

# **Vernon God Little Study Guide**

**Vernon God Little by D.B.C. Pierre**

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# Introduction

In *Vernon God Little*, first-time author DBC Pierre dares to go where many would not. The book is an absurdly humorous look at the misadventures of a Texas teen named Vernon Little whose best friend in the world has just killed sixteen of their classmates and himself. In the wake of the tragedy, the townspeople seek both answers and vengeance; because Vernon was the killer's closest friend, he becomes the focus of their fury.

The book tackles many aspects of modern American society, including mindless consumer culture, the death penalty for minors, news reporters casting tragedy as entertainment, and average citizens who crave fame. The book is narrated by Vernon, described by Sam Sifton of the *New York Times Book Review* as "a deceptively simple boy who narrates this tale in the manner of a character created by Mark Twain and remixed by Dr. Dre." The book's unique narrative style has drawn comparisons to both J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The novel, published in the United States by Harvest Books, has proven especially successful in Great Britain, where it was first published. Some critics have suggested that its scathing negative portrayal of American society is too off-putting for readers in the United States, where it has been less successful; others have suggested that its over-the-top absurdity is a frighteningly accurate assessment of how foreigners view the United States and its citizens. In any case, *Vernon God Little* has been awarded both the 2003 Man Booker Prize and the 2003 Whitbread Award for Best First Novel, and it remains one of only a handful of high-profile literary works to tackle the subject of school shootings in America.

## Author Biography

DBC Pierre is the pseudonym for author Peter Finley, who was born in Australia in 1961. (The author has reported that the "DBC" stands for "Dirty But Clean.") Pierre grew up in Mexico City, but he spent significant time living in Texas as well. In an interview with the *Guardian* (U.K.), Pierre explains his varied upbringing:

I grew up with a real sense of cultural homelessness.... I haven't been successful in fitting in anywhere. I clearly wasn't Mexican, although I could move in that culture as easily as anywhere. I'm a British national but wasn't quite from here; and I went to school with a lot of expat Americans.... There's nothing I love more than to just be part of something, for someone to pay you a hello.

After his father died of a brain tumor when Pierre was nineteen, Pierre—as the default male head of his household—began to accrue both mounting debts and an increasingly destructive cocaine habit. He spent the following decade recovering from both, and he eventually found a job as a graphic designer. In 2000, Pierre moved to Ireland where, in an attempt to finally recover from his debts, he undertook what he calls "a big and bold stroke"—the writing of his first novel, *Vernon God Little*.

*Vernon God Little* was published by Faber and Faber in 2003 and went on to win several distinguished literary awards, including the Man Booker Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award, and the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize. The novel was also listed as a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2003. Pierre published a follow-up novel, *Ludmila's Broken English*, in 2006. In a statement posted on the British website Contemporary Writers, Pierre reveals, "I write because it is the most bright and intimate relationship I will ever have with other minds." As of 2006, Pierre lives in Ireland and continues to write fiction.



# Plot Summary

*Vernon God Little* follows an intelligent teenager, innocently accused of capital murder, on his adventures through the penal and legal system. He briefly escapes to Acapulco into the arms of a lover, who brays him. The story shows reality television invading Death Row, and Vernon gaining a last second pardon through a remarkable series of phone calls to enemies and friends.

Vernon Little's life as a normal teenager falls apart, when his best friend, Jesus Navarro, murders their classmates in the schoolyard, and Vernon is taken in for questioning. He cooperates with Deputy Vain Gurie, because he had been running an errand for a teacher, Mr. Nuckles, and is not involved in the massacre. The perception of Vernon's innocence weakens, when Doris Little's best friend, the food-obsessed Palmyra (Pam,) arrives and, against Vernon's better judgment, whisks him off to Bar-B-Chew Barn, allowing the police to claim he is a flight risk. Eulalio ("Lally") Ledesma, supposedly a CNN reporter, ingratiates himself to Mom and promises to help Vernon "shift the paradigm" of his story. Instead, Lally betrays Vernon, who is returned to jail pending a psychiatric analysis. Vernon's jailhouse dream is beautiful but unattainable Taylor Figueroa living on the beach with him in Mexico. When the court-appointed shrink, Dr. Goosens, touches him inappropriately, Vernon leaves, knowing it can wreck hopes for bail.

Vernon's bail hearing suggests a possible alibi and no grounds for holding him, so Vernon is released as Goosens' outpatient, subject to regular sessions. Vernon, however is intent on living out the movie *Against All Odds*, repelled by Lally's not only betraying him again with a video interview with Nuckles, but also by insinuating himself into Vernon's family life - including sharing Mom's bedroom. Learning a posse intends to search Keeter's field, where his rifle is hidden, Vernon races to beat them, but meets a stranger who reveals Lally is a fraud. Vernon confirms it by phoning Lally's blind, neglected mother, and plans how to get her to talk with Mom. Vernon cannot control his temper well enough to make the evidence stick, however, but Lally worries enough to bails out and moves in with Leona. To pacify Mom, Vernon lies about finding a job, but when he skips a session with Goosens and word comes that his rifle has been found, he extorts money from an old pervert by photographing him with Ella and catches a bus to San Antonio. There he phones Taylor, meets her in Houston, but their meeting ends, when Taylor turns out to be Leona's niece.

Fast talk and money get Vernon into Mexico without identification, and a truck driver, Pelayo, takes him to his dream world on the beach near Acapulco. Vernon awakens on his 16th birthday on top of the world, but plunges, when Taylor's wired \$600 does not arrive. Instead, against all odds, Taylor comes in person, takes him to a fancy hotel, and uses her wiles to get him to admit he is a murderer. Not suspecting a string of murders across Central Texas are attributed to him or Lally has recruited Taylor, but knowing from movies girls like bad boys who swear and commit crimes for them, and given just enough sex to admit anything, Vernon gives an out-of-context confession. Lally's people seize Vernon, turn him over to Federal marshals, and he lands in the Harris County



lock-up for the summer. In the fall, as Vernon's trial is televised drama, with court officials, witnesses, and Vernon being made up for the cameras. Vernon trusts the system implicitly. His lawyer exposes Goosens' criminal behavior, discrediting his testimony for the State, and Taylor and Lally are seen entrapping Vernon. Vernon's attempt to tell the whole truth fails, however, when the State produces Pelayo's affidavit, which provides no alibi, because Vernon uses an alias in Mexico. Nuckles alone can clear Vernon when he testifies, but explosively calls him a murderer. Vernon is cleared of the Central Texas rampage but convicted of the schoolyard slayings and is sent to Death Row.

Lally has expanded his multi-media empire to include the ultimate reality show - an execution lottery. An axe murderer turned popular preacher helps Vernon figure out his feelings towards Mom, advises him to watch animal and human behavior and to realize Vernon is God. Vernon struggles to do this as he survives several votes, but eventually his turn comes. He thinks about what presents he can give the various people in his life. He makes kind phone calls to people calculated able to pull together an operation that destroys Lally and proves Vernon's innocence. A pardon comes seconds before the deadly chemicals are to flow into his arm. The den also yields up Jesus' suicide note, condemning Goosens and Nuckles to prison for pedophilia. Vernon and Ella prepare for a vacation in Mexico, Mom's fridge finally arrives, and everything in Martirio returns to normal.



# Act 1, Chapter 1

## Act 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Vernon Little finds normal times are gone as he sits in his underwear and Nikes in the sheriff's office on a hot Friday morning. Deputy Vaine Gurie returns his clothes and leads him to an interrogation room, where a picture of his friend, Jesus, hangs. Mom will not fetch Vernon, being too busy pumping the town for sympathy and furious he is cooperating in the inquiry. Vaine informs him he is an accessory to murder, no witnesses have come forward, the two forces underlying the world are cause and effect, and the two categories of people are citizens and liars. Liars are psychopaths who paint gray areas and in here, there is no gray - just facts and lies.

This settled, Vaine asks where Vernon is Tuesday morning at 10:15 AM, but Eileena interrupts, saying Mrs. Little is on the phone. Mom planted a psychological knife in Vernon's back at birth, and turns it with every noise she makes. She will ask, "Are you all right?" and inquire about his bowels. Vernon wishes her to be less pathetic. Mom is baking joy cakes for the Lechugas, so Pam must pick him up. Vernon reminds himself beneath his grief glows serenity and, from the movies, knows truth always wins in the end.

Back in the interrogation room, Proclaiming that at the time of the murders he is running an errand for Mr. Nuckles, Vernon wishes he were Jean-Claude Van Damme rather than a puppy dog featured wimp. He denies being on drugs and possessing a firearm. Sheriff Porkorney takes over the interview, warning Vernon folks are troubled, and looking doubtful Vernon had not known Jesus was planning murder. Vernon declares he is not gay like his childhood friend, but fails Porkorney's test to prove he likes girls; Vernon has had but one, unappetizing, chance to explore girls, but wishes he could explore Taylor Figueroa. The officers leave Vernon alone, believing he can smell lumber being cut for a cross.

## Act 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces the major characters and hints at the plot. Vernon's gay childhood friend, Jesus, has committed murder, and Vernon is being looked at as an accomplice. Vernon's worldview is formed by a combination of his mother's feeling herself a victim of life, her turning a psychological knife in his back, and the message of the mass media that everything turns out right in the end. Jesus' name evokes images of crucifixion in a teen, who will be seen to have had a religious upbringing but no personal faith. Vernon has powerful observational ability, expressed with youthful profanity and bravado.





# Act 1, Chapter 2

## Act 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Palmyra (Pam), Mom's best friend, arrives and, against Vernon's better judgment, whisks him off to Bar-B-Chew Barn. Sitting in Pam's chicken smelling, fire ant-infested Mercury, Vernon wishing he could catch a bus out of the "tight-assed" town marked by pumpjacks, jackrabbits, and Guries. Pam sings along to "Galveston" as they drive by the school, where girls and mothers weep amidst flower offerings and tiny crosses. Vernon recalls Jesus' picture taken at the crime scene, so different from how he remembers him and isolated from the other corpses. To him, Jesus is not six-fingered or dead in girls' underwear, but speeding on his bike. Jesus has always been clumsy but not angry, self-doubting, secretive, and weird as of late. He needed a better role model than the father who lets him use his rifle or the "powder-puff" Nuckles, who only makes him worse by recommending a shrink. Jesus ceases to be an innocent hell-raiser, when his "alternative lifestyle" takes over, and classmates brand him a "wetback judge-packer" As they ride to school that fateful morning, Jesus recalls Manual Cunt (Emmanuel Kant) asking if a trapped kitten is already dead, if no one knows it exists. It chills Vernon's soul to recall Jesus then asking if things happen, as one knows they will, if one tells no one.

## Act 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 paints a picture of Vernon's hometown and his troubled boyhood friend, Jesus, who talks philosophy en route to school on the fateful morning. Even Jesus is put off by Vernon's anal complex, which is interwoven with homophobia throughout the novel. Vernon proclaims the first of the "learnings" about life that regularly come to him. Ethnic Mexicans ("Meksins") are the targets of at least passive discrimination by Martirio's Anglo population.



# Act 1, Chapter 3

## Act 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Vernon spots Vaine too late to escape. Mom scurries out in "Spooked Deer mode," dripping the "cutesy-shucksy" attitude Vernon loathes. Vernon does not want Vaine to come in for refreshments, for fear she will check his bedroom and find amputee sex pictures, Mom's polluted lingerie catalog, and a Nikes box holding Taylor Figueroa's two joints and two hits of LSD. Vaine doubts a single gunman or the innocent absconding, but Pam takes the blame for taking Vernon to eat. Vaine is ready to take Vernon back to town, when Fate intervenes. Mom's three overweight so-called friends arrive, including Leona Dunt, Georgette ("George") Porkorney, and mopey Betty Pritchard. A crumpled stranger steps forward, claiming to be a CNN reporter, Eulalio Ledesma, and interviews Vaine on-camera about how the community is coping, and the open-and shut case. She balks, when Ledesma pulls Vernon into the frame and other reporters close in, refusing to have words put in her mouth. The sheriff orders her elsewhere and, after documenting her retreat, Ledesma winks at Vernon, saying, "You owe me a story." Vernon realizes Fate gives a person exactly long enough to complete one plan before presenting the next.

## Act 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 introduces the trio of circle of overweight women who form Mom's circle and the supposed reporter, Ledesma, who will take over all their lives. The trio of sex, drugs, and Taylor will become a major plot element late in the novel.



# Act 1, Chapter 4

## Act 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Vernon is slow responding to Mom's calling. Brad Pritchard is watching television with a finger up his anus, Pam is beached on the sofa eating candy bars, and the others are in the kitchen, Leona bragging, George blowing smoke, and all discussing dieting - primarily Vaine's. Mom brags about ordering a pre-owned side-by-side fridge and sends Vernon out to offer Ledesma a Coke. Vernon finds him sleeping naked in his red van. Claiming the motels are full, Ledesma pulls on his overalls, and gathers some tiny vials before accepting the offer of hospitality. His fatherly solicitude about Vernon's predicament makes the teen uncomfortable. Vernon knows from watching *Court TV* he cannot quiver enough to clear his name by telling his story. Ledesma explains paradigm shifts to Vernon and says the jails are full of people who fail to manage their positions. Facts and witnesses matter nothing.

Reaching the kitchen door, the smiling visitor asks to be called Lally and shares bottles of "Siberian Ginseng Compound" with the ladies. George tries to distract Mom from offering Lally the guestroom by talking about how all the boys Vernon's age have summer jobs, and haircuts. Claiming he has a job for Vernon to do, he frees him to return to his room, but Vernon really wants to run away. With Jesus dead and unable to explain the situation, and Vernon needing to protect Mom and the family honor, he cannot tell the truth. He hears the ladies talking about Vaine needing to increase her conviction rate or be demoted, and bringing in dogs from Smith County to hunt for drugs. Mom wishes they would bring dogs here to clear Vernon, who slips the evidence into his pocket as Kurt barks outside.

## Act 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 begins fleshing out Lally, the slick erstwhile CNN reporter in whom Mom is showing interest. Both Littles' being taken in and betrayed has begun. Lally's bottles of ginseng, which Vernon says look "like piss" and the side-by-side fridge will both play into the final act. Vernon's dependence on the movies and television for a worldview is growing clear.



# Act 1, Chapter 5

## Act 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Ostracized by allegations he molests schoolgirls, Mr. Deutschman must get haircuts at the meatworks' barbershop, where Mom takes Vernon on Saturday. Outside, the marching band practices as the grownups discuss the SWAT team coming in to search for drugs and weapons, and Vernon worries about the dope cannot ditch with the press roaming around. When the barber spots Vaine, Vernon races into the fields and learning comes to him. Knife-turners like Mom form a spider like web to catch their children on every word and wear them down.

Vernon meets Lally, who says the cops have been to his house and offers him a ride home. Lally offers to prepare and broadcast his story, but without Nuckles to clear him, Vernon cannot risk telling the family's secrets. When Lally again offers him ginseng, Vernon realizes its color and odor will mask the acid pearls, but reaching for a bottle, Vernon drops the joints. Lally offers to take care of them. Vernon races into his room, drops the LSD in the ginseng, hides it in the Nike box, and strolls nonchalantly onto the porch, thinking Lally is okay. Vaine takes Vernon into custody, because they have found his fingerprints. As he sits quietly in a Smith Country Sheriff's truck, Brad comes over to goad him. Mom runs out proclaiming even murderers are loved by their families. Lally offers again to tape Vernon's story before rushing to comfort Mom. As the truck drives away, Vernon yells to Lally, "Tell 'em the fucken truth."

Jail is sour as Vernon waits for a televised proclamation of his innocence. The disgusting Barry E. Gurie, a "Detention Executive," makes his rounds, teasing Vaine about her diet, and Vernon about masturbating. Vernon decides he must get out of town, maybe out of Texas, until the truth is told. He thinks about the Mexican beach house in *Against All Odds*, where, vindicated, he can take care of Mom, buying her the things Mrs. Lechuga has. The pessimist in Vernon objects, and wants to get a bomb and take Taylor away, instead. They are not close in school, but once they almost make out, when he finds her wasted in a Buick outside a party to which he is not invited. Vernon picks up the drugs that fall out of her clothes as he helps her out of her panties, but rather than taking advantage of her, he fetches her friend to mind her. In jail, Vernon curses the missed opportunity and masturbates, dreaming of Taylor in Mexico and a prisoner snorts with laughter.

## Act 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 lays out in Vernon's jailhouse dream about Taylor in Mexico the scenario that nearly plays out in reality. Were he to carry out the movie scenario precisely, he would not be captured, but he is taken in by treacherous Taylor as fully as he is soon to be by Lally, whom he believes to be his liberation.



# Act 1, Chapter 6

## Act 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Vernon figures he is doomed, being represented by the slimy, fat, court-appointed attorney from God-knows-where who talks so fast Vernon calls "Ricochet Abdini." Funerals and Vernon's age mean no media are present. However, Vaine watches, as Vernon is led in to a courtroom that smells like his first-grade classroom to make defendants regress and fall in line. Mom cannot make it, so Vernon is spared the psycho-knife. The stenographer and guard stare daggers at Vernon, who contemplates bail jumping and a run to the border. Judge Helen E. Gurie takes the bench and pounces on Vaine for seeking an indictment on fingerprints alone. Vaine claims that new information that came to their attention last night is also insufficient. That is, unless they have slipped into a parallel universe and left the judge behind, and she is ready to release Vernon, who is filled with hope, excitement, fear, and a plan to withdraw Nana's \$52 and hop a Greyhound bus. However, prompted by the stenographer, they adjourn until 2 PM, to await a report.

Mom asks delicately about Vernon's living conditions, when they talk by phone during the break. Vernon finds it pathetic she cannot just ask, "Have you been taken up the ass yet by some lifer?" He hangs up as the news comes on and Lally announces the arrest of a new player, a seemingly normal, awkward teen. After a montage of grizzly crime scenes, Vernon's grinning school picture appears. Mom's friends comment, and then Lally pans Vernon's bedroom before focusing on the lingerie catalog and Silas Benn's sex pictures on the computer, which prove Vernon's confused sexuality. Mom proclaims she had not idea, agrees she too is a victim of this tragedy, and repeats the line about murderers' families always loving them. Vernon curses the "powerdime shift," as Barry leads him back to court, where the computer and boxload of other evidence await. Fortunately, the Nike box is missing. When Vernon suggests calling his witnesses and teacher can clear everything up, the judge asks if they have been checked. The last student has died and Nuckles has not mentioned Vernon's whereabouts; his doctors claim he cannot talk until March, but he did mention another firearm. Abdini moves for bail, which Vaine counters by the history of absconding. After hearing Vernon's family situation debated, Judge Gurie remands him in custody pending a psychiatric report, and Vernon returns to his cell.

Fate attaches tunes to major events in one's life and tonight Muzak plays in the cells. Vernon imagines the TV-movie of his life. It's about a crusty, mixed-up kid hopping a bus for Mexico, who meets an uncrusty blond cowgirl wearing bikinis beneath her Levi's. In reality, Jesus' leaden soul haunts Vernon until Wednesday, when the shrink can see him. Vernon practices making faces, because TV teaches one must state explicitly, "I'm devastated," to be released. Barry taunts him before taking him to the phone to face the "skidmark" of Mom's whimpering voice. She advises he not look impassive in court, and he admonishes her not to talk to Lally any more. When the fridge arrives, she has to go, but not before reminding Vernon to say nothing about daddy's gun he has stashed away

from home. Jesus must have mentioned it to Nuckles to warn him off, but Jesus is dead and Nuckles insane. The wrong fingerprints are on it.

## **Act 1, Chapter 6 Analysis**

Chapter 6 brings to a close the first act, "Shit happened." The judge, yet another Gurie, is scrupulous about Vernon's rights as a minor, but Lally's treachery dooms him to a summer in jail. Muzak and movies form his thoughts, and Jesus haunts him. Mom's puzzling concern about Vernon cooperating with the investigation is clarified a bit. She worries about her husband's gun, which Vernon has hidden. The teacher probably knows about it, perhaps its location, and it bears "wrong" fingerprints. The meaning will come out only at the end of the novel.



# Act 2, Chapter 7

## Act 2, Chapter 7 Summary

Vernon goes to Dr. Goosens wondering how to act and prepared to mess his pants if that looks like a good idea. The office is way out of town, smells clinical, and features a receptionist who gives Vernon the shivers. Over the intercom, Goosens admonishes her for not checking her email - he is ready for the next patient. The round, soft, smug, sympathetic doctor waves Vernon to an armchair, reviews his file, and asks why he is here. Vernon talks uncomfortably about his friendship with Jesus and people twisting facts to fit his guilt. Goosens recommends he speak candidly and in good faith about his feelings. Vernon feels "wrecked dead away" and like a "skate-goat" (scapegoat,) because Jesus is not alive to blame. Vernon squirms talking about his "familial network," which lacks male influences. Vernon struggles not to panic, describing how, comes back from his errand, he needs to take an "unpredictable" bowel movement outside school. Goosens informs Vernon a fresh stool situated away from the scene of the crime will clear him; it can be accurately date. Goosens passes over the bowel condition to discuss girls. Vernon says he likes Taylor and has "kind of" had physical contact with her. He most remembers her smell. Vernon denies ever being attracted to man or boy. Goosens starts a tape of Gustav Holst's martial *The Planets*, Mars, and has Vernon undress and lie on a bed, on his stomach, legs spread. As he probes, Goosens asks if this makes Vernon think of Taylor, or something else. Violent cussing forms in Vernon's throat, but he suppresses it, because he wants bail. Van Damme and James Bond would not take this. When Goosens takes up steel tongs, Vernon flees, ignoring the doctor's warning that he is jeopardizing his bail application.

In the jail van, Vernon struggles to forget Goosen's "ass-banditry" and not worry about his report. Watching the littered landscape pass, he thinks of Mexico and hears the guards talk about Vaine going over the sheriff's head to petition for a SWAT team. Vernon senses a lesson. The dumber one is the more likely he is to be in charge, and only the dumb are safe. Waiting in his cell for his next court date, Vernon feels Fate has slowed time down. Mom calls to say Lally is shooting another report, which makes Vernon think recognizing Fate's tricks only makes them worse. The day of Vernon's court appearance is too hot for dogs, cats, and rats. The courtroom reeks of sweat. Pam comes in lieu of Mom. Vernon feels sad for the devastated kin of the fallen who stare at him. Perky Mr. Gregson, representing the State, vigorously opposes bail. Holding Goosen's file, Judge Gurie demands to know why. He is a flight risk. Gregson objects to the judge doing the defense's job, when Abdini is slow bringing up Vernon's bowel syndrome. Gregson surprises the judge with the transcript of a video statement from Nuckles, just in from a CNN reporter. After examining the transcript, the judge declares it is clear no one has read Goosen's report and there is no hard evidence of a second weapon; therefore, she releases Vernon to Goosen's care as an outpatient. Quietly, she suggests the defense expand on the "bowel thing." Vernon walks free into the sun, wondering how his turds can help and worrying about the fingerprints on the hidden gun. He is looking to be in Mexico by daybreak.



People coldly ignore Vernon as he heads to Pam's Mercury and Abdini speaks contentedly to reporters. Vernon has a lesson in court. Everybody acts as if they are in a TV trailer. He pictures himself on television of the Mercury lunging through the crowds. Pam inquires about jail meals, as they head to the Barn drive-thru and then to Beulah Dr. with its knot of reporters and sightseers taking pictures of the Lechugas' teddy farm. Mom is still waiting for her fridge delivery. Vernon pushes past reporters and enters the familiar house, quiet except the television. Down the hall, he hears Mom and Lally.

## Act 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

Act 2, "How I spent my summer vacation," begins with Vernon's psychiatric hearing, which ends, surprisingly, in his release to his psychiatrist's care. Judge Gurie is the only competent figure in the courtroom and irregularly suggests the key to Vernon's defense. Vernon's vision of living out *Against All Odds* is certain to be acted out, now that he is free, but Lally, having betrayed him yet again with the video interview introduced as evidence, appears to have grown into a discomfoting factor in his family life of sharing his mother's bedroom.





## Act 2, Chapter 8

### Act 2, Chapter 8 Summary

The ladies arrive before Vernon can recover from the shock. Mom emerges in a flimsy pink robe and alien scent, and gives him an uncomfortable hug. Betty observes a fridge is being delivered to Lechugas and Leona rattles off three brags. Lally emerges in a blue robe and new Timberlands. No one questions their relationship, wiping the situation over with "cream-pie lies." The ladies insist someone tell the deliverymen they have the wrong address. Vernon, whom Lally is ignoring, recalls a horse that used to do math on stage; the trick, of course, is it can sense the audience's tension, and when they relax at the correct number, it stops tapping its hoof. Lally senses the kitchen's tension and announces he has cancelled Mom's order and suggests driving to San Antonio. As Vernon heads for his room, Lally deflects him to the living room to "share some thoughts." Vernon resents Lally's claim to have stepped in to pick up the pieces and see his mother through the ordeal. Lally orders Vernon not to cuss at him as he asks about talk of a second firearm. Threatening to call Goosens, Lally says it is not too late to shift the paradigm and make the story die. He has been commissioned to produce a series, which might be spun off into web events. The ladies drift over like farts to watch mindless 12-year-old Ricky on *America's Youngest Millionaires*. Vernon pulls away from Lally's grasp and goes to his room, thinking of Mexico. He grabs the CD player, disks that Vaine has not taken and some clothes, shoves them into his Nike backpack, and tosses it out the window. Beyond his neighborhood, Vernon's stealth turns to a casual lope, as he heads for Mexico.

In town, crowds gather outside the Seldome Motel, so Vernon skirts the area, thinking about Taylor, the 29 words they have exchanged, and the odds of her running off with a 15-year-old slimeball. In Willard Down's used-car lot, Vernon spots Lally's red van. He also sees Pizza Hut opposite his bank, and Vaine inside, breaking her diet. Vernon feels sorry for her furtive panic eating. Blocked from the ATM machine, Vernon heads to the Greyhound yard. The next bus to San Antonio leaves in 20 minutes. Hoping to meet a cowgirl on board, Vernon tries to blend in with the Mexicans and daydreams of Taylor's panties hanging on a palm tree. An old man drops a newspaper with Vernon's picture and a headline "Guilty?" It's fate, again. At the ticket window, the clerk greets Pam, who insists Vernon go with her to the Barn. The man with the newspaper nudges a companion and points at Vernon, who feels Martirio tighten around his throat.

### Act 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 establishes the fact that Lally and Mom are having sex and everyone engages in "cream-pie lies" about the situation, which becomes a stock phrase for the rest of the novel. Lally still has big plans for Vernon's life, but Vernon's sights are on Mexico, and Taylor, if possible. Amazingly, Vernon can still feel compassion for his nemesis Vaine.



## Act 2, Chapter 9

### Act 2, Chapter 9 Summary

The sheriff assures reporters dogs can find firearms and fingerprints will close the case. Mom switches off the TV as Pastor Gibbons arrives to offer Vernon a job. Lally is sporting a fancy suit. After one long night at home, topped off by Kurt's setting off the barking circuit, Vernon wants to die or go back to jail. He is also bothered by Mom playing Honey Bear, as she never did with his father. He had done everything he could for her, but it was never enough. Fat Gibbons comes in spouting piety and wolfs down a fresh-baked joy cake. Lally promises Vernon will give 150% today at the fair, where the New Life Center hopes to earn \$10,000 for a new media center. The Tragedy Committee has worked miracles bringing good out of devastation, and word is the networks will put them on today through Lally's help. Lally plays Pa on *Little House on the Prairie* to Gibbons' Fr. Mulcahy on *M\*A\*S\*H*. The pastor drives in silence, except to comment on tacky T-shirt stands the pass and Emile Lozano hailing him as Vermin Little. The radio says the Barn has gotten behind getting a SWAT team and hunting for a second gun.

The New Life Center is their old church, where Vernon had gone to Sunday school. Today it is a carnival market. After helping to unload the car and set up a cake stand, Vernon is ordered to don a choir gown to man it. Plans of disappearing vanish; after Pam finds him at the bus station, the cops will be watching for him. He will have to find a blind, deaf driver to take him to Surinam. Customers avoid the joy cakes, or Vernon, on this hot day. He is revolted by Mom's bubbly Burt Bacharach disk playing somewhere and her new wardrobe and wanton, flowing hair, when she wanders by. Lally comments on the gown. Mom wishes Vernon would get a job and be happy for her new love, but Vernon resents what Lally has done to him. She tells him she is investing in Lally's new undertaking, which guarantees a 90% return. She sashays off with a kiss, leaving Vernon's soul dragging in the dust.

Vernon's heart stops, when he sees beautiful, shapely Mrs. Figueroa, and knows he must ask her for Taylor's address. She disappears, however, as he overhears talk of getting up a posse to search at Keeter's place. Vernon must get there first, but he is surrounded until 2 PM, when the prize drawing draws everyone into the big tent. Vernon hears Mom win a refrigerator donated by the Lechugas while he negotiates with a passing ten-year-old to watch the stand for one hour for \$30. Knowing he will not return, Vernon accepts. He will wipe the gun clean, withdraw his money, and get out of town. They synchronize their watches; Vernon ditches his robe, sees Mom weeping, and races home for his bike. A stranger hails him, asking about the Lally's red van and calls him "the guy from Nacogdoches." He pulls out a card reading "Eulalio Lesesma Gutierrez / President & Service Technician-in-Chief, Care Media Nagodoches." The bastard owes him money. Vernon rides to Keeters's exalting in what he now has on Lally and feels Jesus with him. Vernon reaches smelly, honest, humorous Crockett



Park. Empty land stretches beyond towards Balcones Escarpment and the "Welcome to Martirio" sign at Johnson Rd.

Knowing the kid will start making trouble after an hour, Vernon stops at a public phone to call CMN. A very old lady answers and says she has only \$7.3 to her name and needs groceries. Claiming to be Bradley Pritchard, Vernon learns that she is Lally's mother, blind for 30 years. The finance company has taken everything including his van, and the Wylers are suing over their video camera. Wondering what a blind woman will do with it, he gives her his home number, saying that is where her son is staying, and rides off, knowing he has changed Fate.

Ketter owns miles of empty land and *Keeter's Spares & Repairs*, now in ruins. There, Martirio boys first taste guns, girls, and beer. An old mineshaft they call the den is fitted with a padlocked tin door. There, Vernon had his bowel movement on the tragic day and hides the rifle. Vernon startles slack-jawed, slow-talking Tyrie Lasseen, who recommends he ride around the property to get to San Marcos Rd., because this is now a restricted area. Vernon follows a wide arc out of Lasseen's sight and approaches the den from the back. Hearing voices, Vernon hides in a nest of abandoned toilet bowls. The posse is setting up a picnic, complete with band. Vernon spins when he hears, "Bernie?" A former classmate, Ella Bouchard, shuffles closer and flashes her stained panties at him. He looks, automatically, while begging to be alone. His name is not Bernie. Ella declares her love and vanishes. Lasseen warns men away from the mineshaft, which is a good thing. However, a boy, named Todd, needs to pee but will not use the bushes. Someone suggests the toilets. Ella intervenes, warning of snakes. Vernon stands up, trying to look casual, but Todd yells, "It's the psycho!" Todd's mother, a coordinator for the posse event, asks Vernon's team color and name so she can verify it with Vaine, and Vernon again uses Brad's name, only to see him step forward and remark it is "nouvelle" for a convict to search for own his gun. Vernon escapes, racing to the ATM machine, where he finds Nana's balance is \$2.41.

## Act 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

In Chapter 9, the action leaps forward on several related fronts. Mexico appears blocked to Vernon, but he knows he must escape Martirio. Hearing a posse intends to search the area where his rifle and feces are hidden, Vernon must beat it there. However, he is interrupted by a fateful meeting with a stranger, who reveals that Lally is a fraud, cleverly turning CNM into CNN. Vernon uses this ammunition to out him to Mom, who is rapped up in and transfigured by this love affair. Vernon's use of Brad's name as an alias blows up in his face, and Nana's bank account is empty, most likely preventing him from getting out of town. Ella, for whom Vernon clearly does not care, will become a key figure in the escape that is not yet hopeless.



# Act 2, Chapter 10

## Act 2, Chapter 10 Summary

While Vernon is collecting things to pawn, Mom invites Lally's creditor to wait while he finishes in the bathroom. Vernon insists Mom listen in as Lally answers the door and slips the man \$50, but is outraged to learn it comes from a raid on Nana's lawn-mowing fund/Vernon's college fund; Mom will pay it back as soon as her loan is approved. Mom recalls an elderly lady from Lally's office has phoned and will call again. Lally changes the subject, explaining his new nickname of Mom. *Vanessa Le Bourget* works better than Doris Little, when CNN hires her. Leona's boasting has no effect on Vanessa. The pastor enters as Vernon baits Lally about Nacogdoches, thanking them for donating the fine fridge to the media center, and Lally demands why Vernon abandoned his post. George notes Vernon's aggression, like that other boy (Jesus,) after Vernon smacks him in the head. At the end of his rope, Vernon produces Lally's business card and recounts his conversation with Lally's unfortunate mother. The ladies perk up. Lally turns white as Vernon guarantees she will call here. Lally scoffs at a highly paid reporter moonlighting as a repairman, and Mom backs him up. To end the debate, Lally declares it his duty to call the police and get Vernon help.

All jump as the phone rings, and Vernon wins the scuffle for the receiver. It is only Renye at CNN, New York. All hear Lally repeat back details of his series deal. He gloats afterwards and insists this proves Vernon needs professional help, setting off another clash- and the phone rings again. Lally wins the receiver fight and pretends it is a wrong number, but Vernon hits the speaker button and they hear Mrs. Ledesma wailing she has no groceries. Switching off the speaker, Lally states his network has instructions to continue his charities while he is away. He hangs up, but it rings again, and Lally yanks the cord from the wall. He piously explains his charities to the "Sunshine Souls," which accounts for why he is sometimes short of cash. The pastor blesses him, Vernon declares it bullshit, and Lally laments now his whereabouts are known, he must move on. Vernon's grudge has ruined everything and it will only get worse, when the sheriff hears about this. Leona offers to take Lally in. She has an unlisted number and call screening. As Mom struggles to salvage the situation, Lally produces Vernon's joints, with which he cannot be associated. Leona turns over the Eldorado to George and rides with Lally. Betty offers her spare room, but the hook-up is made. Mom smells their sex and melts. Vernon runs after them, demanding they study the card. He feels worse about breaking his mom's heart than about his classmates' deaths. As the drapes close next door, Vernon solves one mystery, in that Nancie Lechuga's "hotline" is what gathers the ladies at strategic times.

## Act 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

In Chapter 10, the action is non-stop and staccato. Lally has taken Mom in completely and given her not only a new name but the assurance to stand up to Leona's boasting.



They have donated the Lechugas' old fridge, won at the church fair, when Nancie robbed Mom of her novel-long dream. Vernon cannot control his temper well enough to make his considerable evidence on slick Lally stick, but it worries Lally enough that he bails out. Mom's so-called friends show their true colors by offering to take Lally in. Until he is the cause of his Mom's broken heart, Lally has looked down on her, but his hatred for Lally aside, Vernon has glimpsed a different person within her and grieves.



# Act 2, Chapter 11

## Act 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Sunday night on the porch, Vernon tries to conjure up Mexico while Mom prays aloud for a side-by-side fridge and Lally back. Kurt barks, setting off the barking circuit, which is fed by the passage of the Bar-B-Chew Barn hayride. When Vernon jokes to break the tension, Mom cusses him as the cause of her misery. Her old, repugnant look is back. She recalls her Papa always predicting she will amount to nothing, just be ornery and ungainly, nothing like sparkling, fresh Betty, who is only later broken down by her own father. Vernon must realize all humans are subject to cause-and-effect, and even Leona is sweet before her first husband turns gay. The only time Mom proves Papa wrong is when star linebacker, Den Gurie, asks her to the prom. However, he then abandons her on the road near a hog farm. Vernon rages at the Guries and their town, and pictures Jesus, crucifying himself before anyone else can do it. Vernon knows the anger brewing inside exceeds the town's anger and cuts like a knife. Mom brings him back by squeezing his hand. Vernon is all she has. Remembering his daddy's proud face, when he learns his baby is a boy, Mom smiles a brief, genuine smile and sighs, as the sound of her favorite old song reaches them from the hayride. It's Christopher Cross's "Sailing." This fate tune breaks Vernon's heart.

Mom says George can decoy the sheriff until tomorrow, but the drugs create a new problem. Vernon insists he is innocent, but she gives the kind of hooshy laugh that is the "powerdime" of the day, translating as, "Yeah, right." Figuring Mom's closet is full of such lingerie, Vernon ducks the catalog charge to concentrate on the drugs, which everyone is into, but which are not his. Mom asks if Jesus put him up to the catalog, and demands he show respect for a flamboyant people by calling them *Mexicans* rather than "Meskins." Vernon announces he needs a walk in the park, but is amazed, when Mom objects and lays into him about getting a job and contributing a little, like the thousands of kids in town, who do not spend the night in the park. Once again at the end of his rope, Vernon builds himself a cross, claiming Mr. Lasseen is giving him a job, maybe starting tomorrow. Mom twists the psycho-knife, she used to know Hildegard Lasseen. What about Dr. Goosens? Vernon can pay lodging, now that he is grown up. When will the money start? Vernon fakes answers to every question, but she might give Hildegard a call.

Complaining the Littles are not answering their phone, Pam arrives with sacks of Barn provisions. She suggests calling Lally to tell him Mom has herpes. As Pam ripples with laughter, Mom struggles to keep her misery and declares it is important for her to hurt sometimes. Pam offers to push her down the stairs. Vaine, Pam reports, has made a pig of herself at the hayride and Barry is out celebrating the posse's finding a gun yesterday at Keeter's.



## Act 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 shows Mom in emotional crisis, and Vernon empathizing. Her musings produce details on how she and her friends have come to be as they are. Vernon, who has still not given up on his Mexican dream, is driven to create a lie about having a job and then pushed to act by word from Pam his rifle has been found. Talk of Jesus Navarro again raises the image of Jesus Christ crucified, and Vernon also applies the cross image to himself.





# Act 2, Chapter 12

## Act 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Mom sets out before dawn for Nana's, not wanting to be seen on foot. Vernon promises to go to therapy, while planning to be seen at Keeter's, so Mom will believe he is working there. He plants to pawn his party music, which boosts the spirits only to dash them, and the heavy metal, which leads to suicide. He needs some Eminem, but angry poetry is not sold in Martirio. Here, *gangsta* means Bonnie & Clyde. He ends up keeping just his Country albums, which understand one's troubles. Vernon drops by Silas Benn's place to sell a list of Internet addresses, which will let Sie download hard-core pictures without help from students. This will save him a truckload of beer. Sie pays Vernon a six-pack of Coors, which by 7:30, he is drinking at Keeter's, while trying to figure out how to get cash, pick up Taylor, and reach Mexico. Instead, his mind works out a lie-world about his imaginary job. Vernon is in the Pathology Zone. Fate makes it harder for him to admit his slime is so thick it is not worth coming clean, which seems unfair. Vernon knows his credible lie has handed everyone the last nail for his cross.

Skipping Goosens', Vernon lights a joint and sees Ella. Like every boy in town, he has known her since age eight. None are in love with her, because "her equipment ain't arrived" and likely never will. Skinny, freckled, and wild haired, Ella lives with her hillbilly folks and, like them, cause and effect, stares and repeats everything eight times. Ella has set back many a boy's sexual development while curing their horniness, cussing, spitting, and farting with them. She will certainly greet aliens, when they land. When Vernon insists his name is not Bernie, but offers no more, Ella threatens to ask Tyrie who is smoking weed and drinking beer on his property. Sensing a tantrum building in her, Vernon claims he is John and insists on being left alone to chill and think. Ella puts steps into a TV-movie that Vernon finds as realistic as a Japanese person barn-dancing. As Ella threatens to scream rape, Vernon learns a lesson: Mom is right, when she says to beware the Human Condition. They strike a deal. Ella may share nine sips of beer and then leave, but Vernon softens as he gets loaded, and realizes she just wants attention. Ella asks if Vernon is a "pillow biter," because the other boys all want to fool around. Danny Naylor for one, and old Mr. Deutschman for another; he will even pay for it.

At day's end, Vernon avoids the main roads heading home, knowing after ditching therapy he must leave town. Mom is safe at Nana's. He will call her, come clean, and flee. In the house, however, Vernon hears Mom bawling. Taking Vernon's hands, she says they must pull together, because they found nine guns Saturday, her investment with Lally is a fake, and the power is being shutting off tomorrow. Can Vernon get a \$59 advance? She has told the deputies who serve the notice he is at Dr. Goosens, and they plan to verify it. Next morning, the two-week anniversary of That Day, the power company calls, and Mom promises them Vernon's advance by evening. Vernon contemplates Ella's claim Deutschman will pay for sex. Mom decides to call Tyrie, but cannot find the number, and gives up looking, when television news reports a tragedy in





California that eclipses events in Texas, and Lally appears, talking about his new venture to spread the gospel of human triumph over adversity from Martirio to the world. Lally says he is not capitalizing on devastation, but helping others avoid learning hard lessons on their own. There are perpetrators to be brought to justice, which is the purview of his new partner, Deputy Vaine Gurie. Mom whimpers. Bar-B-Chew Barn is their corporate backer. When Leona appears on screen, Mom forbids Vernon to let Those Girls in, if they show up. She is out.

Vernon examines Dad's old marketing videos and learns one must wrap the right kind of words around anything to make it succeed. Like the loveable pimps on TV movies, Vernon intends to offer a service he has only to position and package correctly. The Girls let themselves in and sweep past Vernon like TV-movie guys barging into a chairman's office. Leona announces to Mom she has gotten her own show, which will start once Vaine raises capital. Barry's taking charge of the SWAT team devastates George. Lally says they must move fast to keep the infrastructure from moving to California. As Mom bustles about, preparing to go out with The Girls, George comes clean. They are coming for Vernon; Goosens has turned him in. Mom argues Vernon has a job now; he is a changed boy, and as The Girls talk on, Vernon repacks and slips silently out, passing a power company truck as he speeds away.

## **Act 2, Chapter 12 Analysis**

Chapter 12 lets Vernon muse about popular culture, as he sorts out which CDs to pawn and which to keep. His pretend job cannot fool people for long. Meeting distasteful, insistent Ella again over beer plants in Vernon's mind the seeds of a way of making money to fund his Mexico adventure. Leaked word he is about to be picked up for skipping therapy set him in motion. Lally's new venture, pulling in Leona and Vaine, is but the tip of the surreal iceberg that will drive the last act of this novel. America will swallow any and all reality TV and Lally exploits it.



## Act 2, Chapter 13

### Act 2, Chapter 13 Summary

Vernon is sure no one will look twice at a boy and girl on a bike who look like they might be selling something. Ella is getting a kick out of this and claims she is not in it for the money, which they will split. Vernon worries the victim may be trying to quit schoolgirls, but listens instead to Dad's marketing principles. He is sad for Mom, alone in the dark, but Vernon is now committed. Deutschman is known in the business as a Cold Call. Vernon hides as Ella knocks and goes inside and hears her talk about her cotton underwear and his cold hands. Vernon sneaks inside, finds them in a back room with Ella's dress up and panties down, and surprises them with a snap from Mom's Polaroid. Deutschman says, "The psycho!" and slumps in shame. Vernon explains respectfully, copying the manner of Dad's video salesmen that a single, easy payment of \$300 will make the problem go away. Deutschman's wallet holds \$160, and Vernon returns \$20, not wanting to leave him broke.

Ella is getting the attention she craves, Deutschman gets kicks he has dreamed of all his adult life, and Mom's son has earned some income. Still, Vernon feels bad and wants to get out. Lally has captured the whole scene on video from the window. The principals scatter, Vernon giving Deutschman the print and recommending he not talk to Lally, positions himself between Vernon and his bike. Vernon charges, butting Lally in the gut and sending him sprawling. He snatches the videocassette, evades Lally's grasp, kicks him bloody, grabs Ella's hand and his pack, and hurries her into the sunset. Vernon feels the "powerdime" glowing hot. Lally will soon be out searching, pissed as hell, and the law will not be far behind him. Ella falls, exhausted, near her house, and Vernon must in seconds plan his future. He pulls \$10 out of the take and gives the rest to Ella, asking her to deliver \$60 to Mom. She must fix her clothes and hair first. Ella nods like a child, staring through Vernon. He will not let her go along. When her mother calls, Ella kisses Vernon, declares her love, warns SWAT will be out tonight, and returns all but \$60 to him. Vernon wipes his mouth and melts into the darkness. Barry and Lally pass one another, but Vernon is gone.

### Act 2, Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 concludes Act 2, "How I spent my summer vacation," with Vernon being hunted. He and Ella have applied the principles of marketing to get \$160 out of an old pervert, but it yields Vernon only \$10 for the road until Ella surprises him by returning her share, despite how clearly he despises her.



## Act 3, Chapter 14

### Act 3, Chapter 14 Summary

Nighttime Martirio is beautiful from above Keeter's, except the dark northern edge where Vernon lives. Destroying Lally's cassette, Vernon feels Mom's emotional tug but turns his face towards Mexico, probably forever. He reaches the highway by midnight, but is not sure which way is south. With "Wichita Lineman" in his head, he walks an hour enjoying the moonlit beauty without trying to hitchhike. He grows chilly, resting until 5 AM, when he hears a motor coach approaching. The driver objects to picking him up between established stops, but gives in, because Vernon is stuck. He shuffles to the rear, forgetting to check for cowgirls but half-expecting Fate to make Lally or Ella's mom appear. Vernon dozes and his senses flood with Taylor and dreams of them having sex, and suddenly awakens seeing Jesus and Nuckles, and weeping for all the fallen. He knows they will haunt the rest of his life. An old lady asks if he is all right and offers to help if she can. Vernon prays for distraction in his dark purgatory and it comes in the form of "Sailing," on Muzak.

The bus reaches San Antonio after dawn, and after 8 AM, Vernon phones Taylor's parents for her number. He identifies himself as Danny Naylor, who Mrs. Figueroa knows and likes. Taylor is at UT Houston. Vernon hangs up feeling slimier than Adolf Hitler, but he has the number. Buses run regularly to Houston and from Houston to the border. Vernon is tempted to buy two tickets but considers that might be tempting Fate. Americans have invented assertiveness, so maybe showing her he knows she will go to Mexico will do it, but with his finances, thinking positive is not enough. Taylor's life is so separate from his he could cry. Fate will not let him play dumb. Dreams and reality are different. Finally, Vernon flips a coin and calls Taylor.

### Act 3, Chapter 14 Analysis

Act 3, "Against all odds" begins with Vernon making the break from his hometown and catching a bus to San Antonio. He uses an alias to get Taylor's phone number and a flip of the coin to decide whether to dial it. Fate music drives him as he writhes in existential crisis.



# Act 3, Chapter 15

## Act 3, Chapter 15 Summary

Taylor's girlfriends giggle in the background as she tries to place the name Vern Little. He prompts her about the news stories from Martirio and the night he takes care of her outside a party. She thanks him for that and asks how he got her number. He says he is in Houston and asks to meet her, but she has a lunch date with a cousin. Vernon says he is on the run from jail and wants to tell her something before he disappears. He cannot do in over the phone. He waits for Taylor to take the bait of a bad boy, as girls always do. Taylor will meet him outside Victoria's Secret in the Galleria - or under the inflatable promotion octopus outside the mall. Hanging up, Vernon considers the awesome power of trouble. Vernon has just \$44.50 left to get them both to Mexico, so he heads to a pawnbroker, who offers 25¢ apiece for his CDs. The pre-paid \$10 cab then drives him to meet Taylor. The driver reminds Vernon of Brian Dennehey, swimming with alien eggs in a pool. Vernon and his school friends had wished Dennehey could be their dad, and Barbara Bush their granny. The thought had made Vernon feel guilty while his read Dad was alive. Vernon's pulse races, as they drive up to the octopus.

The sight of Taylor in a short khaki skirt makes Vernon sick to his stomach with fear, but her scent pulls him out of the cab like his is climbing Mt. Everest. She smiles as he fumbles to find another \$7.80 for the driver, looking so unlike Van Damme, so he tells him to keep the change from a \$10 bill. Taylor kisses his cheek, and he is slain by her. She asks if he is okay, seeing him weary and depressed, but he relaxes as she relaxes, and they enter the mall. Taylor teases Vernon as a "dirty boy," pushing for details. He is so smitten the display at the lingerie store does nothing for him. Taylor's friend is not there and she resumes the quest for secrets. He denies there are any hidden bodies, as they sit on stools in a fancy cafeteria, and he studies her face for tiny imperfections. She asks if he should stay and fight the murder charges of which he claims innocence, but Vernon says things are too stacked against him. He must disappear. She guesses he needs money, but a waiter interrupts them. Vernon asks about her life and Taylor tells about trying out for a TV role and being in love with an older doctor. They are driving to Colorado in November for her birthday. Fate is killing Vernon miserably. Suddenly, Taylor stands and waves to her cousin, Leona Dunt. Vernon flees, fearing Lally may be with her.

Vernon festers and decomposes in the back of the bus bound for McAllen, not having called Mom or eaten all day. His brain plays movie he does not want to watch. Pearl Jam's *Better Man* gets attached to Taylor that Vernon knows will, like herpes, never go away. They were too busy in school teaching you about Surinam to tell about useful things like the destructive power of Fate songs. Vernon chokes back a sob and watches a young mommy start slipping a psycho-knife into her baby, pretending to cry or be dead until the baby stops laughing and worries - then surprising it with a laugh. Vernon



knows this is no way to spend his learning years. He pictures Taylor with her skirt up in her boyfriend's Stingray and yearns.

McAllen is still, when the bus arrives at 11 PM, ten miles from the border. Vernon feels alive, walking again, with \$21.30 in his pocket. He needs food and coffee, but the television tells of new shocks in Martirio. Apparently, Vaine is shown, in a tracksuit, being arrested. Lally comes on camera, arm in a sling. SWAT team member Barry Gurie is less lucky, he says, as TV shows his body bag and his cadet photo; he has been brutally gunned down with his own weapon on the practice range, purportedly by the fugitive Vernon Little. Vernon's school picture appears, followed by footage of him leaving the courtroom with Pam. A forensics expert talks about unique footprints. Federal authorities are securing the borders and highways and warn the suspect may be armed. Vernon looks around to see who might be watching and inches into the darkness Vernon runs, limps, and shuffles toward the border. International Bridge looks like a Spielberg set. Trucks, cars, and pedestrians are passing through checkpoints but there is no sign of a roadblock. Vernon steps into his dream. On the Mexican side, uniformed officials are searching vehicles. Vernon tries to blend into the crowd, but is stopped.

## Act 3, Chapter 15 Analysis

Television, movies, and music have full control over Vernon as he arranges to meet Taylor, meets her, and flees from her, when it turns out she is related to Leona. After hearing Vernon critical about Ella's verbal tics, it is interesting to see him pass over Taylor's exaggerated Valley Girl affectations. She asks him to call her, and he doubtless will if he can, for Taylor fills his mind as he rides towards the border. Having learned from the television he is being sought for killing a police officer, Vernon counts himself luck to get past the U.S. side, but is too tall to blend in among the Mexicans and is stopped.



# Act 3, Chapter 16

## Act 3, Chapter 16 Summary

The dark, greasy border guard takes his time demanding Vernon's passport or driver's license and, in the absence of either, leads him to the main building, where another official tells him one cannot enter Mexico without identification. Among many lies he rapidly considers, Vernon chooses he is meeting his parents in Tijuana. The official frustrates Vernon by demanding ever more specific information. He had better return to McAllen and call his parents. Vernon thanks him, pretends to use the phone, and sleeps a few hours on a bench. When American troopers pull up, Vernon heads back to the desk and begs to be allowed across so he can go to bed. His parents cannot make it immediately. Offering him his last \$20 does the trick, and Vernon is welcomed to Mexico, 30 yards ahead of the troopers.

Mexican Fate is less tolerant than American. Reynosa is big, messy, and even busy late at night. Broke and dead on his feet, Vernon sleeps in a bunker on the edge of town and dreams of the goddess Taylor playing in the dirt with him. When he awakens, he knows he must get money, but does not know if he dares call Taylor on his phone card; she may have squealed on him to Leona. He must also straighten things out with Mom, but is sure her phone is bugged. Dirty trucks pass as he walks the highway, decorated like mobile cathedrals. He notices one, which looks like a Christmas tree, with mud flaps showing a beach and palm trees. It is a sign, and Vernon runs after it and finds it stopped at the next gas station. The driver is smaller than Vernon, but he strides into the roadhouse cool and smooth like he is wearing guns. A boy follows him, as does Vernon, and no one seems to mind. The bartender has red hair. Vernon tries to barter his CDs for beer, the truck drivers check out his tunes and shoes, and his credit is established. Vernon does not recall, when the first tequila arrives, but he is soon loaded and remembers only snatches of what happens. He notices how different the easy-going Mexicans here are from those back home.

Friday morning, Vernon awakens on the floor with a headache, slowly taking in his Nikes hanging from a cross on the wall and the word "Ledsma," as the truck driver and bartender talk rapidly in Spanish. Sitting up, Vernon sees Lally on TV, soon replaced by his own school picture, but understands none of the rapid-fire narration. No one in the bar seems upset, and Vernon catches only "*chinga*," the F-word. When a map of Texas links photos of strangers with Lubbock, Tyler, Austin and San Antonio, but not Houston, Vernon takes them for reported sightings, meaning Taylor has not told. When the driver's son turns to cartoons, Vernon stands, staggers to the bar, and realizes the barkeeper has swapped clothes with him and put 200 pesos in his pocket. Vernon learns the truck driver, Pelayo, is headed home to Guerrero and, reading painted between the mud flaps, "*Me ves y sufres*," figures it is something about surfing.

Vernon buys a phone card and dials Taylor. A man answers and hands her the phone. She cannot believe she is talking to a serial killer. Taylor pushes Vernon to say he killed



people, something happened. The "poor tortured babe" says he is in Mexico and Taylor fills him in on news from home. The town is wired with web cams, financed by some company that buys out the Bar-B-Chew Barn; her dad is trying to set her up with a sushi bar on the site of the old unisex salon. Taylor offers Vernon \$600 and asks where to wire it. Her Fate-song rings in his ear and boosts him to enough to call Pam, who is devastated and asks if he is eating. Mom snatches the phone, bawling. The detectives assure her it will go easier on him if he just comes back. He denies he has killed anyone and says he must make good before he can come home. Mom guesses he is in Mexico and says Abdini is working on a defense. When Lally returns, they can be a real family. Vernon snorts at the thought that she still loves Lally. His minutes running out, Vernon wants badly to leave her some "cream pie," but cannot and hangs up.

### **Act 3, Chapter 16 Analysis**

Vernon is allowed into Mexico and makes friends in a bar. At a loss in a Spanish-language environment, Vernon must guess at everything he sees and hears. Only when he phones Taylor does he learn mass murders are occurring across Texas, but is so caught up in her mystique he misses the fact she is trying to get him to admit guilt and setting him up with her offer of \$600. Vernon's entrapment becomes an ongoing theme. Taylor also tells of Martirio's electronic transformation, which Lally must be (and is) behind, but Vernon appears not to make the connection. This, too, becomes a prominent theme going forward. First, Vernon must travel across Mexico with his new friend, Pelayo, to his dream world on the beach, assuming the phrase painted between the mud flaps is about surfing. Act 5 will make clear it is about suffering.





# Act 3, Chapter 17

## Act 3, Chapter 17 Summary

Mexican radio and the overgrown dashboard shrine to the Virgin amuse Vernon as he rolls south with Pelayo, Lucas, and the spirit of Jesus Navarro. Deep in the guts of Mexico, greenery blends with Vernon's hangover to make him dream of home and Taylor. He cannot, however, escape devastating thoughts about the dead. Mexico City and the route south are dangerous places to drive, and Vernon is perpetually on edge. He tries to concentrate on Taylor-"Sailing"-Beach, but it gets harder, and he is devastated. They stop in a town Vernon figures must have a fly farm. It looks ominously like the TV movies, with Muzak and rats.

When Acapulco appears on Saturday, it is organized like Martirio, improving in sights and smells from the outskirts to the center, which wraps around a huge round bay. Vernon picks the biggest hotel to call Taylor from, figuring he can blend in with the many tourists. Pelayo gives him two hours, while he has a drink and unloads his truck before heading to his village. Vernon enters an awesome lobby Leona could only dream of seeing. A typical American family passes, including a pushy mom, sock-puppet dad, goody-two-shoes daughter, and sulking son. Vernon thinks, "World-class knifing." Fleeing the pricey buffet area and observing some psycho kids, Vernon fantasizes about rescuing some drowning kid, maybe the President's kid, and being pardoned and hailed. Snapping out of it, he finds a public phone and calls Taylor. He suspects something is wrong, as soon as she says, "Hi, killer." She has been crying about the boyfriend she wants to leave. Hearing he is in Acapulco, Taylor directs him to the Western Union at *Comercial Mexicana*. She will wire the money on Monday. Before he can say more, his card expires, and Vernon is left to watch *Love Boat* life for a while.

Back in Pelayo's cab, heading north along a TV-movie coastline, Vernon is disappointed nothing is as good as in *Against All Odds*. Parts look like *Tarzan*, and they pass through a military roadblock complete with a machine-gun nest, manned by cartoon-like kids. The journey terminates in a tiny jungle village straight out of *National Geographic*. It is paradise. There are men lying in hammocks, sucking beer, and kids flocking. Pelayo is clearly the big man in town, and Vernon an alien in his world. Pelayo opens two beers with his teeth and leads Vernon to a table by the beach. By evening, there is a crowd of bottles on the table and an English-speaking buy named Victor lectures Vernon on the importance of getting ahead in life to bring wealth to the village. Vernon feels as low as a snake. Victor tells him the words between the mud-flaps mean, "You see me, and suffer." Vernon knows he is loaded, when he makes fun of eating snot-like oysters. After a tequila, Vernon tries to explain his beach-house dream, the mud-flaps, and Fate. Victor and Pelayo lead him ten minutes through the jungle to a white beach house he may use until Monday and maybe longer. Sitting alone, Vernon dreams of his Mom coming to see how well he has done. Maybe he will become Mexican, but he will still be Vernon, just clean of slime. Taylor will run around in her panties, brown as a native.





Monday is Vernon's 16th birthday, and he awakens happy to be alive. He catches a bus into town, wearing Victor's straw hat, and struts up to the Western Union counter. He says he is expecting a wire from Houston, but is puzzled what name to use and has no password. People look at him strangely as he retreats to phone Taylor - without phone points. Vernon's enthusiasm dies. He finds a public phone and tries to call collect, but Taylor has a mobile phone that cannot accept collect calls. Vernon is pissed off, stuck in Surinam with a flock of criminal charges lined up behind him. He charges back into the store and tells the agent he cannot find the password. He says his name is Vernon Little, and he is expecting \$600. The agent consults his computer and says, "Nothing here." Someone grabs Vernon around the waist and says 'Freeze!'

## **Act 3, Chapter 17 Analysis**

Chapter 17 takes Vernon deep into Mexico and sets him up in a white cabin on the beach near Acapulco. He awakens on his 16th birthday on top of the world, but plunges to the depths again, when Taylor's money does not arrive. During their brief phone call, Vernon hears in her voice she has been crying, and believes it is over her boyfriend. Taylor is so large a part of his dream (along with Mom) he cannot see anything else, more sinister, might be afoot. It is.



# Act 3, Chapter 18

## Act 3, Chapter 18 Summary

Vernon breaks the grip and spins, ready to run, but it is Taylor, wishing him a happy birthday. She comes, because he failed to wait for a password, which means she can give him only \$300. He cannot wait to show her his beach-house, but Taylor has already rented a twin room. She addresses him regularly as "killer." Vernon is tired of lurking in the background of life and calculates  $A=DT^2$ , which means the potential assholeness, when a dream comes true is relative to the amount of time you spend working up the dream. It is almost dark, when they reach her hotel, where Vernon feels uncomfortable. He follows her upstairs, aroused, and stands stupidly by the window, admiring the view. Taylor pulls out some tequila miniatures and they sit on the bed. Vernon relaxes and figures this is how one ought to spend their birthday, but then pictures Mom at home, sobbing over a cake. Taylor picks up on this and snaps him back. He asks if she is here to witness he has committed no murders, but she does not want to get involved. Vernon is slain; in his dreams, they never enjoy the luxury of a fancy room. After four drinks, Taylor fixes Vernon in her vixen eyes and asks what he has done. They kiss and she lets him fondle her a bit, but then demands the violent, nasty boy confess she has killed for Tayla. She kicks aside her shorts, revealing her panties - The Final Frontier - and lets him touch a bit, but this time she cannot teasingly pull away. When Vernon comes up for air, Taylor demands he tell her he killed and loved doing it. As she pulls him down on top of her, she wants to hear he did it all for her. Vernon has heard about such girls, and moans, "Yeah." Instantly, Taylor's face changes, and Vernon knows it is over. She speaks into her jacket and four men barge in with a camera.

People stare as Vernon is led through the lobby in hand and leg cuffs, while Taylor walking along, listening to an earpiece and giggling through her microphone to Lally how exciting it is - getting to anchor a show. The waiting plane suggests big money is behind this story. He flies to Houston Intercontinental airport guarded by marshals whose conversations contrast with his own predicament. They land and taxi to an empty section on their airport perimeter, where crowds of await at 4 AM, three weeks since the initial tragedy, waiting to pass the images to every household in the land. The marshals parade him for their convenience before loading him into a truck for a police car- and helicopter-escorted parade to jail. Vernon offers enlightenment. Police cars drive straight and do not smash into one another, like in the movies.

In his cell, Vernon does a mental re-cut of his life, in which he is in no trouble; he is the quiet wordsmith kid that hears about trouble coming but pays no attention. He falls asleep as the other cons awaken and start razing the new celebrity. They yell Abdini has been fired and a big-gun lawyer is on the case. Vernon is allowed to sleep some before being paraded to the phone, where Pam asks if he is being fed. The guard says egg and chorizo in half an hour, which Pam thinks is not enough. There will be a tray full of trimmings, Vernon assures her. Mom grabs the phone and tells the latest news. Lally has dumped Leona and will probably come crawling back soon; with all his



responsibility, he needs a strong woman, and has edged Vaine out of the picture. Lally has negotiated the rights to videotape in the courtroom and Huntsville, so he is stretched thin. Vernon listens in stony silence. Mom asks about his birthday; she did not buy a cake this year. Vernon thinks about how relatives avoid talking about obvious, embarrassing, troubling things.

After a good breakfast, Vernon meets his new attorney, another Brian Dennehy clone, said always to win, because juries love him. They have a long talk and Brian is amazed Vernon is innocent. Vernon must watch what he says. Capital trials are the cutting edge of the justice system. Another man visits Vernon's cell, chuckling as he explains the new system they are trying out on him. Vernon will sit in a "security enclosure" equipped with a buzzer he can push if he wishes to revoke any information. It activates a green light and a chime, designed to be minimally stressful. After all, he is innocent until proven guilty.

## **Act 3, Chapter 18 Analysis**

Act 3, "Against All Odds," ends with Taylor seducing Vernon in a fancy Acapulco hotel and then turning him in. The beauty has been recruited by Lally and withholds sex just enough to get Vernon to admit to anything. He knows from movies that girls like bad boys who swear and commit crimes for them, which is precisely how Taylor behaves. He finally utters words that, when taken out of context, are an admission of guilt. Vernon's taste of freedom ends, and he will pass the rest of the summer in the Harris County lock-up and courtroom.



# Act 4, Chapter 19

## Act 4, Chapter 19 Summary

By October, Vernon has memorized the routine. He is accused of every murder in Texas since fleeing Martirio, and Jesus' role in it is forgotten. Mom has attempted suicide and Pam is feeding her. Vernon focuses on survival. The state has furnished eyeglasses and Abdini has given him a crucifix. The prison psychologist disputes Vernon's contention he lacks human qualities and skills, insisting he is perceptive and sensitive, and Vernon concedes he sniffed trouble before all this started. The big news is Vernon has quit cussing, because the psychiatrist feels dwelling on the bad side of things and anal fixation are problems. TV movies now affect him.

Lynch mob crowds, media crews, and vendors (and perhaps a few supporters) greet Vernon, when the van pulls up to the courthouse. He is taken to a make-up room before entering court, which he enters knowing he is innocent and expects to leave free, once people learn the truth. All watch as Vernon locked into a shiny black zoo cage with microphone and green button. Mom sits like a Muppet, wrists bandaged, and unable to turn any psycho-knives today; the psychologist says Vernon's conscience has taken over that job. Brian looks confident and the new prosecutor looks overconfident. The judge nods to the prosecutor to begin. This case is cut-and-dried. Thirty-four decent citizens are struck down, including Vernon's young friends. Vernon has been positively identified at sixteen other capital crime scenes, supplanting the notorious John Wayne Gacy. Vernon tries to look impassive. Brian takes his turn, and says that 4.3 murders occur every week in the vast region Vernon is charged with terrorizing. Have all normal murderers taken a vacation, while Vernon meets the quota, striking various places simultaneously and using various weapons? Or, have the media made Vernon's picture so familiar all witnesses point to him? Vernon is an industry, bigger than O. J. Simpson. Even Black witnesses to Black murders in Black neighborhoods pick him out. Vernon, a meek nothing before the Martirio massacre, is a living victim of that tragedy, guilty only of not crying "Innocent!" quickly or loudly enough. Vernon is pleased and feels justice will visit, like Santa. Everybody looks smug. The attorneys probably are attorneys because, as babies, they master half-smiles and hooshy laughs.

The wonderment of the first session wears off after lunch, and Vernon sits like a zombie through a week of forensic evidence. Jury members doze. Witnesses, strangers, point him out in his cage. The State calls Goosens, and the judge beats Brian to the punch, pointing out the conflict of interest between impartial expert witness, and Vernon's caregiver. The judge also warns the prosecutor about inferring all the crimes are the work of one person. Goosen sees traits associated with Antisocial Personality disorders, and chuckles it would be odd for a six-day outbreak not to point to a single individual. ASP sufferers thrive on instant gratification, are facile manipulators, and are oblivious to others' rights and needs; they are commonly called psychopaths, and manifestations include murder. When Brian objects to equating murderers and psychopaths, the judge shows he would like to lay into the prosecutor but confines himself to, "Please." A



question of lack of remorse draws another objection. The innocent also lack remorse, but this time, the judge overrules Brian. Goosens describes ASP sufferers appetite for thrills and dismissal of consequences. Sexuality is a powerful drive and to the antisocial mind, death and sex are common bedfellows. The fixation develops in childhood, is usually directed towards females, and can end in killing the object. The prosecutor has no further questions.

Macaroni and cheese lunch curdle in Vernon's gut as Brian begins his cross-examination, about whether ASP disorders worsen with age and are treatable at any age. Brian asks why Goosens' report to the Martirio Local Court recommends outpatient treatment rather than detainment - at odds with the certainty Goosens has just proclaimed. Brian asks clarification of how regular homosexual desires differ from pathological fixations and how one who forces boys to participate is a psychopath. Goosens stops grinning. Brian introduces the name Harlan Perioux and the *Bambi-Boy butt Bazaar* website. Goosens turns white. Brian produces exhibits proving this is Goosens' alias, and he has been indicted in Oklahoma for corrupting boys. Hearing Goosens' objection that the charges are unproved, Brian brings up *Serenade of Sodom*, Goosens' current website. Finally, Brian ask whether Goosens treated Jesus Navarro Rosario in May, and holds up the panties Jesus wore on his last day alive, bought on Goosen's credit card.

## Act 4, Chapter 19 Analysis

"How my summer vacation spent me" takes up in the fall, as Vernon's trial begins. A psychiatrist has convinced Vernon to stop cussing, so the flavor of the narrative changes drastically. The trial is a televised drama, with court officials, witnesses, and Vernon being made up for the cameras. Vernon trusts the system implicitly. Opening statements and Goosens' examination and cross-examination proceed as one would expect in a TV movie, including Brian's dramatic revelation of Goosens' criminal behavior. Heretofore there has been no indication Jesus is in therapy. Vernon's fear while being examined now appears fully valid.



# Act 4, Chapter 20

## Act 4, Chapter 20 Summary

Vernon feels lighter and hopeful as he exercises his tract in the jail toilet - another useful item they do not teach in school to oppose maternal propaganda that bowel movements are the Devil's Work. A fellow con, Detiveaux, has given him a Camel Filter to smoke. Riding to court, Vernon figures, when he is found innocent the guards will wish he had just escaped. He is given French fries while they make him up, and he does not realize some ketchup smears him. Mom departs, when he comes in; she only wants her picture taken, but cannot endure the proceedings. The State calls Taylor Figueroa, dressed for business and working the cameras. She identifies herself as a student and trying out for a career in media. The prosecutor apologizes for having to ask delicate questions. Has she ever been stalked? Yes, once, by someone who turned up out of nowhere and confessed to crimes. She had met him previously once, outside a party; he helps her into the back of a car until her friends arrive. Vernon sees the jurors' faces showing concern for their own daughters. Taylor sees this person again in Houston, as he is en route to Mexico from Martirio. He confesses a lot of stuff and runs away, when her cousin appears.

Taylor identifies Vernon, without looking at him. Taylor is prompted to say she can account for Vernon's whereabouts in Mexico for only three hours and not provide an alibi for all the murders. Taylor stiffens, the courtroom buzzes, and Vernon nearly hits the green button, when the prosecutor turns to the hotel room in Acapulco. All hear his voice on tape, admitting he did it for her. Brian puts on his hooshy face for the cross-examination. He gets her to admit she gives him \$300 and they have sex, but that is not money for sex. Had Vernon known she would be in Mexico that day or been surprised out of the blue and too confused, innocent, and desperate not to be seduced? Brian understands why Taylor would entrap Vernon for promises of celebrity and gets her to admit Eulalio Ledesma sends her to Mexico.

Lally testifies, dressed in white and waxy-faced, uncomfortable but clearly loved by the crowd. The prosecutor depicts him as a Little family friend and concerned citizen; Lally asks how long it will take, because he must meet the Secretary of State. They move straight to Vernon. Is he a psychopath? The judge warns the prosecutor a young man could be executed as the result of these proceedings, and the prosecutor gestures towards the jury his hands are tied. Had Vernon told Lally anything about the school massacre? Lally sobs as he talks of Vernon's violent nightmares. Had Lally seen Vernon kill Officer Gurie? Lying flat, Lally had seen Vernon run towards Gurie, heard a scuffled and three shots. Brian takes over as Lally's voice tails off. How long and where has Lally worked as a TV journalist? Has he worked in Nacogdoches? Lally hooshes a "powerdime-booster," denying even having visited. Has Lally ever lied? Brian produces a calling card and Lally hooshes. The judge allows Brian to bring in a tottering little Mexican lady, whom Lally denies is his mother. She breaks free, stumbling, bawling, and yelling "My Lalo!" in the direction of his voice. The judge is shocked realizing the



witness is blind and the prosecutor apes despair. Brian declares hollowly every woman recognizes her son's voice.

Vernon does not sleep well that night, haunted by Jesus and knowing he may soon join him. Lally has pounded in the last nail on Vernon's cross. Vernon's only chance is to listen to Jesus' advice to forget about the family secrets. He has been loyal long enough. He should tell them about his bowel movement and let them find the gun. Cameras focus as his finger touches the green button. Vernon knows billions of people as far away as Japan are watching. Vernon does not want to change his story, but to get his story told. With them flying in expert witnesses, putting on extra patrol cars, and building a zoo cage, this is not *Judge Judy*. Unless Vernon can prove he is innocent, the technical stuff will wipe out Reasonable Doubt. As Vernon has nothing to lose, he hits the buzzer, and Brian's jaw drops.

Once sworn in, Vernon declares Nuckles can verify he sent him to fetch a candle for an experiment. If Vernon had spoken up earlier, none of this would have happened. Brian tells the incredulous judge Nuckles is medically unfit to testify and they had expected the high school-related charges to be dropped on the basis of existing evidence. The judge demands to hear Nuckles, in court or in the hospital. In fairness, the Judge must let the prosecutor ask Vernon some questions. Vernon thinks he hears Brian weeping. Insisting he respond yes or no, he asks if Vernon denies seeing the 16 last victims, the school victims, prior to their being shot and being at any of the 18 crime scenes. He had been in Mexico during them. Vernon cannot say for sure that 31 people have identified him as a murderer but has to accept the persecutor's word. Vernon panics, knowing he is trapped. He says he has been on the run, because everyone suspects him. The happy prosecutor is not surprised. Prior to Mexico, Vernon spends time in the vicinity of Amos Keeter's property, where Gurie is found. Vernon is gunman Jesus Navarro's closes known associate, lives close to the school, absconds during his first interrogation, and flees to Mexico, when let out on bail. Why will he not admit to the murders? Has he lost count? Vernon says he has been in Guerrero, Mexico, with his friend Pelayo. The prosecutor produces an affidavit from Gargia "Pelayo" Madero, stating he knows only one young American hitchhiker, named Daniel Naylor.

## Act 4, Chapter 20 Analysis

Chapter 20 watches Taylor and Lally on the stand, showing crass motivations for entrapping Vernon but contributing little to the case. Anyone who suspects Lally possessing humanity is dissuaded by how he treats his mother from the stand. Brian clearly has not explained to Vernon that pushing the green button to tell his story opens him to a cross-examination in stark yes/no fashion that will paint him into a corner. The State, evidently, has not disclosed to the defense Pelayo's affidavit, and Vernon's use of an alias finally gets him into trouble. Jesus' ghost is telling Vernon to tell the truth and get himself off the hook. The nature of the family secret will be held to the end of the novel, when its potential for harm has been wiped away (literally.) Vernon's reflections on trial procedure and Probable Doubt suggest he may pay more attention in school than he lets on.





# Act 4, Chapter 21

## Act 4, Chapter 21 Summary

Life flashes before Vernon's eyes. Nuckles will testify in five days, on the last day of the trial. Observers say he is Vernon's only chance. It is Nov. 14, and Vernon thinks back to May 20, the last time he sees Vernon, beginning with the bike ride with Jesus. Vernon doubts Jesus can survive another week like the one just endured. He lusts for power and cannot afford branded shoes, which are the ultimate source of prestige. Vernon alone knows Jesus' deep humanity. The classroom bakes Tuesday morning. Jesus stares at his desk, baring his back, showing his psycho-knife. Egged on by the Gurie twins, Max Lechuga teases Jesus about being gay, and then turns on Vernon. Lorna Speltz is slow getting jokes and laughs at the first, misexplaining it. Nuckles arrives, calling on the students to focus and asking who has remembered a candle. Dana Gurie has a box of gold-leaf aromatherapy candles. Career advisors say she will be a journalist. Max suggests where Jesus has put his candle. The class detonates laughter through the nose, but Dana insists they are here to get an education and this is not very educational. Charlotte Brewster insists they have a constitutional right to protection from deviated sexual influences. Nuckles counters people have a right not to be persecuted. Lorna and Beau Gurie add to the debate, which Charlotte will not let rest.

When Nuckles argues from the Papers of State, Charlotte wonders about the big picture behind the teacher spending so much time defending Jesus. Nuckles freezes. Max suggests Nuckles surf the web more to see the "boy sites." Nuckles is enraged, and Jesus flees the room. Lori Donner runs after him, and Nuckles chases both. Vernon knows he must find Jesus. Classmates slip into the character of the scene, including innocent bystanders, head-shakers and gigglers. Max activates the screensavers on the bank of computers, showing Jesus naked, bent over a hospital-type gurney. In the hallway, Nuckles tells Vernon to take notes to the lab and find a candle, rather than chase Jesus. As he goes, Vernon sees Jesus' locker open and his sports bag gone. Behind him, he hears Nuckles snarling, having seen the computer graphics. Charlotte goes on about the Constitution being a tool of interpretation by the majority of any given time, and they are now that majority. Max sings, "*Bambi-Boy, Bambi-boy!*"

Vernon finds Lori, weeping. She says Jesus has taken his bike and she does not know where he is going. Vernon does. Vernon blames too much TV for the change in Jesus, thinking anything goes, like in California. Vernon asks Lori to tell Nuckles he will be back for math class. She kneads one of Vernon's fingertips, asks him to tell Jesus they can change things if they stick together. Vernon races away like Caped Crusader, jamming Nuckles' notes in his pocket. He flies on his bike to Keeter's, embarrassed to feel excited by this drama/tragedy. He sees Jesus' tracks in the clearing, but Jesus is not here. The padlock is secured, and Vernon's key is home, but he levers the hatch back far enough to squint into the shaft. Daddy's rifle is there, but Jesus' gun is gone. Vernon follows Jesus' tracks and sees Jesus in the distance, pedaling madly back to school. Vernon's bowels take the opportunity to move, and he uses Nuckles' handwritten





physics notes to wipe himself and ditches them in the den. He races to school with an ominous feeling.

Splattered young lives already fill the schoolyard with stench, when Vernon arrives. He drops flat on the ground beside the gym, behind the shrubs, to watch and listen. He finds Jesus' gym shorts, a hole cut in the back and decorated brown, with "Bambi" written above it. He grabs Jesus' sports bag, empty except a half box of ammunition. Sixteen already lie dead. Nuckles snakes around the corner, saying Jesus went for him but got Lori, and says Jesus warns not to follow him, because he has another gun, at Keeter's. Vernon sees Jesus bending over the body of his only other friend, shrieking. Vernon spins away to avoid seeing Jesus blow his own brains out, and reaches for Nuckles, who pulls away. The teacher's face is a tragedy mask as he stares at Vernon, who holds Jesus' sports bag and leftover ammunition.

## Act 4, Chapter 21 Analysis

Vernon's view of what happened on May 20 is finally told. Classmates' teasing has made Jesus snap. The den clearly contains Vernon's alibi of the physics notes used as toilet paper. The victims of the shooting are given personalities in brief strokes, as is Nuckles, whose Internet proclivities intersect with Goosens'. The pictures of Jesus suggest what the psychiatrist had intended for Vernon. Television-living Vernon blames television watching for ruining Jesus. Nuckles alone can clear Vernon, when he testifies in five days, but the last look he gives him in the school yard gives Vernon good reason to worry about what he will say.



## Act 4, Chapter 22

### Act 4, Chapter 22 Summary

Nuckles comes to court bony, frail, pasty, and heavily made up. He points out Vernon, but has trouble talking about May 20. He admits giving Vernon handwritten notes and sending him on an errand, and then shouts about the scorned love and erased perfume of Jesus, the blood of babes. Vernon killed them all. Nuckles and Vernon both sob, and Vernon continues sobbing through both summations. Mom cannot make it on Friday, Nov. 21, but Pam, Vaine, and George are in court. The foreman announces 18 not-guilty verdicts, including Barry's, but guilty of killing his friends. Vernon feels the departments in the office of his life shred files and close down. The husk of his body alone is led out of court.

### Act 4, Chapter 22 Analysis

Why broken Nuckles seals Vernon's fate is left unclear in this short, explosive chapter, which closes Act 4. No insight is given into how the jury could believe Vernon guilty in Martirio but see through the charges leveled across Texas. Nuckles' outburst should have had little value.



# Act 5, Chapter 23

## Act 5, Chapter 23 Summary

On Dec. 2, Vernon is sentenced to death, but believes the new fast-track appeals process will clear him by March. Taylor is on TV, detailing his final day. She has appeared lately on *Today*, *Letterman*, and *Penthouse*. Vernon distracts himself with a set of clacking metal balls and an art project he keeps hidden. Vaine lends him a baby TV. Changing channels, Vernon sees Abdini say Lally is a liar, hidden facts have not come out, and the second gun is missing. Flicking again, Vernon sees Lally sell a reporter on broadcasting final hours and executions, with the revenues flowing to the State. Until recently, executions have been public, and the web can return that. The next step toward true democracy is allowing people to vote on who will be executed next. Fast-track guarantees a large pool of candidates, who are costly to keep alive. Expediting their fate is less cruel than having them languish. Lally will offer greater access to spiritual counsel and let them choose music and backgrounds for their final statements, so they will welcome this. Vernon turns the set off before Lally can talk about chances of getting this through the Senate. Vernon contemplates cons turning actors to make viewers want to keep them around longer.

Mom phones, saying Lally is snooping about his father and acting antsy since dumping George. Vaine has joined The Girls since the sheriff began taking out his troubles on her. Mom still wants Lally back. Vernon hears Taylor's voice oozing from a TV and goes back to clacking. The cons argue about the noise and discuss beer, ribs, and steak in heaven, but Vernon insists he still has plans on earth, once the truth wins out. Jonesy tells them to cut Vernon some slack, since they know the tension of a pending appeal. The bothered con asks Jonesy to fix Vernon some "Lasalle" before the clacking drives him crazy. Lasalle can help the boy face his God. Jonesy agrees to try, leaving Vernon with facing his God stuck like a burr in his brain.

A guard leads Vernon down to Lasalle's "chapel," where an old Black man appears, smiling bemusedly, and promptly falls asleep. Awakened, he proclaims Vernon brave, lonely, older than his years, and sent to him, because he is not ready to die. Trying to figure things out leaves Vernon tangled up, which is the human condition. Lasalle agrees people talk about rights but want blood and lie while ordering you not to lie. Vernon has gotten his wish. He no longer has to associate with people. Lasalle guesses acts crusty and independent, because his mother makes him feel guilty. When Lasalle unleashes a string of profanity about Mom, Vernon jumps to his feet to defend her, which Lasalle says proves Vernon does love someone he has been too busy to realize loves him. Lasalle is about to reveal the secret of life, when Lally's voice sounds in the corridor.



## Act 5, Chapter 23 Analysis

In Act 5, "*Me ves y sufres*" observes Vernon's life on Death Row. Lally is working on an obscene but coldly logical marketing scheme to turn Death Row into a reality program, but is also shown floundering, using and abandoning people faster than ever and hunting for the never-found body of Vernon's father, a new fact in the novel. It appears Lasalle will help Vernon understand why this is his destiny, but Lally interrupts. Who this old con is, and what he has to teach the young rebel will be revealed in good time.



# Act 5, Chapter 24

## Act 5, Chapter 24 Summary

Outside the room, Lally plans to offer viewers a short list, certainly not all 114 on Death Row. Interviews, reconstructions of crimes, and tears from victims' families will flesh out their characters and spark head-to-head battles for sympathy. *Big Brother* is attracting sponsors, and "*The last shall go first*" has a nice ring. Lally is surprised to find Vernon getting counseling, and Vernon shocks everyone threatening to pay Lally back. Lasalle shuffles away, promising to tell his secret later, and Lally announces the first vote will be on Valentine's Day.

Vernon is working on his art project, when Jonesy brings the phone, but from the TV knows his appeal has been declined; Brian can only say fast-tracking puts the Supreme Court out of reach. Cameras are installed in Vernon's cell and all TVs and radios are removed from the Row, to keep the cons from seeing how the voting is going. Sickos from around the world send Vernon valentines, but only Ella's is delivered to him. He does not open it. Vernon needs another date with Lasalle, but Lally has forbidden any. Vernon offers sign over to Jonesy the \$1 million sweepstakes letter he has gotten. Cons bid the letter up to \$500 before the voting starts.

Jonesy escorts Vernon to Lasalle. A porter is returning TVs and radios to the cons, meaning the vote is in. A dark-suited man with execution papers follows the cart, and nod assures Jonesy none of his boys will die today. Vernon's gut relaxes. Lasalle is in the can. Legs protrude from two cubicles, one in prison clothes, and another in black shoes and suit pants. Vernon knocks on that door. Lasalle gripes at the imposition and orders Vernon to make a wish to Santa. When Jonesy says Vernon's pardon has not come through, Lasalle laughs, so much. Vernon calls him a lousy preacher and is ready to go, but Lasalle rages there is no God, just frustrated human wants. Humans dream up God to take the heat, but are themselves God. Vernon must grow up. Four men appear and lead Lasalle to his Final Event. First, he teaches Vernon a lesson about the power of suggestion and tells him to learn to observe. Vernon hollers thanks. "No sweat, *Vernon God*," is the answer from the axe murderer Vernon has taken to be a preacher.

Vernon lies on his bunk as TVs buzz about Lasalle's execution. Vernon expects to hear Taylor's voice, but she has left the show to become a roving reporter, in search of one big story. Lasalle makes no final statement and dies listening to "I Got You Under My Skin." Vernon works on his art project and thinks about his wasted life, the powerdimes against him, and the fear that keeps him from yelling loud enough to get ahead. He is too embarrassed to play God. Vernon survives three votes and relates to moths hitting light bulbs while aiming at the moon. He dreams of fantasy animals romping with him and Jesus, and by day thinks about how other dogs would not follow his barking if they knew how measly he is. However, Kurt barks like a much bigger dog.



## Act 5, Chapter 24 Analysis

Chapter 24 depicts the tension created on Death Row by Lally's heartless project of an execution lottery, and introduces an axe murderer turned popular preacher who helps Vernon figure out his feelings towards Mom, but is interrupted from telling him the secret of life until he is being lead off to execution. Lasalle tells Vernon to watch animal and human behavior and realize he is God. Vernon struggles to do this as he survives several votes. Notice Taylor has left Lally's program and is looking for one big story to establish her as a real journalist.



## Act 5, Chapter 25

### Act 5, Chapter 25 Summary

Mom asks about Vernon's bowels and the sweet cripple who is his competition in the next vote. She wishes Vernon would not look so impassive. Death Row always hushes, when Mrs. Little phones; she is more entertaining than TV-land. The Girls are going out canvassing votes for Vernon. After they hang up, Vernon thinks about the human needs expressed by The Girls, Deutschman, Mom, and Vaine, and cannot guess what each would like from him. Taylor wants a big story, Vaine needs a homicidal maniac for the SWAT team to practice on, and Lally has everything, but Vernon wants to give him some token. Vernon does not suspect Mar. 28 is his execution day, when paperwork accompanies his breakfast. All the cons probably receive it. A brochure tells about how to act for the cameras, suggests last statements, and lists musical choices while entering the Death Chamber and during the Event. Vernon knows he will regret whatever he chooses. The usual Sunday quiet falls over the Row as Vernon turns over the order for his execution at 6 PM. He falls to his knees, bawling, and prays to God.

### Act 5, Chapter 25 Analysis

The calculated psychological effect of Lally's project sinks in, watching Vernon leaf through a packet of instructional materials he believes everyone is getting. He is thinking about what presents he can give to the various people in his life. The unthinkable appears to be happening, but for Vernon to tell this story, as he has been presumes he survives. However, the system seems to preclude last-minute reprieves.



# Act 5, Chapter 26

## Act 5, Chapter 26 Summary

Folks are uncommonly kind on the afternoon of Vernon's execution. The four executives and a cameraman fetch him for his last meal, supervised by Pam. The Girls will be enjoying the same as he lies on the gurney, imagining him out riding his bike. At 4:30, Vernon is allowed to go to the bathroom with a copy of *Newsweek*. It reports Martirio has the fastest economic growth rate in the world. An hour before the execution, Vernon makes private phone calls. Pam fails to answer and has no answering machine on which he can say, "I love you." Lally's secretary nearly hangs up, but puts the call through to his cell phone. Vernon tells him where the gun is stashed. Vernon next calls Mrs. Lechuga to give her something to return her to head of the pack. Next, he calls Vaine, en route to the Barn. Finally, Vernon calls Taylor, whose voice transports him to another, smutty, time and place. He gives her the break she is waiting for and she squeals with delight. Two guards and a chaplain lead Vernon away.

Vernon feels his knees go weak as he enters the chamber to the tune of "Galveston." He removes his shirt, revealing his art project, called "*Me ves y sufres*," tattooed on his chest. Guards strap him down and an orderly inserts a needle. A cool solution begins to flow. An usherette directs witnesses to their seats; Vernon recognizes only Mrs. Speltz, but then sees Ella, tall, beautiful, dressed in a pale blue suit. "Sailing" begins to play, and Vernon cannot swallow as a terminal learning comes to him. He has been self-destructive but has grown to like the place. As he feels an itch around the needle, Vernon closes his eyes and feels himself slipping away. He looks down at the death scene, calmly, and then floats home to watch Lally break in to fetch the padlock key and the ginseng bottle concealing LSD. The Girls follow Lally at a discreet distance, per Mrs. Lechuga's orders. Sailing to Keeter's, Vernon watches the LSD fry Lally's mind. Hauling out Daddy's rifle, Lally wipes away Mom's fingerprints, and her worries. She brandishes it at Vaine's SWAT helicopter. Taylor's cameraman catches Lally scream, "Mamb!" as the SWAT team opens fire. George and Betty find evidence of Vernon's bowel movement in the den. "Sailing" still plays as Vernon opens his eyes, and sees Abdini, waving a dirty brown ball of paper and a melted candle. The phone rings, and Jonesy says Vernon his pardon.

## Act 5, Chapter 26 Analysis

Chapter 26 shows Vernon's last day on Death Row, including kind phone calls, offering people precisely what they most want and need. These come together into an operation that proves Vernon's innocence and prevents the deadly chemicals from flowing into his arm. He attributes the out-of-body view of events to the anesthetic administered before inserting the open line.





## Act 5, Chapter 27

### Act 5, Chapter 27 Summary

Mom loves being in mourning, so she mourns Lally the morning The Girls gather to see the fridge arrive. *Time's* headline is, "Stool's Out!" and Abdini is shown holding the note Jesus leaves in the den that will send Nuckles and Goosens to prison. The local paper says Taylor will be fine. The insurance claim on Dad can now be processed; clearly, since his body will never show up. Pam is playing pinball on *Oprah*. Up the street stands Ella with her suitcase, waiting to accompany Vernon to Mexico. Everybody is gone and everything is back to normal.

### Act 5, Chapter 27 Analysis

Chapter 27 wraps things up. Taylor has been shot in the ass and is recovering, and Jesus has left a suicide note. Mom's fridge finally arrives, and everything goes back to normal.



# Characters

## Vernon Gregory Little ("Vern")

The 15-year-old narrator and protagonist of the novel, Vernon self-deprecatingly describes himself as the puppy dog featured. He lives alone with his mother on the northern edge of Martirio, TX, regularly twists a psycho-knife in his back about getting a proper hair cut, finding a job, and above all, the state of his bowels, because Vernon has suffered irregularity since childhood. Vernon's father has disappeared, but he remembers him vaguely, wishing he were more like the actor Brian Dennehy. When Dad disappears, Mom insists Vernon get Dad's rifle out of the house fast, and he hides it in the abandoned mine at Keeter's Field that he and best friend Jesus Navarro call the den. The key to the den's padlock and other secrets, including drugs he is holding for beautiful Taylor Figueroa, are hidden in a Nike shoebox in Vernon's closet. Vernon seems bored by what the school system feeds students, but is intelligent, perceptive, and expressive, and works hard to learn the ways of the world. Much of his outlook is drawn from TV-movies, where truth always wins in the end, and from Fate-tunes linked to people and events.

Vernon's life changes forever on May 20, when Jesus, whom he has observed growing strange and rigid of late, murders their classmates and commits suicide, leaving Vernon on the scene, literally holding Jesus' sports bag. Vernon has just returned from running an errand for his physics teacher, who fails to provide him an alibi, and family loyalty prevents Vernon from telling about evidence he is at the den rather than school. Mom's friend Pam innocently spirits him out of the preliminary investigation to get something to eat, which brands him a flight risk. Vernon is held in jail pending a psychiatric evaluation, and freed as an outpatient of Dr. Goosens, whom he suspects of being a pedophile after receiving a physical examination. As tensions build between him and Mom's scheming boyfriend Lally, whom he learns is a fraud, and a posse closes in on the den, Vernon flees to Mexico. En route, Vernon meets Taylor, who later surprises him in Acapulco. Rather than living out his dream with her in a beach-house, Vernon is seduced into confessing to mass murder, returned to Houston, and tried for murders across Texas as well as in Martirio. Acquitted of the former but convicted for the latter, Vernon is condemned to death just as Lally turns Death Row into a multimedia reality show, with citizens voting which inmate to execute each week on camera. Vernon is selected in the fourth round, strapped to the gurney, and believes he has died, but receives a last-second reprieve. The series of phone calls he makes earlier that day fall together to destroy Lally and prove Vernon's alibi.

Vernon Gregory modifies his middle name throughout the novel to reflect his mood or situation. He's a "Genius" (expressing irony), "Gonad" (regretting not groping Taylor), "Gucci" (forced to wear a choir robe), "Gridlock" (trying to conjure up Mexico), or "Gray-matter" (planning to be seen at Keeter's.) He's "Gone-to-Hell" (traveling to McAllen), "Gates" (finding 200 pesos in his pocket), "Godzilla" (thinking about the dead, as he rides through Mexico), and "Gonzales" (in Acapulco.) "God" is the name given to him by



Lasalle, the jailhouse preacher, who rages humans have dreamed up God to take the heat for themselves, but are themselves God.

## Doris Eleanor Little

Vernon's overweight mother, Doris' every word turns a psychological knife in her only son's back. Her catch phrase is "are you all right?" Her constant concern is the state of Vernon's bowels. She has four overweight friends who talk about diets, overeat, and help Doris keep watch for the new side-by-side refrigerator she has ordered. Doris wants to keep her 15-year-old a child, controlling his wardrobe by keeping the items that make him look his age damp in the laundry, but at the same time demanding he get a job to "make a contribution" like other boys his age. Doris' husband has disappeared years ago, and Doris insists Vernon get his father's rifle out of the house immediately and say nothing about it. Doris fingerprints, it turns out, are on the rifle, and the insurance company is sufficiently suspicious to withhold paying on his policy. Doris cannot bear to visit Vernon in jail or prison, delegating friend Pam to represent her, and appears in the courtroom during Vernon's trial only long enough each day to get herself on camera. Pam then drives her home. Early in the investigation, ostensible CNN reporter Eulalio ("Lally")

Ledesma wheedles his way into Doris' heart and bedroom, and her severe haircut and frumpy wardrobe are transformed. She treats Lally with a kindness never shown to her ex-husband. Lally gives Doris the professional name *Vanessa Le Bourget* as he promises her an on-camera position in his new multi-media empire helping the world deal with tragedy by sharing the lessons learned in Martirio. Vernon's first attempt to disappear in Mexico is thwarted, when Doris withdraws \$50 from her mother's ATM account to lend to Lally to help his cash flow problem. When Vernon wrathfully reveals Lally's fraud, Lally abandons Doris and works his way through her girlfriends, but Doris never stops loving him and believing he will return to her to live happily ever after. As officials close in on Vernon's den, he flees to Mexico, sad to abandon his hapless mother, but finding no alternative. After his arrest and return to Houston for trial, Doris attempts suicide, by sticking her head in an electric oven, Vernon is sure, but her wrists are bandaged, when he sees her. Pam takes charge of her. Doris cannot bear coming to prison, even on Vernon's execution day, preferring to remember him a carefree young boy riding his bike. When Vernon is spared at the last second and Lally slain by the SWAT team, Doris chooses to put her energy into mourning Lally, and the delivery of her fridge is anticlimactic. Lally unwittingly wipes the fingerprints from her husband's rifle in the confrontation, however, so Doris's worries are over and the insurance company agrees to pay out. Vernon can go on a Mexican vacation without worrying about her as in his earlier flight.

## Eulalio Ledesma ("Lally" / "Lalito" / "Lalo")

Lally is a crumpled, thirty-something phony first met lurking in the trees near Vernon's house, looking like Ricardo Montalban of *Fantasy Island* and posing as a reporter for



CNN. Covering how the community is coping with tragedy. Doris Little takes an instant liking to Lally, who advises her "Little Big Man" to tell his story to the world, which loves the underdog. The world is divided into underdogs like them and psychos like the deputy. Since the public wants justice, not facts, Vernon must paint a "paradigm" by careful positioning. Vernon believes Lally is okay, when he offers to handle the joints Vernon is carrying, and he accepts Lally's offer to televise a report on his innocence as he is taken into custody. Instead, Lally, who is comforting Doris, compiles a lurid report on the seemingly-normal but sexually-troubled teen, interposing crime scenes with his grinning school picture and calling attention to his lingerie catalog and pornographic computer files, which thus into evidence in court.

Vernon happens upon a stranger, who claims Lally owes him money and produces a card reading "Eulalio Lesesma Gutierrez / President & Service Technician-in-Chief, Care Media Nagodoches." Vernon calls the phone number and talks to Lally's blind, impoverished mother and sets up a phone call Doris will hear. Claiming CNN is interested in hiring mom, Lally gives Doris the professional name *Vanessa Le Bourget* and borrows \$50 from her to put towards his debt, which is more than Vernon can bear, and he lays out his evidence. Thinking fast, Lally invents a story about being a generous philanthropist to the "Sunshine Souls," who, because his anonymity is broken, force him move on. Leona, with whom Lally quickly forms sexual chemistry, takes him home, abandoning Doris to depression.

Lally's next move is to form a multimedia company to share with the world 24 X 7 the lessons in survival and coping learned in Martirio. Deputy Vaine becomes his partner, covering the apprehension of perpetrators and the urgent raising of capital. Lally and Leona are at Deutschman's house to videotape Vernon and Ella's sexual shakedown, but Vernon beats him savagely during the escape and steals the incriminating tape. Dropping Leona and moving on to George Porkorney, Lally expands his empire, recruiting beautiful Taylor Figueroa to seduce Vernon in Vernon in Acapulco and obtain a secret camera confession of mass murders. Lally's crew takes Vernon into custody and turns him over to Federal marshals.

Lally transforms the courtroom into a sound set and convinces the State of Texas to turn Death Row into a reality program, where citizens vote on which inmate to execute next. Cells are fitted with cameras and background stories build public interest. Lally sets the first vote for Valentine's Day. Vernon's turn comes on the fourth round, and he includes Lally in his round of final phone calls, telling him the whereabouts of the second gun. Lally races to the Littles' house, finds a key in Vernon's closet along with a bottle of ginseng to which he is addicted. He does not know Vernon has hidden in the golden liquid two LSD pearls. By the time Lally reaches Vernon's hiding place at Keeter's field, his mind is fried. He pulls out the hidden rifle, obliterating Doris' fingerprints, and brandishes it at the SWAT helicopter. Calling out, "Mamb!" to the woman he has pretended not to know in court, Lally dies in a hail of bullets. After all this, Doris mourns his passing.



## Jesus Navarro

Vernon's best friend and arguably the most central character in the novel, Jesus massacres his schoolmates and commits suicide, leaving Vernon literally holding his sports bag with its extra ammunition. He becomes a target, because the town needs someone to blame and punish. Once a happy bike riding and tin can-shooting companion, Jesus has lately grown troubled and demanding of respect, but his homosexuality draw only derision from classmates. Mr. Nuckles has been spending time with Jesus, after school, at his home and in his car, appearing to care and recommending he see a psychiatrist. Jesus only gets worse after seeing Dr. Goosens. Jesus is born with six fingers on each hand, which he overcomes, but also with the Mexican immigrant's tendency to bottle up tension until it bursts. On his last morning on earth, Jesus rides to school with Vernon, but their conversation is troubling and existential, suggesting he has something dark in mind. Max Lechuga begins picking on Jesus before physics class, intimating he has been the recipient of anal sex, and refuses to drop the topic as the teacher, Mr. Nuckles, enters and the class disintegrates into a discussion of constitutional rights. Jesus, however, can bear it no more, flees the classroom, mounts his bicycle, and disappears.

Jesus' only friend besides Vernon, Lori Donner, runs after him. She's followed by Vernon, who knows Jesus' destination is their den in Keeter's field. Vernon arrives to find Jesus' gun missing and sees him pedaling back to school. Vernon arrives to see Jesus shrieking over Lori's body, whom he had shot by mistake while aiming at Nuckles. Vernon turns away as his troubled friend shoots himself in the head, and is found holding the strap of Jesus' bag. Jesus' picture is taken at the crime scene and hangs in the interrogation room. The investigation focuses on the girls' underwear Jesus is wearing at his death. During Vernon's murder trial, it comes out psychiatrist Goosens has bought these panties for Jesus and is, in fact, treating him while photographing him being sodomized for the Internet. In the raid on the den arranged by Vernon from Death Row, Jesus' suicide note is found, revealing Goosens and Nuckles as pedophiles. Jesus' name inevitably raises themes of innocent suffering and crucifixion throughout the novel.

## Mr. Abdini

The court-appointed attorney with a full name and thick accent from God-knows-where, Abdini talks so fast-Vernon nicknames him "Ricochet Abdini" and worries his slimy appearance alone will ensure conviction. Judge Gurie finds Abdini so unprepared she drops hints at what he should do. While on the run in Mexico, Vernon thinks about Abdini not giving in to the American way as Mexican immigrants do, and hears Abdini is still working on his defense. Abdini is fired (by whom is not indicated) and replaced with a high-priced, Brian Dennehy-like attorney, who nevertheless fails to get Vernon released. After Vernon is sentenced to death, Abdini goes on talk shows to insist on his innocence and point to the gun and other evidence not considered. He discovers the



evidence supporting Vernon's alibi, has them tested, and races to Death Row to show it, just as the Governor calls with a pardon.

## **Silas Benn ("Sie")**

An elderly one-legged man who lives on the edge of town, Benn hires underage boys to download pornography from the Internet in exchange for beer. As Vernon tries to raise money for his escape to Mexico, he offers Benn a list of web addresses and instructions on using a computer, so he can cut out the middlemen. Benn gives Vernon only a six-pack of Coors.

## **Ella Bouchard**

Vernon's former classmate, blue-eyed Ella surprises him, as he hides from the posse among abandoned toilets in Keeter's field. Flashing her stained panties at him as an offer to explore her "South Pole," Ella insists Vernon's name is Bernie, declares that she loves him and helps keep him from being discovered. Skinny, freckled, and wild haired, Ella lives with her hillbilly folks. Like them, she stares and repeats everything eight times, and has set back many a boy's sexual development while curing their horniness, cussing, spitting and farting with them. At their next chance meeting at Keeter's, Vernon and Ella share beer, and Vernon sees lucrative possibilities in Ella's claim that old Mr. Deutschman will pay her for sex. Vernon snaps a Polaroid, once Ella has gotten her dress up and panties down over the old pervert, obtaining the attention she craves. Vernon and Ella part with a kiss, Ella returning all but \$60 of their earnings, which she promises to deliver to Doris. When Vernon is in prison, Ella sends him a "pome" (her spelling) about "true hearts and what-all," and attends his execution, appearing surprisingly tall, beautiful, and smartly dressed. After Vernon is pardoned, he and Ella leave for a vacation together in Mexico.

## **Charlotte Brewster**

On the morning of the massacre, Vernon's classmate, Charlotte, insists students have a constitutional right to be protected from deviated sexual influences, and questions the teacher why he so heartily defends gay Jesus Navarro, intimating he may have something to hide.

## **Cindy**

Dr. Goosen's spiky-toothed, grating-voiced, socks-and-sandals receptionist, Cindy instantly puts Vernon on edge, which he figures is her function in the psychiatrist's office. He expects her name to be "Graunley Stelt" or "Achtung Beed," and is surprised it is as bouncy as "Cindy."



## Brian Dennehy

An actor and rugged star of *Cocoon*, Dennehy is a favorite of Vernon and his school friends, the father all wish they had. A cab driver in Houston reminds Vernon of Dennehy, as does the high-priced attorney who takes his murder case, replacing Abdini. Vernon never uses the attorney's real name. "Brian" discredits the State's witness, Dr. Goosens, as an Internet pornographer, and successfully impeaches testimony by Taylor Figueroa and Lally, but fails to warn his client of the risks of pushing the green button to have his say in court. The prosecutor skillfully paints Vernon into a corner as Brian shakes his head helplessly. Brian takes Vernon's appeal, but is hindered by Vernon's refusal to substantiate his alibi by revealing the whereabouts of the second gun and other evidence. Brian is apologetic, when the appeal is turned down and access to the Supreme Court is blocked by new quick-review legislation.

## Mr. Deutschman

A once upstanding school principal ostracized by rumors that he molests schoolgirls, Deutschman must get his haircuts at the meatworks' barber shop, where Mom takes Vernon, under protest one Saturday. Weeks later, Ella Bouchard tells Vernon Deutschman once fondled her and offered to pay for sex. This gives Vernon an idea for solving his monetary problems. Vernon snaps a Polaroid of Deutschman beneath Ella, whose dress is up and her panties down. They demand \$200 to make the nightmare go away, but Deutschman has only \$160. Kind-hearted Vernon leaves the old pervert \$20 as they prepare to leave, and warns him to destroy the print and not talk to Lally, whom they discover has been videotaping the whole scene through the window. Vernon fights with Lally during their escape, grabs the videocassette, and destroys it.

## Lori Bethlehem Donner

The goddess of Vernon's class, Lori runs after Jesus Navarro on May 20, when taunting about his sexuality makes him snap. Vernon follows them both and Lori tearfully begs him to find their friend so they together can make things better. When Vernon gets back to school from trailing Jesus to the den, he sees Jesus wailing over Lori's body, having hit her while aiming at Nuckles. Lori dies the day of Vernon's arraignment, removing his last sympathetic witness.

## Leona Dunt ("Loni")

The youngest of Doris Little's so-called friends (under 40,) Leona is easily "devastated" by life's events. Her Eldorado provides mobility for Mom's other so-called friends, Georgette Porkorney and Betty Pritchard. A pear-shaped, almost pretty, honey-voiced braggart, Leona shows up, only when she has at least two things to crow about. Her first husband turns gay and runs away and the second, a rich man, dies, leaving able to purchase and travel. After Vernon reveals his evidence proving Lally's lies, Leona offers





refuge to the supposed recluse philanthropist, but Doris can sense the sexual connections they have swiftly made. Leona is promised an on-camera program once Deputy Vaine raises enough capital for Lally's new multimedia enterprise offering the world lessons on surviving tragedy as learned in Martirio. Leona is at a Houston mall to meet her beautiful niece, Taylor Figueroa, to do some shopping, when run-away Vernon arranges to meet the girl of his dreams. Seeing Leona, Vernon flees in horror, worrying Lally may also be there. By the time Vernon makes his way to Acapulco, is seduced by Taylor into admitting his guilt, and returned to Houston for trial, Leona has been swept aside by Lally in favor of George.

## Eileena

The sheriff's office receptionist, Eileena wears a wooden hairdo and holds her eyebrows high in an air of moral superiority.

## Taylor Figueroa

Taylor is the girl of Vernon's dreams, whose narcotics he is holding, when Smith County drug-sniffing dogs arrive in Martirio, Taylor has had but one encounter with Vernon, when he finds her wasted in the back seat of a Buick, outside a party to which he is not invited. Rather than take advantage, Vernon fetches Taylor's friend to tend to her. Vernon recalls the pitiful scene, lying in a jail cell, thinking about fleeing to a beach house in Mexico, while Taylor is in college in Houston. After fleeing Martirio, Vernon obtains Taylor's phone number from her mother, and arranges to meet at a mall. Taylor responds to his "bad boy" act and realizes he needs money, but their conversation is cut short by the approach of her aunt, Leona Dunt.

Taylor hears from Vernon again, after he has crossed into Mexico. Pumping him unsuccessfully for an admission he has killed and offering to wire him \$600, Taylor flies to Acapulco to surprise Vernon on his 16th birthday and again presses him, in her hotel room, to admit he has killed for her. Instantly, she alerts Lally's camera crew, which takes Vernon into custody and turns him over to U.S. marshals for return to Houston. Taylor believes Lally will make her an anchorwoman. After Vernon is sentenced to death, Taylor delivers a feature report, detailing the itinerary of his last day. She is in the media a lot recently. She's featured on *Today*, *Letterman*, and even *Penthouse*, posing by "Old Sparky," which is more dramatic than a gurney. Taylor leaves Lally's network to become a roving reporter, hoping one big story will establish her career. On the day of his execution, Vernon phone Taylor to give her that story, and she is at Keeter's field, when the SWAT team kills Lally. Wounded in the exchange, Taylor is likely to recover but perhaps need silicon to restore her ass to perfection.

## Pastor Gibbons

The flabby, overly pious, loud-talking Gibbons, leader of the New Life Center, puts Vernon in charge of a booth at the fair, hoping to raise \$10,000 for a new media center.





Gibbons is proud of the work his Tragedy Committee has done and effects the coyness of Fr. Mulcahy on *M\*A\*S\*H* when complemented by Lally. Gibbons is present at the confrontation between Vernon and Lally over the latter's true identity, is completely taken in by Lally's stories of selfless philanthropy towards hapless old women and blesses his virtue.

## Dr. Oliver Goosens

A round, soft, smug, seemingly sympathetic psychiatrist, Goosens is assigned by the court to examine Vernon prior to bail being considered. After talking about Vernon's family life, sexual orientation, and feelings about the crime (during which he suggests the bowel movement outside of school can provide a forensic alibi), Goosens starts a tape of Gustav Holst's martial *The Planets*, Mars, and orders Vernon to disrobe and lie on a bed, on his stomach, legs spread. Vernon bolts, ignoring the doctor's warning this could jeopardize his bail application. Judge Gurie releases Vernon to Goosen's care as an outpatient, but when Vernon skips a session, Goosens turns him in. At Vernon's murder trial in Houston, the State calls Goosens as an impartial expert witness. It's an obvious conflict of interest for Vernon's caregiver. Goosen testifies in detail about Antisocial Personality (ASP) disorders, which can result in killing. Vernon's attorney turns the testimony to Goosens' career as Harlan Perioux, indicted owner of the *Bambi-Boy butt Bazaar* and *Seranade of Sodom* websites, and presents the panties Jesus Navarro wears during the massacre, bought on Goosen's credit card. Goosens had been his psychiatrist. In the den with the fecal evidence that wins Vernon a last-second pardon, is Jesus' suicide note, describing Goosens' (and Marion Nuckles') pedophilia, which guarantees a life behind bars.

## Mr. Gregson

The perky State's attorney at Vernon's psychiatric hearing, Gregson vigorously opposes bail on the grounds Vernon is a flight risk and objects to the judge doing the defense's job, when Abdini is slow bringing up Vernon's bowel syndrome. Gregson surprises the judge with the transcript of a video statement from Nuckles, just in from a CNN reporter. Nevertheless, in the absence of hard physical evidence of a second gun, Judge Gurie releases Vernon to his psychiatrist's care.

## Officer Barry Enoch Gurie

A disgusting, leering "Detention Executive," or jail guard, Barry teases Vaine about dieting and Vernon about presumed masturbation, a joke his fellow guards take up. Barry leads the posse that finds guns at Keeter's (but not Vernon's rifle, hidden in the den), which inspires Vernon's flight to Mexico. "Lard-Ass" is named to head Vaine's SWAT team, when she partners with Lally in a new multimedia enterprise, only to be gunned down with his own weapon on the teams practice range, purportedly by the



fugitive Vernon Little. Vernon is found not guilty of Barry's murder but convicted for taking part in the schoolyard massacre.

## **Beauregard ("Beau") and Dana Gurie**

Vernon's classmates, fraternal twins, Beau is the wise-mouthed follower to Dana, who alone remembers to bring a candle for a physics experiment. In fact, she brings a whole box of aromatherapy candles with the price tag left on. She is the one who always reports on who barfs in class, and the career advisor believes she will be a fine journalist. Dana objects they are not getting the education they deserve as the May 20 debate about homosexuality escalates. Both die in the schoolyard massacre.

## **Judge Helen E. Gurie**

The bright-eyed, gray-haired, bespectacled jurist who presides at Vernon's preliminary hearing, Judge Gurie is careful about his rights being strictly observed under the Texas Family Code. She stares through her relative, Deputy Vaine Gurie, and takes her to task for seeking an indictment on the basis of fingerprints alone, and criticizes the sheriff for the quality of procedures reaching her bench. Judge Gurie remands Vernon into custody pending a psychiatric hearing. The results of the hearing, particularly the "bowel thing," suggest an alibi. In the absence of sound physical evidence of a second gun, the judge releases Vernon to Dr. Goosen's care on an outpatient basis.

## **Deputy Vaine Millicent Gurie**

The sheriff's deputy who first interrogates Vernon about the schoolyard massacre, Vaine is badly overweight, a true devotee of Bar-B-Chew Barn ribs, which she claims are salads for purposes of her Pritkin diet. She believes in statistics and psychology. There are only facts, no gray areas, in her worldview. Vaine shares the Gurie family habit of making "G-hrrr" sounds. At Vernon's preliminary hearing, Vaine is taken to task by her relative, Judge Helen E. Gurie, for seeking an indictment on the basis of fingerprints alone. Vaine goes over the sheriff's head to petition for a SWAT team and Fate puts her at the Pizza Hut opposite Vernon's bank, when he makes his first, abortive break for Mexico. Lally makes Vaine a partner in a new multimedia enterprise to bring to the world the lessons learned in Martirio about dealing with tragedy, but later sweeps Vaine aside, withdraws financial support from the SWAT team, and takes up with the sheriff's wife, George, which makes the sheriff take out his woes on her. Vaine is drawn into the circle of Doris Little's friends. One of Vernon's final phone calls on the day of his planned execution is to Vaine, which results in her arriving in a SWAT helicopter at Keeter's field, where she orders the team to open fire on an LSD-crazed Lally who is brandishing Vernon's hidden rifle.



## Seb Harris

A classmate whose name is thrown in Vernon's face as an example of an enterprising young person with a good job and truck, Seb is the storeowner's son.

## Officer Jones ("Jonesy")

Vernon's guard on Death Row, Jonesy is sympathetic towards his charges and particularly with the youngest, sticking up for Vernon, when another con protests the repetitive clacking of metal balls Vernon uses to relieve stress. He reminds them how it feels to be waiting for an appeal. On the day of the first vote to see who will be executed, Jonesy risks Lally's wrath by taking Vernon to talk with Lasalle, and restrains him, when it becomes clear Lasalle has "won" the first round. Jonesy mans the Governor's telephone for Vernon's execution and delivers the last-second news Vernon has been pardoned.

## Lothar ("Lard-Ass") Larbey

Lothar is a classmate who taunts Jesus as a "wetback fudge-packer," as they bike to school on the fatal morning of the schoolyard massacre.

## Clarence Lasalle

A yellow-eyed, peaceful man Vernon believes to be the prison chaplain, Lasalle is in fact an axe murderer whom the cons accept as de facto spiritual guide. Vernon is taken down into the bowels of the prison to meet Lasalle and is disappointed to watch him fall asleep. When he awakens, Lasalle draws out of Vernon his aversion to illogical, uncaring mankind, and guesses he blames his plight on his controlling mother. Lasalle releases a string of filth about Mom to provoke Vernon into realizing the love they share, and is about to explain to him the meaning of life, when Lally interrupts them. On the day of the first voting, Vernon is allowed again to talk with Lasalle, whom he finds, wearing a blue suit and black shoes in a bathroom. Annoyed at being bothered, Lasalle rages about there being no God, just frustrated human wants. Humans have dreamed up God to take the heat, but are themselves God. Vernon needs to grow up. Officials then lead a slumping Lasalle to his final event. However, first, he flicks a lighter and hears another con in another cubicle light a cigarette he had not known he wanted. That is the power of suggestion Vernon must learn to observe. Vernon hollers thanks, to which Lasalle responds, "No sweat, *Vernon God*," providing the novel its title. Lasalle makes no final statement and dies listening to "I Got You Under My Skin," leaving Vernon to think about his final teachings.



## Tyrie Lasseen

The slack-jawed, slow-talking caretaker of Ketter's property, Lasseen warns Vernon out of the newly-restricted area, but then fortuitously warns the posse away from the mineshaft, where Vernon's evidence is hidden. Berated by Mom about not having a job like thousands of other boys, Vernon makes up a story about Lasseen offering him a job. Doris used to know Tyrie's wife, Hildegard ("Hildy"), and threatens repeatedly to call her about the fishy story.

## Nancie Lechuga

The Littles' normally snotty next-door neighbor and leader of the pack of Mom's friends, Nancie is broken by the loss of her son Max in the massacre, and orders the memorial flowers and teddy bears no one else will send. Their yard is strewn with tributes. Mr. Lechuga, not Max's real father, stares death-rays at Vernon in court. A JCPenny's truck delivers to Nancie the fridge for which Doris has long waited, but this comes at the time love for Lally has made Doris less needy. After the blow-up with Lally and his departure with Leona, Vernon realizes Nancie has remained the lookout that summons the ladies to the Littles' home at key points in the unfolding drama. He uses this on the day of his planned execution, phoning Nancie to summon the girls and watch for Lally to drop by the house. Nancie watches out her window as they tail Lally to Keeter's field. Nancie is once again leader of the pack.

## Max Lechuga

Vernon's next-door neighbor and schoolmate, killed in the massacre, Max has been such an asshole in life Vernon cannot help calling him one in death. Max starts the May 20 tragedy by picking on Jesus Navarro's homosexuality in physics class, which leads to discussion of constitutional rights. Jesus storms out to fetch his father's gun.

## Garcia Madero ("Pelayo")

A Mexican truck driver who befriends Vernon at a highway road stop, Pelayo and ten-year-old son Lucas take him home to his tiny village near Acapulco. Pelayo is Vernon's size, but walks with the assurance of a gunslinger, an attitude capped off by adjusting his testicles before entering buildings. When they arrive, it is evident Pelayo is the village's big man, and he looks after Vernon, taking him to a white cottage up the beach and telling him through the English-speaking Victor he may stay there indefinitely. Vernon never sees Pelayo again, being picked up by Lally's camera crew and Taylor and flown to Houston to face murder charges. When Vernon names Pelayo as his alibi, there is a fatal problem, in that Vernon has visited Mexico as Daniel Naylor.



## Danny Naylor

A schoolmate older than Vernon, Danny has had sex with Ella, she brags. When Vernon flees to Mexico, he uses Danny's name as an alias, which comes back to haunt him in court, because Pelayo, his good alibi, knows him only as Danny.

## Marion Nuckles

Vernon's physics teacher, who sends him on an errand at the time of the massacre, Nuckles is a "powder-puff" devotee of big words who spends time after school with Jesus Navarro at his house and in his car, appearing to care, but making him worse, when he recommends he see a shrink. Before the shooting, Nuckles tries to control a classroom full of teens debating their constitutional rights after Max Lechuga picks on Jesus about being gay and hinting Nuckles frequents child pornography sites on the Internet. Vernon last sees his teacher, whose handwritten physics notes he uses as emergency toilet paper at the den, crawling in the bushes by the gym after Jesus turns his gun on him but hits Lori Donner instead. Nuckles' face is a tragedy mask fixated on Jesus' sports bag in Vernon's hand. Hospitalized for a mental breakdown after the massacre, Nuckles mentions to police a second firearm but is forbidden by physicians to speak at length. Nevertheless, a CNN reporter obtains a video statement, a transcript of which is entered as evidence at the time of Vernon's psychiatric hearing. In November, the trial judge demands Nuckles testify, in court or in the hospital. Nuckles comes to court bony, frail, pasty, and heavily made up. He points out Vernon, but has trouble talking about the shootings. He admits giving Vernon handwritten notes and sending him on an errand, and then shouts about the scorned love and erased perfume of Jesus, the blood of babes. Vernon killed them all. Nuckles and Vernon both sob. Nuckles' fate is sealed, when Jesus' suicide note is found in the den, linking him with Goosens and revealing their pedophilia.

## Palmyra ("Pam")

Doris Little's best friend, Pam is obsessed with food, a bad driver, and a loud and insistent modern woman not to be argued with. Pam has one cassette in her chicken smelling, fire ant-infested Mercury, *The Best of Glen Campbell*, and sings along with "Galveston," which reminds her of an old boyfriend from Wharton. Pam insists on feeding Vernon in the midst of his initial interrogation, leading to the prosecutor's claim he is a flight risk at his bail hearing. Pam is in court, in lieu of Mom, at Vernon's psychiatric hearing and brings him home, when he is released to his psychiatrist's care as an outpatient. When Pam finds runaway Vernon at the Greyhound bus station and takes him home, the authorities are put on alert, and he despairs of reaching Mexico. After the blow-up resulting in Lally leaving Mom for Leona, Pam jokes they should call him and say Mom has herpes, and then reveals the authorities have found a rifle at Keeter's. Pam attends Vernon's murder trial in Houston and oversees his last meal. Neither she nor Doris plan to witness the execution, preferring to remember Vernon as a



happy boy. Pam is missing from the final gathering of The Girls, having been invited to play pinball on *Oprah*.

## **Sheriff Porkorney**

The sheriff of Martirio, TX, Porkorney is a foul-breathed "strip of buffalo leather" tacked around a soul. His wife Georgette has little use for him and Deputy Gurie stiffens in his presence.

## **Georgette-Ann Porkorney ("George")**

The sheriff's chain-smoking wife, George is the oldest of Mom's so-called friends, a dried out old buzzard with lacquered hair.

## **Mrs. Porter**

The Smalls' childless neighbor at 20 Beulah Dr., Mrs. Porter is the owner of Kurt, the medium-sized dog that starts all the other neighborhood dogs barking.

## **Betty Pritchard**

One of Mom's so-called friends, Betty is like a small bird sitting on the shoulder of the rhino George. She has a mopey face and constantly repeats a reassuring, "I know." Mom recalls her Papa always contrasting her to sparkling, fresh Betty, who is class president in fourth grade and stars in school plays until her brutal father beats her and breaks her spirit.

## **Bradley Everett Pritchard ("Brad")**

Betty's ten-year-old son, Brad suffers some "disorder" that makes people overlook his watching television with his finger up his anus, breaking Vernon's PlayStation, and other misbehaving. Brad pops up on several occasions to badger and torment Vernon, but his name pops to mind as an alias, when Vernon phones Lally's blind mother and tries to blend in with the posse in Keeter's field. As a suspicious coordinator phones Vaine to verify the name, Brad steps up, announces it is "nouvelle" for a convict to search for own his gun, and mocks him as he flees with Ella's offer to look at her South Pole.

## **Lorna Speltz**

Vernon's classmate, Lorna gets jokes far more slowly than the others, and her late laughter and misunderstandings cause the other "dorky" girls laugh at her. Her mother is the only parent Vernon recognizes at his execution.

## **Victor**

The English-speaking Mexican who serves as Vernon's de facto translator in Pelayo's village, Victor inadvertently makes Vernon feel terrible by talking about his need to make good to bring income to the village.



# Objects/Places

## Acapulco, Mexico

Acapulco is the Pacific coast resort city in Mexico, where Vernon's truck driving host, Pelayo, unloads cargo before heading northward to his tiny seaside village. Vernon picks the largest of Acapulco's luxury hotels to place a phone call to Taylor, figuring he can blend into the large crowd of Americans. Affluent Taylor appears to know the city well, and agrees to wire money to the Western Union at *Comercial Mexicana*. Taylor surprises Vernon by flying down for his 16th birthday and leads him to a room in one of the finer hotels, where she seduces him, gets him to admit he has killed for her and loved it, and gives him up to Lally's camera crew, to be turned over to U.S. marshals and flown back to Houston.

## Antisocial Personality (ASP) Disorders

Dr. Goosens testifies at Vernon's murder trial about the psychological condition he has diagnosed Vernon suffers. ASP sufferers thrive on instant gratification, are facile manipulators, and are oblivious to others' rights and needs. They are commonly called psychopaths, and manifestations include murder. Goosens describes ASP sufferers appetite for thrills and dismissal of consequences. Sexuality is a powerful drive and to the antisocial mind, death and sex are common bedfellows. The fixation develops in childhood, is usually directed towards females, and can end in killing the object.

## Bar-B-Chew Barn

The favorite eatery of Doris Little's circle of perennially-dieting, overweight friends, the Barn is referred to throughout the novel but visited only once, on the day of Vernon's scheduled execution, as Doris and Pam plan to eat the same meal Pam has arranged for Vernon's last meal. The restaurant becomes a sponsor of Lally's plan for a multi-media project sharing Martirio's experience in dealing with tragedy with the rest of the world. Bought out by him, it expands into a statewide chain.

## Ellis Prison

Ellis Prison in Huntsville, TX, houses the state's 144 Death Row prisoners. Lally redesigns it to suit his reality television series to allow everything, including the execution in the so-called "Events Suite" to occur in-house. Previously, the condemned had been transported to the near-by Huntsville unit, home of the notorious but now retired electric chair, called "Old Smokey."





## Keeter's Field

Acres of empty ground on the southern outskirts of Martirio, TX, Keeter's is where boys first experience guns, sex, and beer, and Vernon, Jesus, and other pals have fitted an abandoned mine with a tin door and padlock and christened it the Den. There, at Mom's anxious request on the day her husband disappears, Vernon hides Dad's rifle. He keeps the padlock key in a Nike shoebox in his bedroom closet. A posse of townspeople searches Keeter's for a second gun allegedly used in the schoolyard massacre and finds some, but not Vernon's. The new SWAT team turns part of the property into a shooting range, where an officer is brutally gunned down with his own weapon, purportedly by the fugitive Vernon. The climax of the novel occurs at Keeter's, orchestrated by a series of phone calls from Death Row. An LSD-crazed Lally finds Vernon's rifle, wiping off Doris' incriminating fingerprints, and brandishes it at a SWAT helicopter. He is cut down in a hail of gunfire, and the den is finally searched. It reveals Jesus' suicide note, Vernon's feces, the physics notes he uses as emergency toilet paper, and a melted candle, establishing Vernon's alibi and earning him a last-second pardon of his death sentence.

## Martirio, TX

Decorated pumpjacks, jackrabbits, and Guries dominate the hot, wind-blown, "tight-assed" town, where Doris and Vernon Little live on the northern boundary, in a peeling wooden house at 17 Beulah Dr. Here the early action of the novel occurs, and its Spanish name befits the theme of martyrdom in the general sense of death. Once the second-toughest town in central Texas, Martirio now suffers nothing more serious than congestion at the drive-thru on Saturday nights. Moneyed folks live at the center of town and wealth diminishes as one heads outward, shown in the color of girls' underwear and healthiness of the lawns. Since Tuesday May 20, when the massacre occurs, Martirio is in mourning and swarming with press and camera crews. On the southern outskirts of Martirio lie Keeter's empty fields.

## Houston, TX

Houston is the site of Taylor Figueroa's meeting with Vernon at the Galleria mall during his desperate flight to the Mexican border and the venue for Vernon's spectacularly staged murder trial. Taylor attends the University of Texas in Houston and lives there with an older boyfriend.

## Siberian Ginseng Compound

The vile-tasting, strong-smelling concoction to which Lally is addicted, Siberian Ginseng Compound is sold in small bottles and its color precisely matches the LSD pearls Vernon is holding for Taylor Figueroa. As dogs are brought into Martirio to search for Vernon's rifle, he drops the illegal drugs into a bottle and hides it in his closet. On the



day of his scheduled execution, Vernon phones Lally to reveal the hiding place of his rifle, and the scoundrel finds the bottle alongside the key to the hiding place and greedily downs it before driving to Keeter's field. His brain fried by the hidden drugs, Lally perishes brandishing Vernon's rifle at a SWAT team.

## **Smith County**

The adjoining jurisdiction to Martirio, Smith County is respected for its police force, which includes SWAT teams equipped with armored personnel carriers and drug-sniffing dogs. Vernon flees, when they come to augment the murder investigation.

## **Surinam**

Surinam is Vernon's imagined escape destination whenever he despairs of going to Mexico and the academic subject he claims gets priority over all important real-life instructions in school, like the staying-power of Fate-tunes.



# Themes

## Popular Culture

Vernon Little contextualizes his life through images from popular culture. Movies and television programs in general have taught Vernon truth always wins in the end, a certitude that sustains him throughout his murder trial and unsuccessful appeal of his death sentence, while *Against All Odds* specifically allows him to imagine the TV-movie of his own life. It's about a crusty, mixed-up kid hopping a bus for Mexico, meeting an uncrusty blond cowgirl wearing bikinis beneath her Levi's, and living happily ever-after in beach house in Mexico. Life appears to be following art until Taylor betrays Vernon and sends him home for trial. Vernon often admonishes himself for lacking the courage and determination of Jean-Claude Van Damme or James Bond, initially sees Lally as Ricardo Moltenbomb (Montalban) on *Fantasy Island*, pictures Mom being played by Kathy Bates in *Misery*, and nicknames his first attorney after *Ricochet Rabbit*. Both a taxi driver and his attorney at his murder trial remind Vernon of Brian Dennehey, swimming with alien eggs in a pool. Vernon and his school friends had wished Dennehey could be their dad and Barbara Bush their granny. Vernon learns police cars drive straight and do not smash into one another as in the movies, but practices making faces, because TV teaches one must state explicitly, "I'm devastated," to be released.

Popular music, of Vernon's era or his mother's, feature prominently. Vernon believes Fate attaches tunes to major events in life and Muzak features *Rose Garden* on the first night he spends in jail. Sitting with Mom on the night before he flees to Mexico, Vernon hears bubbly Burt Bacharach playing in the distance, and Doris smiles briefly and sighs, hearing her favorite, Christopher Cross's "Sailing." It moves Vernon to see Mom dropping her facades and reacting genuinely. When Vernon needs to pawn belongings to fund his escape to Mexico, he sacrifices CDs of party music, which boosts the spirits only to dash them, and the heavy metal that leads to suicide. Vernon craves Eminem, but angry poetry is not sold in Martirio. *Gangsta* here means Bonnie & Clyde. Vernon ends up keeping only Country albums, which understand one's troubles. "Wichita Lineman" runs through Vernon's head as he walks the highway and "Sailing" returns on bus Muzak. So powerfully does "Sailing" touch Vernon that he selects it to play in the execution chamber as he dies, with Pam's favorite Fate-tune, "Galveston," making him go weak in the knees as it plays for his procession to the guerny. A fellow prisoner dies hearing, "I Got You Under My Skin," leaving Vernon to think about his final teachings. Classical music, such as Gustav Holst's martial *The Planets*, Mars, which Dr. Goosens plays while making Vernon undress and lie on a bed, on his stomach, legs spread, also have a psychological effect. It makes Vernon think about Van Damme and James Bond not taking this and fleeing.



## Fate

Vernon Little sees Fate (always capitalized) not only linking specific songs to specific life events, but as setting up and actively steering those events. Fate's worst act is introducing Lally into his family's life, letting Mom fall under his influence, and making Vernon initially trust him. Lally sets effecting "paradigm shifts" for oneself to Vernon's reliance on Fate, but by betraying Vernon in effecting the first one sets him all the more firmly on the path of his Fate. Vernon talks thereafter about "paradimes" as fateful happenings. In the course of the novel, Vernon receives from Fate a series of vital "learnings." Fate gives a person exactly as long as it takes to finish what he or she plans before providing the next task to be undertaken. Fate prevents a person from doing what is in his or her best interest, such as disposing of illegal drugs. Fate manipulates time, when one is in crisis, simultaneously making it crawl and race. Recognizing the tricks Fate is playing only makes them turn out worse. Fate puts Deputy Vaine in a pizza shop across the street from Vernon's ATM, and then overtakes him in a bus station by putting his picture in the newspapers with the headline "Guilty?" Fate makes Taylor Figueroa Leona's niece and nearly makes Vernon run into her in a Houston mall. Finally on a Mexico-bound bus, Vernon is too tired to check for cowgirls as the script of his mental life movie specifies, but he half-expects Fate to make Lally or Ella's mom appear. On Death Row, the old prisoner Vernon mistakes for a chaplain sets Vernon straight just before his own execution. God, who in Vernon's constructions fairly closely equates with Fate, is an illusion, created by hungry human beings to excuse their own striving to get what they want at the expense of others. He tells Vernon to grow up and learn simply to observe how people and animals behave.

## Sex

Sex pervades *Vernon God Little* but only once is shown taking place, when Taylor Figueroa seduces Vernon to obtain a confession to murder. By then it has grown clear Vernon's experience with sex is typically adolescent. He and his friends learn about girls, guns, and beer in isolated Keeter's field, and are simultaneously turned on and off by Ella Bouchard, a simple-minded, underdeveloped classmate willing to show her north and south "poles" to the boys. Vernon uses his mother's lingerie catalogs to masturbate, and appears to have an underwear fixation as he rides his bike through town. He regrets not having taken advantage of his one golden opportunity for sex, when he finds Taylor wasted outside a party to which he is not invited. Rather than take full advantage of her, he goes in to find her friends to tend to her. From what he does see on that occasion, Vernon puts Taylor into the dream movie of his life. She will run along the Mexican beach with him, wearing only bikini bottoms. When he thinks or talks about sexual contact, Vernon is vividly centered on the vision, scents, and tastes of the vulvae. After giving up swearing in prison, Vernon's sex drive appears to diminish, but comes back as he sees a transformed Ella in the witnesses' room, while he lies strapped to the gurney.



Homosexuality receives nearly equal treatment in the novel, because Vernon's best friend, Jesus Navarro, has discovered he is gay and is persecuted for this savagely by everyone but Vernon and the "class goddess," Lori Donner. Vernon suspects their physics teacher of being gay and observes Jesus' attitudes worsen after Mr. Nuckles takes him under his wing and suggests he see a psychiatrist. It turns out, Jesus sees the same court-appointed psychiatrist that examines Vernon prior to his bail hearing, and touches him inappropriately during the session. Jesus' suicide note establishes a link between Nuckles and Dr. Goosens, but the truth about Goosens' pornographic websites showing Jesus and other boys has already come out during Vernon's trial. Whenever the subject comes up, Vernon insists he is not gay, and the legal rights of gays is mentioned in passing during the physics class debate that precedes the schoolyard massacre, but otherwise homosexuality is not mentioned or portrayed. Sex is dealt with clinically in court testimony about how Antisocial Personality disorders can have a sexual basis (hetero- or homosexual) and lead to the murder of those the sufferer controls. It is, of course, taken for granted that in prison, males rape males and all the cons masturbate, but the context in which it is mentioned is Vernon's wonderment that Mom must at her age use euphemisms to inquire.

## Tragedy and Entertainment

The story of *Vernon God Little* begins after a devastating tragedy: Just three days earlier, Vernon's friend Jesus Navarro gunned down sixteen of his classmates and then killed himself. All of the events in the novel are spawned by this single tragic event. In addition, Vernon's experiences amount to a secondary tragedy in the wake of the shootings: He is unfairly accused of being an accomplice to the murders; the only people he cares about seem to care less about him than about fame and worldly goods; and he is sentenced to death despite his innocence and a complete lack of evidence against him.

The tragedy depicted in *Vernon God Little*, however, is presented by those around Vernon as entertainment. News crews swarm the town of Martirio after the shootings to capture the story of the shootings for viewers around the world. At the end of the book, death-row inmates are put on camera as entertainment, and television audiences are asked to decide whom should be executed next. Even the executions themselves are televised.

## Sacrifice and Martyrdom

Throughout the first part of the novel, Vernon repeatedly remarks that the people around him are preparing to nail him to the cross, a reference to the crucifixion of Christ. In this way, Vernon suggests that he is being sacrificed for the sins of those around him, even though he himself has done nothing wrong. Later, Vernon sees the Spanish phrase "*Me ves, y sufres*" on the back of a truck in which he travels in Mexico; some believe that Jesus Christ spoke the words, which mean "see me, and suffer," as he was crucified. He ultimately tattoos the words across his chest in preparation for his execution.



Further, by naming Vernon's friend Jesus, the author draws a connection between Vernon's persecuted friend and Christ; Jesus Navarro, who is picked on by other students and sexually abused by his therapist, in a sense dies because of the sins of others. The author even uses the word "martirio"—Spanish for "martyrdom"—as the name of Vernon and Jesus's Texas hometown.

## Fame

In *Vernon God Little*, many of the characters act the way they do because they believe they have a chance to achieve fame after the tragedy at Martirio High School. This quest for fame is best embodied by Eulalio "Lally" Ledesma, who positions himself within the Little family by seducing Vernon's mother, only so he can set Vernon up as a villain for Lally's self-made news reports. Lally achieves the fame he seeks at the expense of Vernon's reputation and Doris's heart. He then promises the same fame to others, including the object of Vernon's affection, Taylor Figueroa, provided they help him come up with new stories that further cement Vernon's guilt and therefore increase Lally's own fame. Taylor Figueroa readily betrays Vernon's trust in her for a chance at stardom, and Doris's "friend" Leona just as eagerly steals away Lally for her shot at becoming a news anchor.

By contrast, fame for Vernon is a curse throughout the novel. It prevents him from maintaining his privacy, and after he runs away it limits his ability to travel unnoticed. Because of his fame—and the suggestibility of those who have seen him on the news—he is identified by witnesses to sixteen additional murders after the Martirio school shooting. In the end, Vernon is saved by his original attorney, Abdini, who is one of the few characters who does not seem to seek fame.



# Style

## Point of View

*Vernon God Little* is told in the first person present tense by an insightful teenager trapped by circumstances. He appears to know well the person(s) to whom he spills his innermost feelings and often caustic, filthy observations about his family, his mother's friends, his classmates, many of whom he has seen murdered at school, and the police, legal, medical, media, and penal personnel who control his existence after he is taken into custody and charged with murder. Vernon tells it like he sees it, through a filter of music, television, and film and with a scatological verve, until a prison psychiatrist suggests he clean up his language. Vernon appears to be talking with another young person, one attune to popular culture and the events he is discussing, merely filling him/her in on details from his unique vantage point. That person is likely not from his own town or high school, however, given the colorful detail he imparts, which makes it easy for the reader, whatever his or her age, to get into the story.

## Setting

*Vernon God Little* is set in Central Texas, around the turn of the twenty-first century, primarily in the small oil town of Martirio, but with a brief trip to Houston, the border towns, and then deep into the heart of Mexico and the moneyed resort town of Acapulco. Vernon is then arrested, flown back to Houston to face trial, and finally incarcerated on Death Row in Huntsville, TX. Vernon tells a story about a hot, dusty, boring town, where youngsters ride their bikes out to garbage dumps, endure their school days learning little about the practical things of life and forming cliques that snipe at on another. The novel opens shortly after Vernon's strange friend, Jesus, has massacred his classmates and turned the rifle on himself. Vernon is taken in for questioning as an accomplice, and the town is in deep mourning. We follow Vernon out on bail, fleeing to Mexico, and sitting in court and prison, waiting to learn his fate. Finally, a powerful anesthetic administered as he lies on the gurney in the death chamber transport his mind to his home and on to Keeter's field to see played out the drama he sets up by his final phone calls. Vernon's nemesis, Lally, perishes, and the evidence of Vernon's innocence is found. The book ends outside Vernon's house as he and new girlfriend Ella prepare to leave on vacation. All the cameras and hoopla are gone and Martirio is back to normal.

## Language and Meaning

*Vernon God Little* is written in rough teenage idiom, every third adjective being "fucken," applied to nouns at random, sometimes for emphasis but more often, it appears, simply out of habit. When a prison psychiatrist suggests Vernon clean up his language and drop evidence of a profound anal fixation, he obeys and apologizes thereafter to his





hearer for even the most innocent and necessary references to the bowels. While Vernon controls the story, he gives many of the characters distinctive verbal patterns by which they can be recognized. He is generally dismissive of adults, and characterizes Mom as shallowly and meekly asking, "Are you all right?" - even on the day of his execution. Mom dissembles, nags, and twists a psychological knife in his back. Deputy Vaine, like all the Guries, "Gh-rrrr's." Fellow teens talk toughly and defiantly, but the wealthy and slightly older Taylor Figueroa stands out by her exaggerated Valley Girl syntax. In the final moments, when Vernon is waiting for the chemicals to flow in and end his life, his language loses its anesthetic tone but does not return fully to routine filth. He has grown up and learned a lot about life and how people struggle to live it.

## Structure

*Vernon God Little* consists of 27 untitled chapters divided into five "acts." Act 1, "Shit happened" (chapter 1-6), shows Vernon wrongly named an accomplice to a mass murder at his high school and remanded to jail pending a psychiatric review. Act 2 (chapters 7-13), "How I spent my summer vacation," shows Vernon released on his own recognizance but subject to psychological review and watches Fate steer him to the point he can no longer stay in town. Act 3, "Against all odds" (chapters 14-18), shows Vernon achieving his dream of a beach house in Mexico and having sex with Taylor Figueroa. However, he's only to be sold out and returned to Houston for trial. Act 4, "How my summer vacation spent me" (chapters 19-22), covers Vernon's weeks in court, ending with his conviction of the Martirio murders. Finally, Act 5, "*Me ves y sufres*" (chapters 23-27), shows Vernon's weeks on Death Row and brings him to the instant the lethal chemicals will flow into his veins before an anesthetic transports his mind to the scene of Lally's showdown with the SWAT team and discovery of the evidence that clears Vernon. What has happened in Maritirio, TX, and what the truth is that Vernon knows can set him free are withheld well into Acts 4 and 5, allowing considerable suspense to build before the *deus ex machina* ending.

## First-person Narrative

*Vernon God Little* uses a point of view known as first-person narrative. In a first-person narrative, one of the characters tells the story in his or her own words. A first-person narrative can be identified by the use of personal pronouns such as "I" and "me." In a first-person narrative, the reader learns the thoughts and feelings of the viewpoint character, though the thoughts and feelings of other characters remain unknown. In *Vernon God Little*, the story is told from the point of view of Vernon Gregory Little, who is also the main character. He tells the story in his own words, which creates a unique style and voice that reflects both his age and his attitude toward the world around him.





## Present Tense

*Vernon God Little* is written in the present tense. This means that events are described as they are happening. Most contemporary stories are written in the past tense, telling what characters already did instead of what they currently do. Pierre's use of the present tense creates a sense of immediacy and urgency in the story, and, because the author never specifies a year in which the novel takes place, also suggests that the story might be happening right now.

## Five-act Structure

The five-act structure is a type of story structure seen in many modern stories and plays; it is sometimes known as "Freytag's Pyramid," named for the German novelist and dramatist Gustav Freytag, who first described it after studying the works of William Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks. In a five-act structure, the first act generally presents exposition, or an explanation of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. The second act consists of rising action, where the main character faces greater complications or obstacles to his or her goal. The third act consists of the climax or turning point, where the main character generally experiences a sudden change in fortune for better or worse. The fourth act contains the falling action; in this act, events play out as a result of the climax. The final act is known as the denouement, where the main conflict of the story is resolved.

Though the five-act structure is sometimes applied to stories and novels, these types of literary works are not usually broken down into acts as in a stage play. However, *Vernon God Little* is divided into five sections called "acts," much like a play would be. This emphasizes the notion that Vernon's story is being used by those around him to craft a sort of real-life television drama, and that nothing in his world is quite real.

## Historical Context

On April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado, went on a shooting spree that resulted in the deaths of twelve students and one teacher, and the injury of two dozen others, before taking their own lives. It is the most infamous school shooting in American history.

The two Columbine shooters—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—were both seniors at the time and by all appearances planned the shooting far in advance. As early as 1997, Harris was posting death threats against other students on a website he created, as well as pictures and information about his experimentations with creating homemade bombs. Over a year before the shootings, the two were arrested for stealing computer equipment out of a parked van, but they avoided serious punishment by agreeing to participate in both counseling and community service programs. At around this time, the two began to accumulate an arsenal of weapons through friends and acquaintances, some of whom were later jailed for helping the two boys obtain guns illegally. Harris and Klebold also kept journals that suggested they were planning a large-scale bombing similar to the bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995, and they also wrote "hit lists" of students they wished to kill (though only one of their eventual victims was on such a list). Their original plan had been to blow up the Columbine High School cafeteria with two propane-based bombs that would detonate during the first lunch rush of the day. Afterward, they had planned to walk through the wreckage and shoot any remaining survivors.

On April 20, 1999, Harris and Klebold arrived at school just prior to the first lunch period and placed their two homemade bombs in the cafeteria. When the bombs failed to fully detonate, the two decided to open fire on students sitting on a grassy area outside the cafeteria. They soon made their way inside the school and to the library, where they shot and killed several more students and, from the library windows, attempted to shoot students as they were being evacuated from the rest of the building by police. Harris and Klebold spared several students, though their reasons for sparing these students are unknown. They left the library and went to other parts of the school, including the evacuated cafeteria, before returning to the library and taking their own lives. From start to finish, their rampage lasted less than an hour.

In the aftermath of the killings, there were several reports of a third shooter who had helped Harris and Klebold carry out the massacre. Police arrested a friend of the boys named Chris Morris on the day of the shootings, but he was later released. Another friend of the two, Nathan Dykeman, was also investigated as a possible accomplice, though witnesses confirmed that he was not at the school at the time of the shootings.

In *Vernon God Little*, Jesus Navarro kills sixteen in his school shooting spree—three more than in Columbine. Also, as with the Columbine shootings, Jesus's friend is almost immediately suspected of being an accomplice to the murders. When Vernon cannot prove his alibi, he is convicted and sentenced to death.



## Critical Overview

When *Vernon God Little* was first published in 2003, it received a wide range of critical responses. Some praised the novel, while others saw it as nothing more than an unfunny and uneven effort by a fledgling writer. This critical split decision even led to speculation that American reviewers were incapable of seeing the humor in a book that offers such a scathing critique of their own society.

In the *Guardian*, one of Britain's premier newspapers, Carrie O'Grady described the novel as "a startling and excellent debut." O'Grady also called the character of Vernon as "a brilliant comic creation." Joanne Wilkinson, in a review for *Booklist*, describes the book as "scatological, irreverent, crass, and very, very funny," and asserted that "Pierre is a comic anarchist with talent to spare." According to Wilkinson, "Every page is saturated with a humor that barely masks Pierre's contempt for the media, the criminal justice system, and the rampant materialism of contemporary culture."

Sam Sifton, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, described *Vernon God Little* as "a dangerous, smart, ridiculous and very funny first novel." Sifton also called the book "a howl of satirical protest against much that helps define American culture to the rest of the world: reality television, fast food, religion, the death penalty." Sifton felt Pierre's writing is "simply terrific" and noted that the author "renders adolescence brilliantly, capturing with seeming effortless the bright, contradictory hormone rush of teenage life." Sifton described the character of Vernon as "a deceptively simple boy who narrates this tale in the manner of a character created by Mark Twain and remixed by Dr. Dre."

Author Joyce Carol Oates echoed many of these sentiments in a review for the *New Yorker*. Oates wrote that the novel is "unexpectedly moving" and "raucous and brooding, coarse and lyric, corrosive and sentimental in about equal measure." Oates also noted that "Pierre has a flawless ear for adolescent-boy speech." However, Oates did concede that "the objects of Pierre's contempt—tabloid TV, consumer-culture idiocy, the American obsession with the sufferings of others, material goods, and 'image'—are not very original."

Other reviewers were not so kind. As an unnamed reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* wrote, "Humor and mass murder make for strange bedfellows, and first-timer Pierre fails to find the tone that might harmonize them." The same reviewer argued that "there is no vision of [Vernon's] world," and that the book's "delayed revelation" about Jesus and the school shootings "is pointless and without suspense." In a review for *Publishers Weekly*, an unnamed critic stated:

Most of the plotting feels like an excuse for Vernon's endless, sharply snide riffs on his small town and the unique excesses of America that helped spawn the killings.... Vernon's voice grows tiresome, his excesses make him rather unlikable and the over-the-top, gross-out humor is hit-or-miss.



John Freeman, writing for the *Seattle Times*, also commented on the unlikable characters: "Not one character in these pages, including, eventually, Vernon God Little, earns our sympathy. They are uniformly cruel and crass to one another." Freeman also pointed out that the book "twists itself into a pretzel of unbelievable plotting and gross generalization" to convey its message.

Andrea Kempf, in a review for *Library Journal*, wrote of the novel, "The stereotypes are broad: poor Mexicans are noble; white Texans are idiots; women are mindless, materialistic gossips; and convicted murderers are more humane than people outside." Kempf also believed, "America may have difficulty finding the humor in this novel, but equally troubling is the inauthenticity of the narrative voice." Michiko Kakutani, in a review of the book for the *New York Times*, stated that "for the most part it is a lumbering, mannered performance, a vigorous but unimaginative compendium of every cliché you've ever heard about America in general and Texas in particular." Kakutani asserted that the author "fails to use the sort of telling details or surreal developments that might lend his story an eerie verisimilitude, or jolt the reader into a recognition of a larger truth." Kakutani concluded:

In trying to score a lot of obvious points off a lot of obvious targets, Mr. Pierre may have won the Booker Prize and ratified some ugly stereotypes of Americans, but he hasn't written a terribly convincing or compelling novel.

*Vernon God Little* went on to win the 2003 Man Booker Prize, which is awarded to the best novel written by a citizen of the British Commonwealth or Ireland. The book also won the 2003 Whitbread Award for Best First Novel. Although some speculated that the book was poorly received by American critics because of its strong criticisms of American society, the reviews quoted here show that many American critics—including those for the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*—actually praised the novel. The novel was also listed as a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2003.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



# Critical Essay #1

*In this essay, Greg Wilson, a pop-culture writer who lives in central Texas, argues that the narrative voice of Vernon in Pierre's *Vernon God Little* is anything but authentic.*

In his novel *Vernon God Little*, DBC Pierre has received a great deal of praise for the authenticity of his eponymous narrator's highly stylized teenage voice. The narrator is a fifteen-year-old Texas boy, an outcast full of typical adolescent rebellion and anger; the prose is filled with unconventional phrasing and language. Indeed, an author no less reputable than Joyce Carol Oates has commented on the author's "flawless ear for adolescent-boy speech." When it comes to narrative voice, *Vernon God Little* has been favorably compared to classics such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. This praise must come from readers who have, at best, a superficial understanding of a true teenage viewpoint. When it comes to writing in the voice of a believable fifteen-year-old Texas boy, the author fails miserably and in multiple ways.

To be fair, there are instances in which the author displays a keen understanding of the teenage psyche. His descriptions of Vernon's thoughts and feelings regarding his dream girl, Taylor Figueroa, are filled with a yearning and self-consciousness known well to any teenager. The author also works hard to include an authentic level of typical teenage-boy profanity, including well over two hundred instances of the word "f—k" in various forms (most prominently as the adjective "f—ken"). Additionally, the author includes a few examples of a somewhat accurate central Texas dialect that issue from the mouths of several characters, including Vernon, such as "fire ants" being pronounced "far aints" and "Mexicans" being pronounced "Meskins." However, the credibility of Vernon's narrative voice is shattered by numerous other deliberate and intrusive stylistic choices made by the author.

First, Pierre insists on including a distracting and downright ridiculous number of malapropisms in the novel. Malapropism is the unintentional misuse of a word in place of a correct word, often to comic effect. However, the malapropisms in *Vernon God Little* offer nothing to the reader but irritation. A running gag where one character repeatedly misuses words is both cliché and unfunny, but perhaps excusable; a story in which nearly *everyone* pointlessly misuses words is just laborious. One might be tempted to argue that *all* of the malapropisms are Vernon's, since he is the filter through which the reader experiences the world. However, Vernon often corrects other characters' misuses in dialogue exchanges, and other characters occasionally correct his verbal missteps. If these malapropisms offered some deeper insight into any of the characters—especially Vernon—they might be justified. However, repeated references to Manual Cunt in place of Immanuel Kant and Ricardo Moltenbomb instead of Ricardo Montalban add nothing to the reader's understanding of the characters or the world they inhabit.

Many other "clever" bits of wordplay amount to nothing more than annoying authorial intrusion. For example, Vernon's lawyer Mr. Abdini's speech is generally spelled out



phonetically to indicate an accent—"whappen" instead of "what happened," for example, or "impotent" instead of "important." The accent never seems to add up to any truly authentic-sounding dialect, but that can be overlooked. However, the author routinely uses word substitutions with the sole purpose of injecting cleverness on the page. In one instance, the author uses the phrase "tsetse fly" as a substitute for Abdini's pronunciation of "testify" this is clearly not simply a phonetic representation, because "tsetse" is not pronounced as it is spelled. It is also a word beyond the plausible reach of Vernon, so it cannot be argued that Vernon is merely transcribing it after mishearing what Abdini said. The only reasonable explanation, then, is that the author thought it would be clever to include it. He may well be right, but that sort of cleverness steals the authenticity from Vernon's voice, and the reader cannot help but see the author screaming for attention between the lines.

In another example of the author's insistence on forced cleverness, Vernon enters the courtroom and sees the family members of victims. He sees that they are "devastated," and he muses: "I'd give anything for them to be vastated again." This is the type of visual wordplay that could only ever work on the page, and even then it forces the reader to stop and recognize its cleverness before being waved on through to the next paragraph. Aside from its blatant showiness, such wordplay does not seem at all consistent with Vernon's character.

Another way in which Pierre fails to create an authentic voice for Vernon is through his choice of words. Vernon does not achieve a consistent and believable level of diction. By contrast, Mark Twain, who created one of the most masterful narrative voices in all of literature with the character of Huckleberry Finn, never put words in Huck's mouth that did not seem like they belonged there. Huck speaks with utter plainness, even when describing scenes along the Mississippi River in some of the most breathtaking and poetic passages of the book. Huck does not suddenly become a mouthpiece for the writer Mark Twain simply so the author can show off his descriptive skills. Vernon, however, routinely lapses into eloquent writer-speak that is not even remotely believable for his level of development and maturity. The author throws in words like "abattoir" and "mastications" and "cannonade" and "tetchy" without a second thought; even words like "furtive" and "doting" might escape attention with a less stylized narrative voice, but here, surrounded by words like "f—ken" and "duh," they bring the reader to a grinding halt. Most embarrassingly of all, the author has his native Texan Vernon use the word "windscreen" to refer to a car windshield—a term unbelievable for *any* native-born American to use.

The song references throughout the novel also do little to bolster the authenticity of the narrator. Though it is certainly possible for a fifteen-year-old Texas boy to be familiar with the songs mentioned in the book, it stretches the limits of plausibility to suggest that these are the songs that would be foremost in such a character's mind. Glen Campbell's "Galveston" is, perhaps, an exception; its presence is explained by the character of Palmyra, and it fits well in the story. The song "Better Man" by Pearl Jam also appears within a context that just manages to scrape by as plausible, though the author could have just as easily used a song more fitting to the character's age. (Vernon would have been six when the song originally came out, and nine years to a teenager is equivalent





to a lifetime.) However, for a fifteen-year-old boy in 2003 (which is presumably when the story takes place) to be fixated on the 1979 pop song "Sailing" by Christopher Cross is laughable unless a believable context is provided by the author. This is not to suggest that all teenagers are ignorant of music from before their time; however, a character like Vernon—who cannot even remember Princess Diana's name—does not give one the impression of being a pop culture historian. The truth is that these songs feel like they were chosen by a thirty- or forty-something writer who drew from his own well of musical knowledge to inform his narrator, even though the two are separated by a painfully obvious generation gap.

The same holds true for Vernon's allusions to movies, most particularly his obsession with recreating an image from the movie *Against All Odds*. Again, in the proper context, such an idea might not seem completely preposterous. Perhaps if Vernon saw the movie while in jail with nothing else to do, for instance, he would be attracted to the notion of stealing away to a private house on a beach in Mexico. However, for a fifteen-year-old boy to carry around in his mind a fantasy based around a movie—widely regarded as a romance—that came out years before he was born, and has been virtually forgotten by everyone else since, seems to strain the reader's suspension of disbelief beyond the breaking point. Add to this Vernon's recognition that his lawyer looks like Brian Dennehy as he appeared in the movie *Cocoon*, which came out in 1985. As with the music choices, it feels as if a much older writer has accidentally dropped a curtain and revealed the creaky machinery that makes the narrator dance his awkward dance.

In the utterly absurd hyper-America of *Vernon God Little*, a believable narrator could have helped guide the reader through the madness and ground the story in credibility. Instead, DBC Pierre provides an equally absurd caricature of an American teen that reads exactly like what he is: imaginary. The author has received much praise for the unique voice he has created for Vernon Little. While Vernon's voice is most definitely unique, it is at best inauthentic, and at worst the novel's fatal flaw.

**Source:** Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on *Vernon God Little*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

*Hey Nostradamus!* is author Douglas Coupland's 2003 novel that revolves around a Columbine-like high school shooting. Coupland's massacre takes place in 1988 Vancouver, and in a unique twist, the story is narrated in part by one of the victims of the shooters.

*Ludmila's Broken English* is DBC Pierre's second novel, published in 2006. The book intertwines the story of two once-conjoined British twins who have been separated from each other with the story of a young Russian woman desperate to find a way to support her family after she kills her incestuous grandfather. The two ultimately collide, thanks to an online scam for buying Russian brides.

*Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty* is lawyer-turned-author Scott Turow's 2004 nonfiction treatise on a subject with which he



is intimately familiar, having served as both a prosecutor and an advocate for death-row inmates during his storied career. The book provides an objective and evenhanded look at both sides of the debate over capital punishment.

Though written in the 1960s, John Kennedy Toole's comic novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* was first published in 1980—eleven years after the author killed himself. Toole was subsequently awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for the novel, which chronicles the misadventures of eccentric New Orleans resident Ignatius J. Reilly as he embarks on a somewhat belated journey to start his working life in the French Quarter. Some critics have compared the absurd Texas of Pierre's *Vernon God Little* to Toole's quirky vision of New Orleans.

## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Havelly reviews Vernon God Little and examines its plot, structure, and themes.*

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

**Source:** Cicely Palser Havelly, "Vernon God Little by DBC Pierre," in *The English Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, September 2004, pp.16-17.

## Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Kakutani criticizes the stereotypes and clichés in Vernon God Little, which he dismisses as unimaginative and unconvincing.*

[Text Not Available]

[Text Not Available]

**Source:** Michiko Kakutani, "Deep in the Heart of Texas (Via Australia)," in the *New York Times*, Vol. 153, November 5, 2003, p. E1.



## Quotes

"You don't know how bad I want to be Jean-Claude Van Damme. Ram her fucken gun up her ass, and run away with a panty model. But just look at me: clump of lawless brown hair, the eyelashes of a camel. Big ole puppy-dog features like God made me through a fucken magnifying glass. You know right away my movie's the one where I puke on my legs, and they send a nurse to interview me instead." Act 1, Chapter 1, pgs. 8-9

"Just then, Fate plays a card. The hiss of Leona Dunt's Eldorado echoes up the street. The uterus-mobile from hell. It's full of Mom's two other so-called friends, Georgette and Betty. They always just drop by. Until Tuesday, Mrs. Lechuga was the leader of this pack; now she's indisposed until further notice. Act 1, Chapter 3, pg. 23

"So guess what your fucken hero did, take a shot. Vernon Gonad Little went into the party and sent her best friend out to mind her. I never got a finger to her panties, even thou I was close enough to catch the lick-your-own-skin-and-sniff-it disease that wastes me today; fucken hauntings of hollow between elastic and thigh, tang ablaze with cotton and apricot muffin, cream cheese and pee. But no, duh, I went inside." Act 1, Chapter 5, pg. 48

"My daddy's gun. If only my ole lady had let me keep it at home. But no. The fucken gun gave her the tremors. I had to stash it far from the house, way out in the public domain. Knuckles must know it's there. Jesus must've used it as a wild card, must've mentioned it to stop him following, to make him think there was an arsenal stashed away. But then Jesus died. Took the information, the context, all our innocent boyhood times with him. Took the truth with him. "Just my gun's left behind, with all the wrong fingerprints on it. Left behind, just waiting. Act 1, Chapter 6, pg. 61

"I sense a learning: the much dumber people than you end up in charge. Look at the way things are. I'm no fucken genius or anything, but these spazzos are in charge of my every twitch. What I'm starting to think is maybe only the dumb are safe in this world, the ones who roam with the herd, without thinking about every little thing. But see me? I have to think about every little fucken thing." Act 2, Chapter 7, pg. 71

"Mom lingers back. 'Go ahead, Lalito, I'll see you at the sizzle.' Her eyes flick over the crowd, then she sidles up to me like a spy. 'Vernon, are you *all right*?' That's my ole mom. I swell with involuntary warmth. "'I guess so,' I say. That's what you say around here if you mean 'No.' "She fidgets with my collar. 'Well, if you're sure - I only want you to be happy.' That's what you say around here if you mean, 'Tough shit.' 'If you could just get a job,' she says, 'make a little money, things'd be fine again, I know they would.'" Act 2, Chapter 9, pg. 90

"A dizzy feeling comes over me as I hit the ring-end of my fucken tether. I pull Lally's business card out of my pocket, and hold it up in the air. 'Everybody - I called *Yoo-lalio*'s office today, and guess who answered? His blind *momma*, who just had her house



emptied by the finance company on account of his van repayments.' Lally's eyes turn to coal." Act 2, Chapter 10, pg. 107

"The disconnection truck already set off for the day,' she says. Razorfish slash the fucken raft. Mom's eyebrows lean up on one elbow to watch. 'I better call Tyrie.' She fumbles through the phone-table drawer for her address book. I say on my stomach in front of the TV. Save me from falling back down here when I'm fucken dead." Act 2, Chapter 12, pg. 132

"Hello?' The voice is liquid ass in panty elastic. "'Taylor, hi - it's Vern.' "'Wait up, I'll get her,' says a girl. 'Tay! *Taylor* - it's Vern.' "'Who?' calls a voice in the background. "Then you hear giggles. I fucken hate that. Your chances with a girl fall sharply in the vicinity of giggles. Learning: never try to deal with more than one girl at a time." Act 3, Chapter 15, pg. 155

"The guy taps at his keyboard, checks his screen. Then shakes his head. 'Sorry, nothing here.' I pause for a moment, to calculate the depth of my fuckedness. Then the agent's eyes rivet to something over my shoulder. "I'm suddenly grabbed around the waist. 'Freeze! Says a voice.'" Act 3, Chapter 17, pg. 190

"So the whole summer has passed since I last troubled you with my talkings. Yeah; I spent summer locked up, waiting for trial. Jesus kept me company, in a way. I just couldn't talk. Like got real, I guess. May I just plain grew up. Watch out for that sucker too, I mean it." Act 4, Chapter 19, pg. 203

"Absolutely, and we can't tamper with that. But the new fast-track appeals process means prisoners' last recourses at law are spent much sooner, after which I say the public should have a hand in the roster of final events.' Lally lets fly a hooshy laugh at the reporter, and spreads his hands wide. 'In the tradition of momentous progress, it's blindingly simple, Bob: criminals cost money. Popular TV makes money. Criminals are popular on TV. Put them together and, presto - problem solved.'" Act 5, Chapter 23, pg. 246



## Topics for Discussion

How does Vernon's change in language reflect his growing up in a broader sense?

How, psychologically, does Taylor get Vernon to make a false confession?

How does Vernon's ignorance of Spanish advance the plot, while he is in Mexico?

What is the function of food in the novel?

What do Lally's outlandish broadcasting plans reveal about U.S. society? Could it ever happen?

"Martyr" in the original Greek means, "Witness." What is witnessed in Martirio?

Does anyone in the novel appear to believe in God?

- In *Vernon God Little*, the last two chapters of the novel are open to interpretation by the reader. Some believe that the entire sequence after Vernon is strapped to the gurney exists only in Vernon's imagination. Some believe that the events actually occur, and offer a satisfying conclusion to the events of the book. What do you think? Write an essay explaining your opinion; be sure to include examples from the text that support your position.
- Throughout *Vernon God Little*, the narrator substitutes many other words that start with the letter "g" for his actual middle name, which is "Gregory." In the first chapter, for example, he refers to himself as "Vernon Genius Little." Take note of the many nicknames he gives himself throughout the book, and write a report listing the names and their significance to the character of Vernon. What do the names reveal about him? Why do you think the author uses "Vernon God Little" as the title of the book?
- The theme of cause and effect appears many times throughout *Vernon God Little*. For example, when Vaine Gurie first questions Vernon in the police station, she gives him a speech about cause and effect; when Vernon is waiting on death row, he plays with a clacker-ball toy that demonstrates cause and effect. Write a report describing the theme of cause and effect as it appears throughout the novel, and explain how the idea of cause and effect influences Vernon's actions and attitudes.
- Throughout *Vernon God Little*, Vernon and the other characters frequently substitute incorrect sound-alike words for real words. Vernon says his dog is not a "rat-wheeler" instead of "rotweiller," and the courtroom typist is a "stainographer." Do these repeated misuses suggest anything about the characters in the novel? Write a paper identifying some of these mistakes, and explain whether you feel they enhance or detract from the authenticity of the novel's world.
- In small groups, brainstorm about how life would be if television viewers really could call and vote on events in the lives of private citizens. Outline a story—a

farce, a cautionary tale, or any genre you like—that explores such a premise. Discuss the different ideas in a group.



## Further Study

Brown, Brooks, and Rob Merritt, *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine*, Lantern Books, 2002.

As a former friend of the two killers at Columbine, Brooks Brown—the boy who was famously warned by Eric Harris to leave the school grounds before the shooting started—was, like Vernon Little, suspected as an accomplice immediately after the shootings. In this book, he tells of his rocky relationship with the shooters, as well as the environment of persecution and bullying in which the murderers lived.

Radford, Benjamin, *Media Mythmakers: How Journalists, Activists and Advertisers Mislead Us*, Prometheus Books, 2003.

In this book, Radford points out many examples of how different members of the media operate to serve their own needs above those of the public they purport to work for.

Salinger, J. D., *The Catcher in the Rye*, Little, Brown, 1991 (originally published in 1951).

Many reviewers have compared Vernon Little to Holden Caulfield, the main character of this groundbreaking Salinger novel. Told from the point of view of Caulfield, *The Catcher in the Rye* set the groundwork for all future coming-of-age novels, including *Vernon God Little*.

Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Penguin Classics, 2002 (originally published in 1884).

Considered by many to be the "Great American Novel," Twain's classic tale of one misfit boy's coming of age is still a shining example of unique narrative voice in American fiction. From its first line to its last, Finn's narrative is both authentic and revealing of his character.





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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as “The Narrator” and alphabetized as “Narrator.” If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name “Jean Louise Finch” would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname “Scout Finch.”
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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