rob, Sasha and Drew leave the apartment. Drew goes his separate way at Washington Square Park. Sasha tells Rob that she is in need of a fake boyfriend. Sasha's father is trying to bring her back into the fold after she took off with a drummer, dropped out of school, and toured Europe alone. Rob wonders why Sasha chooses him. Sasha says Rob does not look "druggy."

Sasha and Rob spend a lot of time together. They begin to share stories about their respective pasts. Sasha shares about being in Europe, doing drugs, and stealing. Sasha says that the girl in Naples wasn't her; the real Sasha was somewhere else. Sasha says she hasn't stolen anything in two years. Rob talks about a one time homosexual affair with a teammate named James.

Rob spends a great deal of time with Lizzie in hopes of fooling the detective that Sasha assumes is watching her. The group goes out to a club. Sasha refuses to take drugs now and Drew jokes that he missed her druggie moment. The group goes to see the Conduits, a band that is big on college campuses. Sasha predicts great things for them. Sasha is introduced to Bennie Salazar and leaves the group to go to a party.

Rob and Drew spend time talking at "the beach," a junk heap of old tires and garbage along the river bank. Drew decides to go for a swim although the water is perhaps 45 degrees. Rob follows into the freezing cold water. A current begins to carry him away. He calls for Drew's help. He sees Sasha's face as she tells him to fight.

Chapter 10: Out of Body Analysis

The use of second person in this chapter is awkward and does not fit in with the rest of the book thus far. It is not yet clear why Egan chose to go this route.

Sasha seems to be the girl everyone wants. She has a dark past, particularly during the time in Naples, and Rob seems to be the only one that really knows the truth about that time. Rob is confused about Sasha. As they spend more time together, Rob falls in love with Sasha although she is in a relationship with Drew. Rob tries to point out to Drew that he knows nothing about Sasha and so if Drew left to go to Wisconsin, he wouldn't even miss her.

Rob is very confused and seems to have a desire to end it all. Sasha made him promise not to commit suicide after his failed attempt but the reader may surmise that Rob will not survive the swim in the icy water of the river.



Chapter 11: Goodbye, My Love

Chapter 11: Goodbye, My Love Summary

Ted Hollander, Sasha's uncle, goes to Italy to find his niece. The trip is paid for by Sasha's step-father Hammer, who is married to Ted's sister, Beth. Sasha has been gone for two years and no one knows where to find the runaway.

Ted thoroughly enjoys being in Italy and immerses himself in art whenever possible, beginning with the artifacts and art in Pompeii. Ted thinks a lot about writing about art but does little about it. Ted thinks a great deal about his wife Susan while he is in Italy. When Ted calls home he talks to Susan and his sons.

Ted is walking through Naples when he sees Sasha. They recognize each other. Ted asks questions and the pair decide to meet for dinner. Sasha asks Ted why he is in Naples. Ted says he has come to write about art. The pair talks for a long time over dinner and Ted learns about Sasha's adventures since leaving home two years before. Ted does not want to leave Sasha and although Sasha insists that Ted leave, secretly she is happy he is there.

Ted thinks about his relationship with Susan, not the imaginary altered Susan but the Susan from early in the relationship.

Twenty years later, Sasha is married with two children and living in the California desert. Ted, a divorced grandfather comes to visit.

Analysis:

Chapter 11: Goodbye, My Love Analysis

The purpose of Ted's trip to Naples is to find Sasha. Ted's true purpose is to get away from the house in New York, his wife and children. Ted thinks a lot about his wife Susan but it is not the real Susan he dreams of these days. Ted wants to have experiences outside his own life. Doing so on Hammer's dime seems to be the perfect solution.

Ted admits to Sasha and himself that he has not come to Naples looking for her. Sasha balks at being saved although she is secretly miserable and lonely. Like Charlene in Safari, Sasha will eventually find her way and become a woman with an ordinary life.

Chapter 12: Great Rock and Roll Pauses

Chapter 12: Great Rock and Roll Pauses Summary

Chapter 12 is written by Alison Blake, Sasha's 12 year old daughter. The chapter is a series of PowerPoint slides, comparing Alison's life to music. The slides detail May 14th and 15th. The chapter is broken into four sections:

1. After Lincoln's Game
2. In My Room
3. One Night Later
4. In the Desert

Chapter 12: Great Rock and Roll Pauses Analysis

This chapter is an interesting segue into the life of a twelve year old girl who has grown up alongside her mother in the world of music. Alison cleverly compares daily activities and her life with great rock 'n roll music. The author fast forwards again into Sasha's life when she is married to Drew. Alison and Lincoln are Sasha and Drew children. By this time, Sasha lives in the California desert.



Chapter 13: Pure Language

Chapter 13: Pure Language Summary

Alex and Bennie meet to discuss holding a concert for Scotty Hausman. Bennie is almost 60 years old now. He is married again with a small child. Alex is also married, to Rebecca, with a small daughter named Cara-Ann. Alex is reluctant to take on the job since there are so many issues to be addressed. The main one is to find 50 people, known as parrots, to spread the word about Scotty. The parrots must seem real and not employees of Alex's, which they are.

Alex meets with Lulu, a twenty-something that works for Bennie. Lulu is filled with all the latest technology and lingo and attempts to school Alex. Like most people, the pair gets tired of talking quickly and switches to T'ing, something akin to texting with slaughtered language resembling phonetics. The messages come through on handsets that are linked to one's body.

The day of the concert arrives. Scotty is afraid to go on, saying he's too old. Bennie reminds him of the incident with the fish and another twenty years later after he had been fired from Sow's Ear Records.

The concert goes well. Afterwards, Bennie and Alex strike up a conversation about Sasha. Bennie says he fired Sasha twelve years ago and has no idea where she is now. The men stand outside Sasha's old apartment hoping to catch a glimpse of her but the apartment has been taken over by another young woman.

Chapter 13: Pure Language Analysis

Egan projects the reader even farther into the future. The story covers about 40 years from the time Bennie was in high school until he is nearly 60 years old. The author introduces many new innovations in communication and social media which relate to public relations as well as everyday use. The main item is the handset, a small device people use to communicate including expressing their desires. Even babies use handsets, creating a new demographic known as "pointers."

Bennie seems to have come full circle and is trying to make Scotty a star. Alex is working hard to please Bennie and to understand the new way things are done in the business. In the end, they move past everything to focus on a former relationship with Sasha. Even in her absence, Sasha still manages to captivate the men.



Characters

Bennie Salazar

Bennie Salazar is one of the main characters in Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad." Salazar is from Daly City, California but moves to San Francisco in his junior year of high school. He forms a band with Scotty, Alice, Rhea, and Jocelyn. It has many names but is most widely known as the Flaming Dildos. The band is desperate to get a record contract and eventually makes a valuable connection at their favorite club, the Mab.

Even early on, Bennie shows a great deal of interest in every aspect of the music business. For Bennie there is no greater joy than making music and he knows that he has the ability to play as well as promote and record. Bennie makes a valuable contact in Lou, the music producer from LA. From there, Bennie moves up in the recording industry and begins his own record label, Sow's Ear Records. Bennie's career really takes off when he promotes the Conduits, a band that goes multi-platinum.

Bennie is married at least twice throughout the book, first to Stephanie and then later in life to Lupa. He has two children, Christopher and Ava.

Bennie eventually gets fired and loses a great deal but in the end finds himself again.

Sasha Blake

Sasha Blake is one of the main characters in Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad." Sasha's story travels back and forth from the time she is 17 until she reaches middle age. Sasha ran away with a drummer from the band the Pinheads when she was 17. They went to Tokyo and then Hong Kong, where Sasha was ditched. From there, Sasha traveled throughout Asia and Europe and ended up in Naples, Italy, which is where her uncle Ted finds her two years later. Sasha eventually returns to New York.

Sasha works for Bennie Salazar for a large part of the novel. Bennie thinks that he is in love with Sasha but she gently rejects him knowing that his feelings are less about love and more about security and comfort.

Sasha eventually gets fired by Bennie because of her kleptomania. Sasha marries Drew Blake and has two children, Alison and Lincoln. The Blakes eventually move to the California desert.



Lou Kline

Lou Kline is a record producer from LA. Lou is a stereotypical sleazy music producer, sleeping with young girls, getting married multiple times, throwing parties, doing drugs, and so forth. Lou meets his demise after having two strokes.

Scotty Hausman

Scotty is a slide guitar player with Bennie's punk band from San Francisco. Scotty drops off the radar, becomes a janitor and eventually makes it big with help from Bennie.

La Doll

La Doll, aka Dolly, is the hottest publicist in New York until a horrible accident occurs at one of her parties. Dolly loses everything and goes to jail. She makes somewhat of a comeback in "Selling the General." Dolly is also Lulu's mother.

Stephanie Salazar

Stephanie Salazar is Bennie's wife and mother to Christopher. Stephanie works for La Doll, the hottest publicist in New York. Stephanie is also the PR person for Bosco from the Conduits.

Bosco

Bosco is mentioned in many stories. He is the guitarist for the Conduits, the band that made Bennie's career. Bosco eventually becomes a fat and old alcoholic with cancer who wants to die on his final tour.

Jules Jones

Jules Jones is an up and coming writer who continually does this to mess up his own life, including attacking Kitty Jackson. Jules, Stephanie's brother, eventually becomes Bosco's documentarian.

Kitty Jackson

Kitty Jackson is a young starlet that is attacked by Jules Jones during an interview. Kitty will later return to the limelight after La Doll hires her to pose with General B.

Jocelyn and Rhea

Jocelyn and Rhea are two of the members of Bennie's San Francisco band. Jocelyn is the first to meet Lou who she believes to be her boyfriend. Jocelyn and Rhea are childhood friends that are inseparable initially. At the age of 43, the girls meet up at Lou's to say their final goodbyes.



Objects/Places

Sow's Ear Records

Sow's Ear Records is the record label founded by Bennie Salazar. Bennie made a name for himself after he promoted The Conduits, with its skinny guitarist named Bosco. Bennie went on to create careers for many until the music he was producing became little more than noise with mass appeal. Sow's Ear is also the record label that ends up firing him many years later after he attempts to serve the board of directors plates of cow pies.

Sow's Ear Records is located in a green glass building on the corner of Park Avenue and Fifty-second Street. Scotty describes Bennie's office as an opulent place. Scotty immediately becomes enamored of the luxury of the office and tells himself that he wants to give up his apartment and move into Bennie's waiting room.

He says, "Bennie's office was awesome, and I don't mean that in the male teenage skateboarding sense - I mean it in the old-fashioned literal sense. The desk was a giant jet black oval with a wet-looking surface like the most expensive pianos have. It reminded me of a black ice-skating rink. Behind the desk was nothing but view—the whole city flung out in front of us the way street vendors fling out their towels packed with cheap, glittery watches and belts. That's how New York looked: like a gorgeous, easy thing to have, even for me." (Chap. 7, p. 84).

New York City

The majority of the story in "A Visit from the Goon Squad" by Jennifer Egan takes place in various parts of New York City. There are some references to specific landmarks that may be known to the reader. The author mentions some universally recognized places such as Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Fifth Avenue, Central Park, Park Avenue, Washington Square Park, the Hudson River, the East River, Greenwich Village, The New York Public Library, the Museum of Metropolitan Art, and more.

Certain characters are placed in apartments around the city, such as Scotty Hausman on the Lower East Side and Joe in Tribeca.

New York is an excellent backdrop for the story due to its artistic presence and opportunities for the characters to interact as many are loosely connected. It is also an ideal location for Sow's Ear Records as many bands and musicians are from New York.



Crandale, New York

Crandale is the home of Stephanie, Bennie, and Christopher. It is an upper-class neighborhood and one that neither Bennie nor Stephanie particularly likes but one that is desirable because they are finally able to live there.

Daly City, California

Daly City, California is the hometown to Bennie Salazar. Bennie has the desire to get out of middle class America and to make it big.

San Francisco

San Francisco is one of the first settings to be explored. It is the home to the Flaming Dildos which includes Bennie Salazar and Scotty Hausman.

The Pit

The Pit is the place at the high school where Scotty, Bennie, Alice, Rhea, and Jocelyn hand out.

Africa

Africa is the location of choice for a three-week safari for Lou, Mindy, Charlene, and Rolph. The tour travels throughout Africa and include Mombasa.

The Mab

The Mab is short for the Mabuhay Gardens, which is located on Broadway in San Francisco. It is where all the up and coming punk bands play and the favorite club of Bennie, Scotty and the others.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is the home to Lou, the music producer. It is also where Jocelyn goes after running away from home.

Naples, Italy

Naples, Italy is the city in which Sasha lives for two years after running away from home with a drummer from a band called the Pinheads.



Themes

The Music Business

The music business is one of the main themes in Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad." Bennie is the first person to show real interest in the music business. While many high school kids are in bands and are absorbed by the music scene, Bennie Salazar seems to be interested in everything from the music itself to how it is recorded, produced and promoted. This interest leads Bennie into a life long career in the music business with all of its changes, ups and downs. Bennie eventually opens his own record label, Sow's Ear Records, in New York. Bennie's first big break comes with a band he signs. The Conduits go multi-platinum and Bennie's career takes off.

Sasha also has a great love of the music business which she passes down to her daughter, Alison. Alison's PowerPoint presentation compares her life to Great Pauses in Rock 'n Roll.

Scotty is also devoted to the music business. Although Scotty chooses to drop off the radar for a long period of time, he still plays his slide guitar. Years later, after Bennie is fired from Sow's Ear, he says he will make Scotty a star. Bennie keeps his word.

Perhaps one of the most notable people in the book related to the industry is Lou, the record producer from LA. It is Lou that got Bennie started.

Connections

All of the characters in the book are connected in some way, albeit it often loosely. At times the connections might be difficult to find. The most elusive is Alex's connection to Bennie and Sasha, as well as Lulu's connection to her fiancé Joe, who is the grandson of one of the warriors on the African safari taken by Lou, Mindy, Charlie, and Rolph.

Bennie, Scotty, Jocelyn, Alice and Rhea are members of a San Francisco punk band. Jocelyn meets Lou the record producer while hitchhiking. Lou gives Bennie his start in the music industry. Years later, Bennie hires Sasha, one of the main characters in the book. Sasha had once dated Alex, who reappears in the final chapter.

Many of the connections come through Bennie: Stephanie is Bennie's wife. She is also the sister of Jules Jones, the man who had attacked Kitty Jackson. Kitty Jackson makes a second appearance after she is hired by La Doll, Stephanie's boss. La Doll's daughter is Lulu, the girl who will grow up to become Bennie's assistant before he is fired from Sow's Ear.

Sasha is connected to many people from Bennie to her future husband Drew, kids Alison and Lincoln, Rob, Ted Hollander and more. Sasha, Bennie and Stephanie are all connected to Bosco, who is the guitarist for the Conduits, Bennie's breakout band.



Redemption

Redemption is one of the main themes in the story. Each of the characters seems to go through a dark period. This is especially true of Sasha, whose entire background is revealed in various chapters. Sasha was a run away, did drugs, had many injuries and a rough life on the streets or in run down places all over the world, including Naples. Sasha's father did everything in his power to put Sasha back on the right path. It seemed to work despite Sasha's unbeatable compulsion for stealing, which is finally what leads to her being fired by Bennie.

Jocelyn may have the darkest past of all. Jocelyn fell into a bad lifestyle at a young age and spent her life from then on in and out of drug rehab and having bad experiences.

Bennie's downfall also seems to be what leads to his redemption. Bennie realizes that he can no longer work for a company that he has lost control of and serve up music that he openly compares to the cow pies he serves to his board of directors. After Bennie leaves the record label he returns to making real music and rekindles his friendship with Scotty.

Dolly also manages to redeem herself after the horrible accident and losing everything. It takes that tragedy to make Dolly realize that she has a soul and that there is more to life than money and fame.



Style

Point of View

The point of view used in "A Visit from the Goon Squad" by Jennifer Egan varies by chapter. Some of the chapters use first person; one chapter uses second person; and others use the third-person perspective. The variety in point of view is varied to give different perspectives of the characters and permits the readers to view things from different angles.

The use of first person makes the story more relatable to the reader and allows the reader more insight into the characters thoughts, opinions and emotions, which would not be available from another point of view. While the use of first person is more personal, it often takes away objectivity from the story. Egan also covers stories, characters, and their backgrounds in a third person omniscient point of view. This point of view works well in the stories as there are several components and underlying factors that would not be revealed otherwise. While the first person point of view might have been interesting when coming from the characters in their time of confusion, third person conveys the entire story and not just the subjective opinions of the characters. It also permits the reader to take part in the journey and development of each character in the story.

The use of second person is not as common in literature. It is not clear why Egan chose to use this point of view for Robert as he is related to the reader. The use of this point of view is somewhat awkward and does not easily mesh with the other chapters.

Setting

The majority of the story in "A Visit from the Goon Squad" by Jennifer Egan takes place in various parts of New York City. There are some references to specific landmarks that may be known to the reader. The author mentions some universally recognized places such as Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Fifth Avenue, Central Park, Park Avenue, Washington Square Park, the Hudson River, the East River, Greenwich Village, The New York Public Library, the Museum of Metropolitan Art, and more.

Certain characters are placed in apartments around the city, such as Scotty Hausman on the Lower East Side and Joe in Tribeca.

New York is an excellent backdrop for the story due to its artistic presence and opportunities for the characters to interact as many are loosely connected. It is also an ideal location for Sow's Ear Records as many bands and musicians are from New York.

Scotty Hausman sees New York from a different point of view than the others since he is on the poverty line unlike Bennie. Scotty talks about the view from Bennie's office on Park Avenue. As he said, "Behind the desk was nothing but view—the whole city flung



out in front of us the way street vendors fling out their towels packed with cheap, glittery watches and belts. That's how New York looked: like a gorgeous, easy thing to have, even for me" (Chap. 7, p. 84).

Language and Meaning

The story spans just over forty years, starting in the late 1970s. The language used tends to reflect the times with only minimal explanations when necessary. The early part of the book, which takes place in 1979, reflects the language and meaning used by the punk culture and high school kids in San Francisco. The language changes as the eras change. A great deal of the language refers to the music industry which is one of the main themes of the story.

The biggest change in the use of language and meaning can be seen in Chapter 13: Pure Language. The story takes place in the near future but offers up a plethora of new technology and jargon such as pointers, parrots, reach, T, etc.

In the future, people will use their handsets to communicate. The language used in this instance is much like what is used today in the form of text messages and is similar to phonetics. The older generation, including Alex, must get used to this jargon which often includes capital letters in the middle of words to denote long sounds.

Example:

"if thr r childrn, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?" (Chap. 13, p. 203) (If there are children, there must be a future, right?)

"no 1 nOs abt me. Im invysbl" (Chap. 13, p. 203). (No one knows about me. I'm invisible.)

Structure

"A Visit from the Goon Squad" by Jennifer Egan is a work of fiction. It is 269 pages in length, broken into 2 parts and 13 chapters. Part A is largely about the early years of a loosely connected group of people while Part B is about the later years, although there are exceptions, such as Sasha's history in chapter 11: Good-bye My Love.

The book is a series of loosely intertwined vignettes, except for Chapter 12, which is a PowerPoint Presentation. The timelines in the book are sometimes blurred, leaving the reader to estimate the time frame and/or sequence of events.

The shortest chapter is 7 pages in length; the longest chapter is 24 pages in length. The average number of pages per chapter is 21.

Part A



Chapter 1: Found Objects

Chapter 2: The Gold Curve

Chapter 3: Ask Me if I Care

Chapter 4: Safari

Chapter 5: You (Plural)

Chapter 6: Xs and Os

Part B

Chapter 7: A to B

Chapter 8: Selling the General

Chapter 9: Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!

Chapter 10: Out of Body

Chapter 11: Goodbye, My Love

Chapter 12: Great Rock and Roll Pauses

Chapter 13: Pure Language



Quotes

"We live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back?" (Chap. 1, p. 2).

"All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she'd been gouged" (Chap. 1, p. 17).

"The shame memories began early that day for Bennie, during the morning meeting, while he listened to one of his senior executives make a case for pulling the plug on Stop/Go, a sister band Bennie had signed to a three-record deal a couple of years back" (Chap. 2, p. 21).

"Nineteen eighty is almost here, thank God. The hippies are getting old, they blew their brains on acid and now they're begging on street corners all over San Francisco. Their hair is tangled and their bare feet are thick and gray as shoes. We're sick of them" (Chap. 3, p. 38).

"The Flaming Dildos have had a lot of names: the Crabs, the Croks, the Crimps, the Crunch, the Scrunch, the Gawks, the Gobs, the Flaming Spiders, the Black Widows. Every time Scotty and Bennie change the name, Scotty sprays black over his guitar case and Bennie's bass case, and then he makes a stencil of the new name and sprays it on. We don't know how they decide if they should keep a name, because Bennie and Scotty don't actually talk" (Chap. 3, p. 38).

"Lou puts his arm around Rolph. If he were an introspective man, he would have understood years ago that his son is the one person in the world with the power to soothe him. And that, while he expects Rolph to be like him, what he most enjoys in his son are the many ways he is different: quiet, reflective, attuned to the natural world and the pain of others" (Chap. 4, p. 55).

"It's turning out to be a bad day, a day when the sun feels like teeth" (Chap. 5, p. 75).

"I'm back at my mother's again, trying to finish my B.A. at UCLA Extension after some long, confusing detours. "Your desultory twenties," my mother calls my lost time, trying to make it sound reasonable and fun, but it started before I was twenty and lasted much longer. I'm praying it's over. Some mornings, the sun looks wrong outside my window. I sit at the kitchen table shaking salt into the hairs on my arm, and a feeling shoves up in me: It's finished. Everything went past, without me" (Chap. 5, p. 73).

"I felt no shame whatsoever in these activities, because I understood what almost no one else seemed to grasp: that there was only an infinitesimal difference, a difference so small that it barely existed except as a figment of the human imagination, between working in a tall green glass building on Park Avenue and collecting litter in a park" (Chap. 6, p. 79).

"Like all failed experiments, that one taught me something I didn't expect: one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out" (Chap. 6, p. 82).

"Movie stars always look small the first time you see them, and Kitty Jackson is no exception, exceptional though she may be in every other way" (Chap. 9, p. 133).

"Why do I keep mentioning—"inserting," as it may seem—myself into this story? Because I'm trying to wrest readable material from a nineteen-year-old girl who is very, very nice; I'm trying to build a story that not only unlocks the velveteen secrets of her teenager's heart, but also contains action, development, along with—God help me—some intimation of meaning. But my problem is this: Kitty's a snooze" (Chap. 9, p. 137).



Topics for Discussion

Examine Sasha's fascination with stealing from people. What started it? What causes Sasha to try to get help? Does it work? What types of things does Sasha steal? What does she do with the items? Is there a cure for kleptomania?

Discuss Bennie's anxiety attacks. What causes them? How can they be prevented? Do you think they are self-induced? What is the best cure for an anxiety attack?

Scotty falls off the radar and does not want anyone to know where he is after he leaves school. Discuss Scotty's purpose for dropping off the grid, his reunion with Bennie and rise to stardom.

Many of the people in the book seem to be drawn to Sasha. What is Sasha's appeal? Why do Bennie and Alex go looking for Sasha? Why is Rob so fascinated with Sasha?

Examine La Doll's rise and fall from fame as New York's top publicist.

Examine the music industry from the point of view of Bennie.

Discuss the future of social media as it is addressed in chapter 13. Do you think this chapter is realistic?