

# **The Water-method Man Study Guide**

## **The Water-method Man by John Irving**

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# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Water-method Man Study Guide.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>                         | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>                     | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>                     | <a href="#">5</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 4-6.....</a>                     | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 7-9.....</a>                     | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 10-12.....</a>                   | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 13-15.....</a>                   | <a href="#">13</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 16-18.....</a>                   | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 19-21.....</a>                   | <a href="#">18</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 22-24.....</a>                   | <a href="#">20</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 25-27.....</a>                   | <a href="#">21</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 28-30.....</a>                   | <a href="#">22</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 31-34.....</a>                   | <a href="#">23</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 35-38.....</a>                   | <a href="#">25</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>                       | <a href="#">27</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>                   | <a href="#">30</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>                           | <a href="#">32</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>                            | <a href="#">34</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>                           | <a href="#">36</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>            | <a href="#">38</a> |



## Plot Summary

Fred "Bogus" Trumper is a young graduate student trying to figure out what to do with himself. Whether hitchhiking across Europe, playing the family man, or editing a movie about his own life, Bogus has trouble finishing anything. In his adventures, he is always accompanied by persistent problems with urination, which he tries to cure with the "Water-Method." Growing up in New England, Bogus (so called because he lies so much) is best friends with Merrill and Couth, two local boys. When Bogus and Couth both lose their virginity to a girl named Elspeth, she gives them both the clap (gonorrhea). This is the beginning of many years of frequent, painful urinary tract infections for Bogus. He is treated by his own father, who is a urologist.

When Bogus is working on his Ph.D., for his thesis, he is translating an ancient poem in a forgotten language. To do "research," he goes to Austria with Merrill. The two young men wander around, usually drunk. Merrill brags to Bogus that there is an old army tank sunk in the bottom of the Danube river, and that if one swims over it just right, one can see inside. They watch an interview on television of a young American athlete who has just won the gold medal in a women's skiing event. A few drinks later, Merrill is on the verge of passing out from diabetes, when the Olympic skier from the interview walks into the bar and sits down next to Bogus. Merrill wakes up just enough to grope the girl, who beats him up. The skier, whose name is Biggie, helps Bogus get the unconscious Merrill back to their hotel, and Bogus and Biggie spend the night together. Biggie tours Europe with Bogus for a few months before they return to the U.S.A. By that point, she is already pregnant. They hastily get married, and when Bogus's parents hear what he has done, they cut him off financially.

Biggie has a baby boy named Colm. Both of them are terrible with money, and their house and car are both falling apart. In debt up to his ears, Bogus asks Couth to loan him some money. Couth has a great job as a caretaker of the summer home of a wealthy family in Maine. Bogus meets a man named Ralph, an amateur filmmaker. Bogus starts doing sound editing on some projects. Bogus comes close to having an affair with a young college girl. When he gets home, Biggie can tell he has been with another woman, and they have a huge fight. Bogus's father finally decides to loan him some money, so Bogus pays off most of his debts and flees to Europe. In a daze, looking for Merrill, he loses six months. He gets mixed up with the CIA, who make him run a hashish deal for them. Bogus finds out that Merrill is dead, having drowned trying to get a look at the tank in the Danube. Finally, Bogus goes to Maine to see Couth and discovers that Biggie has filed for divorce and wants to marry Couth. Bogus goes back to New York, where Ralph takes him over to the home of Tulpen, a girl who edits his films. Soon Tulpen and Bogus are dating, and Bogus is doing sound for Ralph's movies.

Ralph tells Bogus that the next movie he wants to make is a documentary about Bogus himself, focusing on the breakdown of his marriage and his subsequent relationship with Tulpen. Bogus does not like the idea but agrees to it. Bogus decides to go consult yet another doctor about his urinary problems, and this doctor recommends the "Water-Method." Bogus tries the Water-Method for a while, but he eventually gets another



infection. At Tulpen's urging, he decides to go ahead and get an operation. As he prepares for his surgery, Tulpen starts talking about how she wants a baby. Bogus tells her that he is happy with the one he has and doesn't want another. The operation is a success. Although it takes some time to heal and is very painful in the meantime, Bogus can finally urinate normally.

Bogus finds out that Biggie is pregnant. He runs away to Iowa to finish his thesis. Once he has his Ph.D., he goes to a showing of the movie about his life. He discovers, at the end, that Tulpen is pregnant with his child. Bogus goes to Tulpen's house and finds that she has given birth to a baby boy named Merrill. He decides to stay with her and get married.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

Fred "Bogus" Trumper introduces several main characters. First, however, he introduces his problems with urination. He has always had problems with his "equipment." A doctor suggests the Water Method to treat the problem.

Bogus has a history of slow, painful urination and sex. Even though his father is a urologist (doctor specializing in genital and urinary problems), Fred has never found a satisfactory answer to what is wrong with him. He plans his life around when he will go to the bathroom and has thought about giving up sex. After years of consulting many different doctors and trying many drugs, Bogus goes to see a French doctor, Dr. Vigneron. Dr. Vigneron announces that Bogus's problem is a long, winding urethra, a birth defect. He tells Bogus that he has four options to take care of the problem. He can continue trying different drugs; he can give up sex entirely; he can get surgery, or he can try the Water-Method, which basically involves drinking a lot of water before and after sex. The Water-Method is not foolproof but should greatly reduce the number of infections.

Bogus tells his options to his girlfriend, Tulpen. She, being sensible, thinks surgery is the way to go, but respects Bogus's decision. He tries the Water Method and finds it doesn't really disrupt his schedule much. Bogus reflects to himself that Tulpen is a very quiet girl, and he will probably never know her any better than he already does. They have very little in common. Bogus has recently moved in with her after leaving his wife and son.

In an earlier scene, when Bogus is still with his wife, he spends time daydreaming about days gone by. He remembers how one of his friends, Merrill Overturf, used to claim that there is an army tank deep in the Danube. Supposedly, if one swims just right, one can see the hatch opening. Bogus likes to imagine the tank opening, when he is called back to reality by his wife, Biggie. Biggie asks Bogus to get the baby's clean diapers from the laundromat. On the way there, he thinks about how he has the worst truck in the world. This matches the quality of the house they live in. Bogus's neighbor, Filch, complains about the quality of "war-built things" (8). Biggie has a job changing bedpans for the elderly, and Bogus works in a language lab while trying to get his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

While still living with Biggie, Bogus sends a letter to his friend Couth, asking him for money. Couth has a handyman job at a seaside resort. He works three months out of the year and takes care of the grounds the rest of the time. Bogus talks about how tight money is, how he can't pay any of his bills, especially after several family trips. After subletting his house to some football players for the summer, he finds that his toilet can not stand up to the abuse. He wants Couth to give him some money to help pay for plumber bills.



## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Ironically, though Bogus's own father is a urologist, Bogus himself has trouble with urination. His father, a specialist, is unable to cure him or even diagnose him. This seems like a Freudian suggestion that Bogus does not feel adequate to follow in his father's footsteps or compete with him. It seems as though Bogus's urination can represent everything in his life: nothing works very well, and he must constantly prepare to repair everything around him, but this somehow seems like his doing. Bogus hints that he did something bad enough to get disinherited by his parents, but they eventually took him back. He grudgingly points out that when Bogus, Biggie and their son Colm move into Bogus's parents' basement for a while, they charge him rent. Even after marrying and having a child, Bogus feels he should be taken care of by his parents.

There also seems to be obvious symbolism between Bogus's problems with urination, and his problems with his plumbing. The problems even have the same nature: not terribly painful, but backing up often enough to be a real nuisance. It appears that, though Bogus is desperately poor, he does not think that the way to fix that is to work hard. Instead, he mooches off those around him, trying to get them to share some of their meager bounty.

It is interesting to note the way times have changed since 1972, when this book was published. Dr. Vigneron smokes cigarettes during appointments. He also never even suggests that condoms would help Bogus's problem, even though he points out that it is caused by unprotected sex.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

Bogus, while still in grad school, often has trouble sleeping. While Biggie sleeps, he records his thoughts, for future writing. Gazing out the window, he watches as Filch comes outside and stands on the porch next door. Bogus worries that he will never lose his insomnia, if Filch, at his age, still deals with it. Bogus reminisces about a time when his son is a baby and teething. Bogus leaves the baby alone for a while and visits Elspeth, an old girlfriend. The two have casual sex in her hammock, and Bogus goes for a swim in the ocean.

Bogus comes back to the present, describing his thesis project. He is translating an ancient ballad, written in a dead language no one speaks. It is such an obscure language that Bogus quickly starts just making his translation up, before eventually abandoning the project. As he remembers how Biggie laughed at the poem, Bogus shares it with Tulpen. She understands that it is important to him. Now that Tulpen gives his life a regular rhythm, Bogus no longer suffers from insomnia.

Back in grad school again, Bogus writes another letter to Couth, thanking him for the money he has sent. He suggests a pretty girl he knows for Couth to date. He tells Couth that he has felt close to him ever since both of them caught the clap (gonorrhea) from Elspeth. He goes on to complain about his student job, selling souvenirs at college football games. He asks Couth, who has a darkroom, to please make a fake photo of Bogus's funeral, complete with his family mourning him. He wants to use it to prove his death to his creditors, so they will stop trying to collect.

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Bogus's request for a photograph of his own funeral turns out to be a joke, but it hints rather openly at a death wish. This goes along with the several times that he mentions he is starting a new life. He is stuck in a life of poverty, mediocrity, and unfinished projects. He feels stuck under his father's shadow, even suggesting that his father should orate his imaginary funeral.

Although Bogus has already said he has nothing in common with Tulpen, it is evident Tulpen understands some things about him that his wife can not. Tulpen cares about Bogus's feelings, when Biggie only laughs. It is evident that Bogus does not really miss his old life with Biggie and Colm. Based on the amount Bogus talks about them, they seem to have less importance than Bogus's old pals.

Bogus makes repeated references to birth control, indicating that Colm was an accident and the real reason he and Biggie are married. He works just long enough at his hateful job to buy birth-control pills and fantasizes about having enough money to be sterilized. When he meets Elspeth, he wants to see her diaphragm before sex, imagining it



crammed with objects from her life. Besides being uncomfortable about fatherhood, Bogus seems to be getting ready to be reborn, imagining being remade in Couth's photo, fertilized by photography chemicals.





# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

While in grad school working in a language lab, Bogus meets Ralph Packer, an aspiring documentarian. Ralph invites Bogus to collaborate on some projects, promising that once they start making some money, Bogus will start getting paid for his work. Bogus ends up working with Ralph for quite a while, through several movies, doing sound effects and splicing sound together. Tulpen already has a job editing film for Ralph, a job she got by sleeping with Ralph. Although Ralph has had one popular film which won some awards, his other movies have not been successful. The three are currently working on a documentary about the clash between a hippie commune and some local farmers. Ralph is sure that one of these days, things will come to a head, and the hippies or the farmers will attack, and then he will have the footage he needs. Meanwhile, the filmmakers sit around and eat doughnuts.

When Bogus is still staying with his wife and child, he spends an entire chapter writing letters to various creditors, explaining to them why he can't pay his bills just right now. It is obvious that, even with Couth's assistance, Bogus and Biggie are terrible with money, with bad accounts on credit cards across the country. It is also apparent that Bogus pays his bills only when he has to, refusing to pay an extra \$5 in tuition because he doesn't plan to use the service associated with a mandatory fee.

Once Bogus is living with Tulpen, she takes care of all the bills and doesn't share details of the household finances with him. Both contribute, but Bogus no longer needs to write to every single company to whom he owes money. Instead, he brings out old letters that he used to write to Biggie, but never gave her. He shows one of the letters to Tulpen, who reads it. Through snippets of everyday life, certain aspects of Biggie and Bogus's marriage emerge. Biggie loves to look at ski magazines and remember a trip to Europe with Bogus, years before. Instead of reminiscing with her, Bogus points out that now they live in Iowa and can barely afford electricity, much less a trip to the Alps. The lights go out, and Bogus goes to the basement to change a fuse. There he secretly springs a mousetrap so that Biggie will not kill the mouse. Bogus also checks on the baby to make sure he is all right. Bogus worries about his son Colm, fearing the child will die in his sleep.

After reading Bogus's letter to Biggie, Tulpen says that he hasn't changed a bit. He still worries about little creatures like mice, and now turtles and fish. The two of them sleep surrounded by aquariums with turtles and fish living with them, so that it feels like they sleep underwater. This makes Bogus feel strange, and he is concerned that the upstairs neighbor is building a bomb. He thinks that if the bomb goes off, Bogus and Tulpen will drown in all the water from the aquariums. Bogus considers calling his doctor again to tell him that the Water Method isn't really working anymore. He imagines telling the doctor that his penis has fallen off just to surprise the man.



## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

The combination of Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 say a lot about Bogus's attitudes toward money and responsibility. In Chapter 8, when he is writing his many letters to his many creditors, Bogus often uses an eloquent, joking style, as though he is writing letters to a friend or business contact, someone who understands that Bogus is a responsible man on the verge of settling all his accounts. The sheer volume of the letters, and the fact that in most of them he promises to pay a lot of money very soon, makes it obvious he is lying. He is clearly a pauper who expects unlimited credit and is disappointed when presented with a bill. This is noteworthy when contrasted with Chapter 7, in which Bogus, Tulpen, and Ralph sit around, not making money, but working hard on a project about hippies sitting around not making money. This "head-in-the-sand" attitude is acknowledged in Chapter 9 when Bogus says, "But I honestly think my avoidance of facts has as much to do with my distrusting the relevance of them as it has to do with my lying a lot. I don't think the statistics in my life have ever meant very much." (35)

After reading Bogus's letter to Biggie, Tulpen says he hasn't changed a bit, but she makes no mention of how his habits and lifestyle have drastically changed since he left his wife. This hints that perhaps he is not starting a new life as fully as he hopes. It is interesting that Tulpen points out Bogus's concern for "little things" like mice and fish, but she does not note that Colm himself is a little thing, about whom Bogus seems to worry more than about any small animal. Then again, Bogus is detached enough to leave his son behind when another woman beckons, whether it is for a short time (with Elspeth) or a long time (with Tulpen).

It seems more apparent that Bogus's medical problems might be more psychological than physical. Right after talking about how strange he feels about sleeping under all the aquariums, he mentions that the Water-Method has ceased to do its magic. The world he has hoped to escape to, the world of water, has turned out to still have responsibilities and worries in it. Having built a new life around Tulpen and water, he now imagines ways out of that life, for instance dying in a combination bombing/drowning.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

While Bogus is flirting awkwardly with Lydia, a young college student from the language lab, Biggie is dealing with the drudgery of being married to Fred "Bogus" Trumper. At the grocery store, Biggie has to put up with the humiliation of being turned away, having bounced too many checks there. She blames this on Bogus's father for not helping them out. As Bogus changes another fuse, he thinks about how his life, though devoid of any great hardships, is instead filled with constant, tiny irritations. After Biggie has gone to sleep, Bogus dictates into his tape recorder. Since he doesn't see Filch outside tonight, Bogus worries that the old man has died. The next morning, Bogus sees Filch, and is so surprised to see him alive, that he drops Colm on the floor.

In the tape recording, Bogus reveals how he and Biggie got together. She was a member of the U.S. Ski Team. They met in Austria when Bogus was sent there for a grad school research project, and he got her pregnant. As soon as they returned, his parents cut them off financially. Biggie spends a lot of her time wishing she could still hit the slopes. Bogus is careful not to challenge her physically, for fear that she can easily take him. Bogus is selling souvenirs at a football game when Lydia shows up with her boyfriend. Bogus is so embarrassed to be discovered working there, that he runs away from the game, abandoning his job. Lydia catches up with him, and the two share a kiss, then walk around town for a while. He goes home to Biggie, who is the exact opposite of Lydia. Biggie immediately notices the lipstick clinging to Bogus's mustache, but when he confesses that he has lost his job and starts crying, she comforts him.

Later, when Bogus is living with Tulpen, he and Ralph review the footage they have taken for their documentary. Ralph hates the film and wants to scrap it, saying he wants to do something deep, complex, and introverted for his next project. Once Bogus goes back over to Tulpen's place, he entertains himself watching a tiny eel in the fish tank, imagining that it is talking. Tulpen reveals that Ralph wants to do his next movie about Bogus himself, and how his marriage has broken up, leading to a new life with Tulpen. Bogus is angry that Ralph wants to do this, and he and Tulpen have a big fight. She asks if he wants her to have a baby, since he still misses Colm. She says that the only reason she is so distant with him is that she can tell he doesn't want closeness. Tulpen accuses him of having nothing below the surface, of going nowhere.

Bogus can not find the eel he has been watching, and Tulpen concludes that something must have eaten the eel. In a rage, Bogus tries to kill whichever fish is responsible, destroying the fish tank in the process. Tulpen manages to save most of the fish, but some of them are eaten by turtles as soon as she puts them in a new tank. She admits that she doesn't really want a baby.



## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Bogus talks about how throughout his academic career, his downfall has always been that he has a short attention span. No matter what the enterprise, from sports to a graduate thesis, he is going strong, doing well, and then loses concentration. This is also symbolized by the way Bogus makes repeated references to his fear Colm will die. Even in the face of such fear, Bogus drops the baby because he is not paying attention. By showing snippets of everyday life for the couple, Irving illustrates their respective attitudes in life and just what each has sacrificed. Bogus takes any opportunity to escape the reality of his poverty, marriage and fatherhood. He sees it as an irritation, less preferable than keeping his father's money, and does not use his "responsible" position as a motivation to finish his degree and take care of his family. Biggie, on the other hand, has the dedication of a professional athlete. She has given up a promising career for this life, but she understands that this is her life and she is stuck with it. She, not Bogus, is the one who deals with changing diapers of baby and adults, while Bogus thinks he is suffering at football games.

Through the contrast between Lydia and Biggie, more Freudian images emerge. Even as Bogus is always pointing out how tiny and childlike Lydia is, Biggie is too big to comfortably wear Bogus's clothes. She is like a mother to him, comforting him on her enormous lap. Freud claimed that men want to compete with their father and marry their mother, which in Bogus's case may be true.

For the first time, there is some hint of why the story is told in such a disjointed manner: it is like raw film footage, needing someone to go through it and put the pieces together, playing them in order until some meaning shows. All these episodes and letters appear to be research for Ralph's film, foreshadowing that that film will be made. Bogus is tortured by the fate of the eel because he identifies with it. He imagines the eel is spouting poetry, much as Bogus enjoys hearing himself talk. Just as the eel is put in one tank or another, but eventually gets eaten, so Bogus fears that it does not matter which life he enters, the same destiny will overtake him. Life with Tulpen, while lacking the drudgery of Bogus's poverty with Biggie, nonetheless begins to resemble life with Biggie.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

Bogus reminisces about meeting Biggie in Austria. While in Europe, Bogus attempts to learn to ski, with the help of his friend Merrill. Bogus is an unbelievably bad skier and manages to launch himself into an unsuspecting German family. Later that evening, Bogus and Merrill are hanging out in a bar, as Merrill goes into a diabetic trance. On television they watch an American woman win the gold medal in a skiing event. Through a bad interview, the woman's sense of humor and personality are conveyed, and Bogus and Merrill love the big, blond skier. They are surprised when she walks into the bar and sits down at their table. Bogus talks in German with her for a while before revealing that he is American. Then Merrill, in his drunken diabetic stupor, gropes Biggie and she attacks him with a ski pole. She only relents when Bogus asks her where is her sense of humor.

Bogus feels insecure about being so different from all of Biggie's ex-boyfriends. He is the only one who is not a skier and is physically the opposite of all of them. Biggie doesn't like his excess body hair, and he tends to get sweaty right away. Bogus imagines the tan, blond, hairless, muscular men who could make her happy and feels small and weak. To make himself feel better, he goes and tries to find Lydia, but he does not look very hard.

In the men's room at a local pub, Bogus encounters a gay man who has been beaten up badly. The man reeks of urine and perfume, from being rolled in the urinals, and from having a bottle of perfume break in his pocket during the fight. Even though the man cautions Bogus that he, too, could be a target if they are seen together, Bogus helps him out of the bar and walks him home. Once Bogus arrives home, Biggie immediately smells the perfume and accuses him of cheating on her. They have a screaming, wrestling fight in which both are injured, but finally she believes Bogus that he just helped a poor beat-up gay man. During their fight, Biggie claims that Bogus does not really find her attractive, that he makes her dress badly, and that he wants to sleep with various women of different races, rather than her.

Once again, Bogus recounts how he and Biggie got together. After Merrill passes out from diabetes and being beaten up by Biggie, Biggie and Bogus drag him back to the hotel. In between attempts to measure Merrill's blood sugar, Bogus writes poetry for Biggie, and she spends the night. The next morning, Merrill announces that they are clearly in love and does not want to hang around to see it. Very soon, Biggie is pregnant, and they decide to marry and raise the baby. After Bogus's parents disinherit him, he names the baby after his Uncle Colm, the black sheep of the family.



## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

When Bogus helps the homosexual poet, it mirrors his concern for the eel and the mouse. The gay man points out that the men who attacked him have no way of knowing that he is gay, but they attack him anyway. When he and Bogus arrive at his apartment, the man assumes that Bogus has helped him because Bogus is gay. Like with the eel, Bogus feels that this helpless poet is being devoured by cruel forces and wants to intervene. He does not seem to notice that he identifies with these victims, and by sheltering them from destruction, he is trying to shelter himself from the big, bad world of unpleasant details. Even though Bogus is so worried about the eel and the gay poet, he does not recognize that his own problems, which overwhelm him, are minor compared with the possibility of being beaten up or eaten.

When Merrill is in a diabetic trance, Bogus has to help him urinate. Later, covered in urine, Merrill gets in bed with Bogus and Biggie, who are kind enough to let him get warm. This connects urine and sex in Bogus and Biggie's first encounter, laying the groundwork for many years of urine hang-ups. It is also a sort of foil for the violent encounter in the men's room, when the gay man was covered in urine, too. That time led to a sort of violent sex.

Bogus comments several times on the astounding way Merrill plays with his own life, by not carefully managing his diabetes. He is amazed that Merrill's self-destructive behavior does not in fact kill him, and it seems that Bogus envies this ability. He compares his reaction to Biggie's pregnancy to this self-destructive confidence, indicating that Bogus and Biggie should realize how unpleasant life will be if they get married and have a baby. When Bogus names his baby after Uncle Colm, he assumes the baby will grow up with Merrill in his life. He foreshadows that the self-destruction will someday be final, saying that he should have named the baby Merrill.



# Chapters 16-18

## Chapters 16-18 Summary

Bogus reminisces about the time when he and Couth lose their virginity at the age of 15. Elspeth comes back from Europe with lots of Bohemian ideas, and the boys like to watch her swim nude in the ocean. One night they steal her clothes so they can get a better look, and Elspeth angrily goes in to her house and tells them to bring her clothes to her. When finally presented with the chance to see her naked, they are embarrassed and pretend that they want to look at her paintings. Elspeth tells the boys she used to baby-sit for them, and they would try to peek on her in the bathroom. She takes them each upstairs in turn and quickly deflowers both of them. When the boys go home, they think they are discovered because they find their parents and Elspeth's parents all together and upset. Couth's father has died of a stroke that night. A few days later, Bogus's father proclaims that Bogus and Couth both have the clap, and he prescribes some antibiotics for them. He is shocked that they have already picked up a sexually transmitted disease.

Once Biggie and Bogus are married, Biggie sends some angry letters to Dr. Trumper, Bogus's father. She lets him know in no uncertain terms that she thinks he should continue paying for his son's education and calls him some bad names. Bogus worries about what his father's reaction will be. Later, in the middle of the night, Biggie challenges him to just call his father and get it over with. He crank calls his father, who thinks it must be a patient calling with a medical emergency.

Couth arranges for the Trumpers to come stay in the boathouse for the summer on the estate he manages. Biggie and Bogus both envy Couth's lifestyle and job. Biggie comments to Bogus that she wishes he could be content with Couth's life, saying that even if he had the skills to hold such a job, he would not be happy. Yet Couth envies Bogus for being a father. Bogus admits he is paranoid about Colm, terrified that bad things will overtake the child. He says that he wishes he could raise Colm in some sort of contained environment, like a zoo and make sure that he has some simulation of exciting experiences, but nothing too intense. Bogus can't seem to admit to Colm that death is a part of life and wants to shelter Colm from even the knowledge that death exists. Ironically, Colm does not share any of these fears. He delights in nature, including the fascinating process of destroying the corpses of small animals he finds. One day, when Colm and Bogus are at the zoo, a flock of ducks lands on the pond, but one duck falls out of the air dead. Bogus pretends that the duck is silly and hunting for food on the bottom. Colm immediately recognizes that it is dead, but Bogus continues trying to fool him.

One day Lydia picks Bogus up and drives him far out into the country where no one goes except duck hunters. They undress in the cold in the back of her car, and Lydia tells Bogus that it is her first time. At the last second, he decides he can not go through with it and gets out of the car for some fresh air. Lydia, spurned, angrily throws all of his



clothes out of the car and drives off naked. Bogus walks along, carrying his clothes for a while and cuts up his feet on a barbed wire fence. He is finally picked up by some duck hunters, who tell him about the naked girl who just drove past. Bogus dresses and goes with them, and when they pass Lydia, now dressing, he feels the experience has violated her far worse than he could have, had he slept with her. On the way home, one of the hunters plucks a duck in the truck, covering them all in feathers. The hunters give Bogus the duck to keep when they drop him off.

Since Bogus can barely walk on his cut-up feet, Ralph helps him get home, just in time to be caught by Biggie. She is thrown off by the excuse that he was hunting, with a dead duck to prove it. He gives the duck to Colm, who thinks it is a wonderful toy and certainly understands that it is dead. As Biggie draws a bath for Bogus to help him bathe his feet, he urinates in front of her, forgetting that he is still wearing a condom. Biggie draws the obvious conclusion about the "hunting trip." Just as the argument is really getting going, a courier arrives with a special letter from Bogus's father.

Bogus goes back to Dr. Vigneron's office to tell him that the Water-Method isn't working anymore. After harassing some of the other patients in the waiting room, Bogus announces that he wants to have the operation to straighten out his urethra. Ralph decides to go ahead with his movie about Bogus, and titles it "Fucking Up," a title Bogus does not like. Meanwhile, Bogus's relations with Tulpen begins to resemble his marriage with Biggie.

## Chapters 16-18 Analysis

There is more Freudian symbolism in the episode with Elspeth, Couth, and Bogus. Elspeth, as the boys' former babysitter, is a mother figure, and their first sex partner. Since the Oedipus complex involves a desire to have sex with one's mother and kill one's father, it is certainly significant that Couth's father dies the same night, as though he "kills" his father indirectly, simply by taking a step of independence in the world. Both boys learn that such steps can have painful consequences, literally. Since Bogus's father represents urinary health, it could also be said that in catching the clap from Elspeth, Bogus is symbolically killing his father.

It is clear that Bogus's concern for little, vulnerable things extends to his son, so that he is constantly worrying about Colm's physical and emotional survival. He does not seem to notice that Colm is not very vulnerable or afraid. Colm is much more like Biggie, ready to face the world, but Bogus projects his own fears onto Colm. Bogus feels that he himself is fragile and vulnerable, so he wants to reach out and protect others like him, hoping that someone will do the same for him.

Even though Bogus has been hinting around that he and Biggie eventually move in with Dr. Trumper, there is still a lot of dramatic tension when the letter shows up. He draws out this tension by having the letter show up at an unrelated moment of high drama, in the middle of a fight. By not reading the letter in this chapter, Bogus gives it a "cliff-





hanger" feel, like an old movie serial. This makes sense, since Ralph wants to make a movie of just such dramatic moments.

There are various references to suicide scattered throughout Biggie and Bogus's marriage. Bogus tells Couth that if he had not sent them money, they were considering a quiet double suicide. When the duck crashes into the pond, Bogus wonders whether it was sick and died, or if it committed suicide. He also reminisces enviously about a grad student who, stressed out from studying, tries to crash through a four-story window, only to find that the glass is too strong. This calls to mind Bogus's intent to start a new life, but it also gives a glimpse into the horrors of the safe, simulated world Bogus wants for Colm: a world where escape is impossible, even through suicide.



# Chapters 19-21

## Chapters 19-21 Summary

Bogus compares his experience with Biggie after they have split up to a situation in the poem he is translating for his thesis. In the poem, the hero wants to take his six-year-old son to war with him, which the child's mother protests saying that the boy is too young. She admits she is worried that her son will see his father with some whore and thus lower his opinion of his own mother. The hero ends up leaving the boy at home with his mother. In Bogus's situation, however, Colm is allowed to come visit Bogus and Tulpen in New York, despite Biggie's worries. Before putting five-year-old Colm on a plane, Biggie asks Bogus not to behave lewdly with Tulpen in front of the child. Bogus points out that now Couth is living with Biggie and Colm.

Bogus and Tulpen are both very nervous about Colm's visit. Colm loves the fish and turtles, and asks all kinds of questions about them. Tulpen, concerned about propriety, sleeps on the couch and lets Bogus and Colm share her bed. Throughout the week, they visit lots of museums, shows, and restaurants, and Colm has a wonderful time. Tulpen gives Colm a pet fish to take home with him, but by the time Bogus gets him there, the fish is dead. Tulpen loves Colm and cries when he leaves, and then asks Bogus if they can have a baby.

When Bogus drops Colm off with Biggie, she tells him that Ralph has been by, wanting to interview her for the movie. Ralph always tries to get Biggie to sleep with him. Biggie has heard that Tulpen is a nice girl, but she warns Bogus that Ralph also wants to sleep with Tulpen.

Flashing back to right after the duck-hunting incident, the letter from Bogus's father turns out to enclosed a check for five-thousand dollars, as a loan. After going to the emergency room to have his wounded feet treated, Bogus deposits the money in the bank, then pays off all his debts, including the money from Couth. He takes out several hundred dollars in cash, then books a flight to Europe. After Ralph creates a diversion, Bogus goes home and gets some clothes and books, and his passport and leaves the remainder of the money on Biggie's bed. He fishes the dead duck out of the garbage and mails it to his father. He catches his flight to Germany, determined to locate Merrill, after four years.

Ralph, Tulpen, and Bogus review the footage they have made for the movie about Bogus's marriage. Bogus hates it. The film quality is so low, it seems like a home movie shot with a cheap camera. Ralph says that he did that on purpose, because he wants it to look like a home movie, since it is a real story about real life. The last shot of the footage is Bogus trying to untangle a mass of film.



## Chapters 19-21 Analysis

When Dr. Trumper finally agrees to loan Bogus and Biggie some money, despite the fact that he hates their life choices, it is as though Bogus is moving backward in the Oedipus story. His father's neglect of him is symbolized by his cut-up feet, just as Oedipus's father wounded his son's feet. In fact, "Oedipus" means "wounded foot." Bogus's defiance of his father has thus far consisted of being married to Biggie, and now, just as Dr. Trumper is willing to act as a father to Bogus again, Bogus's defiance is crumbling along with his marriage. Bogus credits his father's part in the events by sending him the duck, which to Bogus represents a sort of suicide.

Although Bogus in no way holds it against Couth, he is envious that Couth has turned out to be the stable father and provider that Bogus could not be. Bogus wishes that he (Bogus) were capable of taking care of Biggie and Colm the way Couth does. When Colm wakes up with night terrors, Bogus blames the child's home environment. He is not referring to the breakup of his marriage but to simply living with Bogus for several years.



# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary

Bogus lands in Germany and hitchhikes to Vienna. He has a long, strange dream about Merrill. He is excited about going to Vienna, but when he gets there, he is not quite sure what to do. He goes to a secondhand store and buys a new outfit and suitcase, dressing up like a spy, or so he imagines. He also buys a typewriter. He wanders around, asking people he meets if they know Merrill, with no luck. A prostitute kindly shows him to a hostel. The housekeeper asks him to please not type at night because it is too noisy. The sound of bidets flushing keeps Bogus up at night.

Bogus goes to Merrill's old apartment and finds an Austrian family living there. Bogus walks past a fountain that he and Biggie played in when they first met, and it makes him sad that it is now frozen. He wishes he had handled things differently. He goes back to his hostel and writes a letter to Biggie, describing the night that Biggie introduces him to her parents and tells them that she is pregnant. Couth drives them there. Biggie keeps saying that Bogus would never marry her if she weren't pregnant, and Couth tells her that he (Couth) would marry her.

In the film footage for Ralph's movie, there are various interviews with Biggie, Couth, Bogus, and Ralph, discussing why the marriage fell apart. None of them can give a reason. Biggie complains that Bogus left so suddenly, leaving no word that he was going to Europe.

## Chapters 22-24 Analysis

The overcoat Bogus buys at the secondhand shop has a bullet hole in the back of it. The fact that the coat was probably worn by someone as they died, clearly symbolizes how Bogus considers himself to have been mortally wounded. He watches a Western movie, where the heroine survives a string of mishaps to struggle on, with an arrow sticking out of her chest the entire time. He wonders how far someone can go with an arrow in their chest. He seems surprised yet impressed by the heroine's ability to keep going after a seemingly fatal wound, which is a sort of reflection of how he feels about Merrill's diabetes. Since there has already been foreshadowing hinting that Merrill will soon be dead, there is a sad sort of tension in Bogus searching for him, trying to find something salvageable from his old life. In an interview, Bogus says of Merrill that, "He was about the most sane person I've ever known." (165) This indicates that Bogus thinks that Merrill is right to push the boundaries of self-destruction.



# Chapters 25-27

## Chapters 25-27 Summary

In the course of filming the movie, Ralph calls Tulpen and Bogus late one night and asks if he can film them getting ready for bed. Bogus hangs up and asks Tulpen how she could ever have slept with Ralph. She does not want to talk about it, but he keeps asking her and says Ralph definitely still wants to sleep with her. The phone rings again, and Tulpen tells Bogus he doesn't make love to her enough. He goes into the bathroom and urinates for a long time. When Tulpen asks what is taking him so long, he calls, "Oh, nothing, Big," (174). Tulpen starts crying and says that at least Ralph never called her by another woman's name. Ralph calls back again, and Tulpen tells him to go ahead and come over and make the movie.

Bogus thinks about part of the poem he is translating for his thesis. In this part, the hero has a huge troll for a bodyguard and friend. When the hero asks one day if he can sleep with the troll's wife, the troll misunderstands and goes and assaults his master's wife. The troll and his wife are exiled, and the troll is castrated. In a faraway land, the two attack sailors unlucky enough to come their way.

In Europe, after leaving Biggie, Bogus loses a period of time. He seems to hallucinate various encounters with Merrill, always involving him desperately needing to get some sugar before he dies. In these hallucinations, Bogus is constantly in the company of whores and is arrested and beaten by the police. No one believes him that Merrill is diabetic. After waking up, Bogus wanders out of a cafe and a foreign stranger comes up to him excitedly. The man hands him a parcel and runs away. It is a brick of pure hashish, which Bogus puts in his suitcase. Walking back to his hostel, he notices that the whores have changed from winter to spring clothing, and he wonders how much time has passed.

## Chapters 25-27 Analysis

Next to Tulpen's bed is a new blowfish, which Bogus hates. He finds it repulsive when the fish swells up huge, and Bogus wants to kill it. For the first time, he comments how he hates fish in general. Soon he begins to suspect that Tulpen is not using birth control anymore. His disgust for the swollen blowfish is a metaphor for a pregnant Tulpen. He has flashbacks to Biggie forgetting to take her birth control pills.

Bogus begins to feel like his life is itself a movie. This is reflected in the way his relationship with Tulpen becomes more and more similar to his relationship with Biggie. He wants to find a way out but can not think of anything. Symbolically, he wishes he could destroy not only the fish, but the tanks and all the apparatus. He wants to get rid of this simulated world.



# Chapters 28-30

## Chapters 28-30 Summary

In a dream, Bogus remembers staying at Biggie's parents house that first night, in separate bedrooms for her parents' sake. They forget Couth waiting all night for them in the car. Bogus wakes up in the arms of a whore. He goes to the American Express office to leave a note for Merrill. A man approaches him and suddenly takes his suitcase, then shoves him into a car. The man turns out to be a CIA agent who knows Bogus received the hashish by accident. He confiscates the hashish. He thinks Merrill is a potential buyer and asks Bogus why he left his wife.

Since Bogus has been gone so long, he has been filed as a Missing Person. The police set him up, saying that they will find Merrill for him if he cooperates. He is to go back to the same cafe where he met the strange man and give the man the money, in order to catch the drug dealer. The dealer does not want to take the money from him, however, and the sting does not succeed. In exchange for plane fare, Bogus is then supposed to put the brick of hashish into his suitcase, and fly to America. A customs officer is supposed to search him and find it and then arrest him. After that, he will be free to go. He cooperates, but the drugs are gone out of his suitcase. He runs away anyhow in order to do his part, and they let him keep all the money that the hashish dealer didn't want. Just as he is driving off, they tell him that Merrill is dead. Two years ago, he drowned in the Danube, trying to see inside the tank. Bogus decides to go see Couth in Maine. On the way there, he realized that six months have gone by, rather than a week, as he has been thinking.

Bogus finds out that Tulpen has stopped using birth control. She wants to have a baby, and may in fact already be pregnant. She tells him not to worry, that he does not need to be involved in the child's life. He considers getting sterilized when he gets his operation in a few days. Tulpen tries to get him excited about a baby, asking if he wants a boy or a girl. He tells her that he does not want a baby at all.

## Chapters 28-30 Analysis

Bogus thinks so much about the poem he is translating because he recognizes his own troubles in the story. With his damaged genitals, he has been symbolically castrated, and so he exiles himself to Europe. There has been too much wife-swapping among friends, and it has left many of them bruised. Bogus begins to see the danger in promiscuity but is still afraid to commit. In the poem, it is the hero's father who gives him the troll as a gift. This same father encourages his son to be promiscuous. When Bogus first meets Ralph, he immediately pictures the father from the poem, and so it is not surprising that he plays the same role. Not only is Ralph an all-around lecher, but he helps Bogus flee to Europe.



# Chapters 31-34

## Chapters 31-34 Summary

Right after Bogus returns from Europe, he decides to go see Couth in Maine. His limo driver, Dante, reluctantly agrees to take him there, after being given a big tip. Although Bogus is excited to see Couth, Couth does not know what to say, because Biggie and Colm have moved in with him. In fact, Couth is trying to marry Biggie. Biggie resents Bogus for leaving for six months, with no communication. Bogus wants to get a look at Colm, but he does not want his son to see him. Out on the beach, with Bogus watching from afar, Colm makes friends with Dante and shows him some animals in the tide pools.

When Dante and Bogus arrive back in New York, they are accosted by a group of armed men who drag Bogus, now quite drunk, out of the limo. Dante decides to protect his new friend and beats up an entire group of them, not realizing they are CIA agents, the same people who hired him to drive the limo. He loses his job, but some of the higher agents hear about the incident and decide that they want to hire him for his fighting skills. The agents explain to Bogus that he is free to go and suggest that he go find his old friend Ralph, who is now in New York. Bogus eventually finds Ralph at the studio. Needing a place for Bogus to sober up, Ralph decides to take him over to Tulpen's, whom Bogus has never met.

The time finally comes for Bogus's surgery. It goes relatively well, but while recovering, Bogus finds that he is extremely tender, and urinating is excruciatingly painful. After his surgery, when Tulpen comes to visit him, he pretends to be fading in and out of consciousness. While Bogus is faking sleep, Ralph comes in and wants to pull up the covers and see the result. Soon Ralph sends Bogus a certificate, stating that Bogus is now a Knight in the Order of the Golden Prick. In the rest of his mail, there is a letter from Bogus's thesis chairman, suggesting that this is the perfect time to finish his thesis, based on what is going on in the linguistics community. He also receives his divorce papers from Biggie. Bogus signs them without a fuss. When Dr. Vigneron comes in to check on him, he lies and tells the doctor that he feels well, and the pain is not bad.

Bogus waits until he knows Tulpen will be out, then goes to her house. He takes his clothes and a few other things, then heads over to the film studio. Bogus finds some trash footage and splices it together into a short reel he titles "The End of the Movie." In it, Bogus's voice tells Tulpen that he is sorry, but he does not want a child. He also tells Ralph that he doesn't want to be in the movie anymore. Bogus is planning on leaving this as a goodbye message for Tulpen and Ralph. He takes a bus to Maine, to see Colm, and on the way there he decides to finish writing his thesis. He calls Biggie and Couth's number to ask them to pick him up at the bus station, and Colm picks up the phone. Colm wants to know if Tulpen is also coming to visit.



## Chapters 31-34 Analysis

The way Couth and Bogus share Biggie's affections, without jealousy between them, is reminiscent of their sharing of Elspeth. With Elspeth, both boys caught the clap, and Couth lost his father. This indicates that things may end badly, especially since this same plotline runs through Bogus's thesis poem, with disastrous results.

Bogus finally begins to really analyze his behavior and acknowledges he has trouble finishing anything. He even foreshadows that he will not truly finish his surgery, warning the doctor that he may not be around in a week to do a follow-up appointment. Although Bogus could wait to tell Tulpen goodbye in person, "He didn't wait. Later he thought about how he had this infuriating habit of leaving too soon." (228) Bogus seems to recognize that he will never go far in life, never make it his own, until he finishes something he has started. "All he knew was that he had never finished anything, and he felt a need, almost as basic as survival, to find something he could finish." (229)





# Chapters 35-38

## Chapters 35-38 Summary

After leaving Tulpen and Ralph behind, Bogus heads up to stay with Biggie and Couth for a few days. For a bedtime story, Bogus tells Colm the story of "Moby Dick," which Colm believes. It is great seeing Colm, and Biggie and Couth are welcoming, but after three days, Bogus knows it is time to move on. When leaving, he comments that Biggie is putting on weight, and she tells him it is because she is pregnant.

Bogus goes back to Iowa to finish his thesis. Staying in the basement of his thesis chairman, Bogus works hard for months, taking time for little other than his studies. When he finally comes to the end of the poem he is translating, he remembers all the shoddy work from earlier sections, and decides to do the whole thing over, doing it right this time. His thesis chairman is delighted, and Bogus finally gets his Ph.D. He quickly discovers that "his new Ph.D. had about the same appeal and importance at an interview as having freshly shined shoes." (256)

At a loss as to what to do, Bogus reads various movie reviews for "Fucking Up." Apparently the film is a success, and Bogus feels like he must go see it himself. He goes to an art house showing of the movie and discovers at the end that Tulpen is pregnant in the movie. Bogus goes over to her house and finds her, with a newborn baby boy. Bogus and Tulpen agree he will stay with her a while, and if they are both willing to stick with it, they will get married. She shows him the baby, whose name is Merrill. In the morning, Ralph calls, and Bogus discovers that Ralph has gotten married and his wife is also expecting a baby.

A few months later, Ralph's and Bogus's families head up to Maine for Thanksgiving with Biggie and Couth. They all have a good time together and discuss plans to go to Europe soon, for Ralph's next film. This one will be a movie version of Bogus's thesis poem. On the last morning before they leave, Colm tells Bogus that he understands that "Moby Dick" is just a story. Bogus smiles to himself, thinking that the story is true.

## Chapters 35-38 Analysis

Many parallels show up in the various plotlines presented. In many ways, the story of Bogus and Biggie is similar to the story of Bogus and Tulpen's relationship, and that between Biggie and Couth. This also echoes adolescent experiences with Elspeth, and the story of Bogus's thesis poem. To point this out more obviously, Ralph is simultaneously shooting a movie about shooting a movie about Bogus's life, giving it the feel of a movie within a movie. This could be the key to why Bogus never finishes anything: it doesn't seem to matter, since it just seems to be a fictional story. Not only that, but he gets the feeling that whatever new life he can transplant himself into, he will



still have the same failures. Eventually, Bogus faces this and decides to go ahead and finish one thing, even if it is just fiction. This changes his entire attitude toward life.

It seems that, until Bogus's operation, he is as stuck and clogged in life as his urethra. Once it is unstoppered, he can allow his life to "flow" as it never has before. Finally he is able to accomplish something, to stay with something until it comes to fruition. Not only does he finish his thesis, but he joins family life in a way he never could before. He also realizes that sometimes, the way to "finish" something is to just keep doing it. The finish does not have to be an ending, but rather, a continuing.



# Characters

## Bogus Trumper

Fred's friends call him "Bogus" because he lies so much. His last name is also a pun on falsehood. Bogus ambles through life, not really sure what he wants from it. He always has problems sticking with anything. Bogus is amazing both with foreign languages and sound editing but does not focus much on these successes. Instead he talks more about doomed efforts, whether in wrestling, skiing, working on his thesis, or trying to protect small animals. Bogus strongly feels his own mortality, feeling vulnerable and useless in an unkind world, so he tries to protect little things in his care, whether they be a mouse, an eel, or his son. It deeply bothers Bogus that all things die, and his habit of never completing anything could be a fear that completion leads to death.

Bogus tends to sabotage his own efforts. When he is unfaithful to his wife, he does little to hide the evidence. He abandons his thesis project just when it is nearly done. He agonizes over his fear that his son will die, yet he does not stay around to protect the child. It seems he is metaphorically "stuck" until he gets his urethra operated on and can finally urinate easily.

## Biggie Trumper

Sue is called "Biggie" because she has always been such a big girl, tall and strong. She wins a gold medal in skiing, and years later she longs for the slopes. Biggie shocks the Olympic team by running off with Bogus; she is forced to give up her career when she finds out she is pregnant. Biggie is an aggressive, confrontational girl. When she is angry, she yells and brawls, never pretending to be dainty and feminine but exuding a strong athletic grace. Biggie realizes before she and Bogus get married that Bogus does not really want to marry her. While they are married, she comments to him that she wishes he could be content with this life. Even though she is loud and bossy, Biggie can be very kind to those she loves. After they are divorced, Biggie is very friendly and hospitable to Bogus, letting him see Colm as often as he wants. Biggie is willing to work hard and not complain, but when she is pushed, she lashes out at the people around her.

## Tulpen

Tulpen is the editor for Ralph's movies. She and Bogus have a baby boy named Merrill, and they get married.



## **Couth**

Couth is Bogus's childhood best friend who ends up marrying Biggie. He works as caretaker for a wealthy family on their summer estate.

## **Ralph Packer**

Ralph is a filmmaker who decides he wants to make a movie about Bogus. Bogus and Tulpen both work for him.

## **Merrill Overturf**

Merrill is a close childhood friend of Bogus's who has diabetes. The two young men have fun wandering around Europe.

## **Colm**

Colm is Bogus's son with Biggie. Colm is fearless and inquisitive and loves the sea.

## **Lydia Kindle**

Lydia is a college student who tries to have an affair with Bogus but does not succeed.

## **Dr. Trumper**

Dr. Trumper, Bogus's father, is a urologist (specialist in urinary functions). When he learns Bogus has gotten Biggie pregnant and gotten married, he disinherits his son.

## **Matje**

Matje is Ralph's wife. She is very pregnant at the end of the book.

## **Akthelt**

Akthelt is the Norse hero of the poem Bogus is translating for his thesis.

## **Gunnel**

Gunnel is the wife of Akthelt and the heroine of Bogus's thesis poem.

## Sprog

Sprog is a troll in the poem from Bogus's thesis. He is the loyal servant to Akthelt.



## Objects/Places

### Iowa

Iowa is where Bogus goes to graduate school and where he meets Ralph and Lydia.

### The Pillsbury Estate

Bogus's friend Couth takes care of the Maine summer home of the Pillsbury family and lives on the grounds of their mansion.

### Tulpen's Apartment

Tulpen's apartment is in New York. She has her bed surrounded by aquariums full of fish and turtles.

### Akthelt and Gunnel

"Akthelt and Gunnel" is the only known literature in Old Low Norse. Bogus is translating it for his thesis.

### The Alps

Bogus meets Biggie in the Alps just after she wins a gold medal for skiing. Later, she misses skiing.

### The Tank in the Danube

Bogus's friend Merrill claims that there is an old army tank sunk in the bottom of the Danube River. He drowns trying to see it.

### Ralph Packer's Studio

Bogus and Tulpen both work editing movies at Ralph's studio.

### Tulpen's Aquariums

Bogus hates having to sleep surrounded by aquariums. They make him feel like he is underwater.



## **The Zoo**

Bogus takes Colm to the zoo a lot. He worries about the bad things Colm might see in less safe environments.

## **Risky Mouse**

Biggie hates the mouse in her basement, but Bogus does what he can to protect it. He feeds the mouse and springs the mousetraps.



# Themes

## A story within a story

There are many stories here which parallel one another. First of all, the most obvious one is the fact that Ralph is shooting a movie about Bogus, who is himself editing the movie as it is being shot. In addition, the story with Tulpen begins to look a lot like the story with Biggie. The way Couth and Bogus pass Biggie between them is reminiscent of the way they passed Elspeth between them long ago. Tulpen also is passed between Ralph and Bogus. All these storylines also coincide with the story of "Akthelt and Gunnel," Bogus's thesis project. Bogus goes into great detail, describing the violent, brutal Norse ballad, which features wife-swapping and revenge. Bogus imagines the people around him in the roles of the characters of the poem. Later, the poem is to be made into a movie, another example of a story within a story. In a way, this book is a story about storytelling. At the end, Colm sadly tells his father that "Moby Dick" is "just a story," but Bogus realizes that it can still have great value.

## Fear of mortality

When he is a young man, Bogus admires Merrill for his casual risk-taking, which he somehow always seems to survive. "He was the great illusion of my life. That such a self-destructing fool could be so indestructible." (84) Once Bogus is a father, he begins to worry more and more about dying, and about protecting tiny things. He says, "Children gave you a sense of your own mortality . . . it's just that children give you a sense of time. It was as if I'd never realized how time moved before." (107) Fear for Colm leads to fear for Bogus. "I always watch him sleep for a while. What I mind about children is that they're so vulnerable, so fragile-looking . . . Well, like father, like son; I'm sure I'm wholly capable of breaking my neck in my sleep." (37) Bogus does not want to expose Colm to any awareness of death, but the child is much better at dealing with death than Bogus is. When they see a duck die in the zoo, Bogus denies that it is dead, and little Colm sets him straight. "Some ducks just die," he said, being irritably patient with me. "They just get old and die, is all. Animals and birds and people," he said. "They just get old and die." And he looked at me with worldly sympathy, obviously feeling sad to be stunning his father with such a hard truth. (110)

## Water

Bogus begins his story talking about his difficulties with urination and ends it comparing himself to Moby Dick. Almost all the major events of his life have a tie-in with water, usually as something he fears. From swimming in the ocean to sleeping under an ocean of aquariums, from powdery winter snows to chemically tinted urine, from bathtubs to birth waters, and from the deep Danube to a winter pond at the zoo, Bogus is surrounded by water, and it causes him problems. This makes sense, since he has





trouble excreting water from his body. Once Bogus is able to urinate normally, he is finally able to move forward in his life, and the water no longer gets in his way. He becomes comfortable sleeping under Tulpen's aquariums. Bogus begins to see himself as Moby Dick, a huge, powerful creature able to withstand anything the ocean holds. Although the "Water-Method" does not cure Bogus's physical problems, it does hold the key to his psychological problems.

One example of the way water dangerously leads away from facing reality is what happens to Merrill. Merrill spins fantasies of the tank sunk in the Danube and one day decides to make the fantasy a reality. Bogus wonders whether Merrill saw the tank before he died.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view changes continually, often even changing in the middle of a chapter. Sometimes it is first person, with Bogus narrating his own life in the present tense. Sometimes the story is told by a third-person narrator, who tells the story as though it has already happened. This narrator sometimes names the hero as Bogus, and other times names him Trumper. There are letters written by Bogus, and there is film footage of interviews. In addition to the bizarre effect from so many different points of view, Bogus proclaims himself to be an unreliable narrator. He lies so often that he has gotten the nickname Bogus. Early in the book, Bogus says, "I am not so honest. I'm a pretty good liar, in fact. People who've really known me tend to believe me less and less. They tend to think I lie all the time. But I'm telling the truth now! Just remember: you don't know me." (5)

This disjointed style and multiple points of view go well with Bogus's psychological problems. Bogus himself has trouble telling the difference between dreams and reality. He also loses large spells of time. It is easy to imagine that Bogus's thinking is as confused and ambling as his storytelling.

## Setting

The book takes place between 1960 and 1970, around the time that it was written. There are four major settings in it, each one representing a different phase in Bogus's life. Bogus meets Biggie in the Alps, when he is in Europe for his studies. To them, Europe represents adventure and new opportunities, and they behave very recklessly there. Later he returns to Europe, hoping to recapture some of that feeling. Bogus goes to grad school in Iowa, where it is boring and flat, and there are lots of dull students around. He is depressed about having to work at the college football games, selling souvenirs for a team that never wins. Iowa is also the location of grinding poverty for Bogus and Biggie.

In New York, Bogus begins his new life with Tulpen, working at Ralph's studio. New York is a much more pleasant situation than Iowa because finally Bogus has enough money not to worry. In Maine, Couth lives with Biggie and Colm at the huge Pillsbury Estate by the ocean. This provides the same kind of wild beauty they found in the Alps, and Colm loves being around the ocean animals.

## Language and Meaning

When the book is told in third person, the narrator talks in a very professional manner, speaking in a matter-of-fact manner about the events in Bogus's life. When Bogus narrates in first person, he uses very casual language, filling his speech with slang and



swearing. He often goes off on flights of fancy, narrating events as he imagines them unfolding. He also goes into great detail describing his genitals.

Bogus is working on his thesis, which is translating the only known piece of literature in Old Low Norse, a language no one speaks anymore. Bogus often makes reference to this language, and starts talking in Old Low Norse when he is in very stressful situations. He himself has a very strong talent for learning foreign languages, and works in a German language lab. Because of his language skills, Bogus has an easy time getting around in Europe. He first meets Biggie by pretending he is European, and not admitting at first that he speaks English.

Bogus imagines himself as a poet, and identifies with animals that he calls poets. He writes very little poetry, however, but his life does seem to echo an ancient poem.

## Structure

The structure of this book is somewhat post-modern eclecticism and out of order, which can be very confusing. It jumps not only from one point of view to another with no warning but also jumps around in time. There are several major storylines from different periods in Bogus's life, and these weave in and out from one another, more or less in order. There are also various letters, but never back-and-forth correspondence. The story is arranged less like a narrative, and more like a pile of old photographs and letters. This calls to mind the vast quantity of film footage Ralph takes when filming his movie. The book is arranged into 38 short chapters, each offering a small piece of Bogus's life. The chapters are variable in length; each one tends to deal with a specific theme, though not necessarily a specific event. Each chapter is cleverly named with a phrase that sums up the theme of that chapter. Earlier in the book, Bogus tells the story as though he knows what is going to happen next in his narrative. Later, he speaks as though events surprise him, giving the feeling that these events are only now happening, and there is no telling where the story will go in the end.



## Quotes

"Surviving a relationship with any other human being sometimes seemed impossible to him." (271)

"Tulpen and I are both twenty-eight, but she's really older than I am; she has outgrown having to talk about herself." (6)

"It's Tulpen's apartment, and all the things in it are hers. I left my things, and my child, with my first and only wife." (6)

"On his way home, his right headlight falls out and he drives over it. Changing his right front tire, he thinks he'd like to meet a man who thinks he's got a worse car." (9)

Since his father disinherited him, he had learned to hoard little injustices, wishing they might merge and leave him with one significant wound, for which he could guiltlessly martyr himself forever." (12)

"Yogurt and lots of water, and a certain sympathy when sympathy matters. I'm all right. Things are straightening out. This is the matter of my urinary tract, of course, but in general things are straightening out." (17)

"Biggie never cries. Do you know what she does do, though? She finds a hangnail and tugs it slowly down her finger; I've seen her tease one past the first joint. Biggie bleeds, but she never cries." (19)

"[Ralph] Packer fails to really deal with the issues . . . a simple portrait of the action seems to satisfy him. I think it satisfies me too." (23)

"But I honestly think my avoidance of the facts has as much to do with my distrusting the relevance of them as it has to do with my lying a lot. I don't think the statistics in my life have ever meant very much." (35)

"He had an image of how he'd like to return—as someone triumphant, like a cured cancer patient. But he couldn't decide what disease he'd had when he left, so he hardly knew if he was cured." (254)

"He hoped she was sincere. Being so frequently insincere himself, Trumper suspected the motives of others. His own motives struck him as bottomless." (40)

"It's just the nightly things—all little—that seem not to have amounted to something very big, or finally serious, so much as they have simply turned my life around to attending almost solely to them. A constant, if petty, irritation." (42)

"His potential was considered 'vast,' but he must learn to conquer his regrettable concentration span." (43)



"Oh, sympathy and comfort. It's a queer thing that when you're given a little, you only want a lot." (52)

"All I want to do in a film is describe something worthwhile," Ralph said. "I hate conclusions."

"I don't believe in endings," Trumper said. (57)

"A big strong girl, she knew that the grace she had was an athletic sort; she didn't try to fake a kind of femininity she knew she didn't have." (70)

"But I lay awake contemplating the horror of having to look for a real job. The notion of earning a living . . . The phrase itself was like those other obscene propositions on a men's-room wall." (111)

"I am no reliable authority on courage, having no courage myself—having cowardice to spare, in fact." (117)

"You should always tell stories, Trumper knew, in such a way that you make the audience feel good and wise, even a little ahead of you." (242)

"All he knew was that he had never finished anything, and he felt a need, almost as basic as survival, to find something he could finish." (229)

"But he didn't wait. Later he thought about how he had this infuriating habit of leaving too soon." (228)

"Det henskit af krig er to overleve" ("The object of war is to survive it.") (119)

"One thing I've noticed, is that witless behavior can be a very calculated thing." (149)

"If I have to stop it just once," Trumper said, "the whole thing will fall apart." (152)

"Bogus Trumper, in stop-action, is stooping to attempt to untangle a mess of spilled tape. Tulpen is looking on." (153)

"It's not until he arrives, still unfeeling, in Vienna that he considers the possibility that adventure is a time and not a place." (156)

"But I didn't want to be around to see what he looked like and if he even liked me any more. Let the grave mound grow a little grass, I always say; then it's safe to look." (216)

"Kids love uniforms, and most men hate them." (220)



## Topics for Discussion

In what ways is Bogus's relationship with Tulpen similar to his relationship with Biggie? In what ways are they different?

Who is the real hero of the poem "Akthelt and Gunnel"? Who is the real villain?

What is the significance of the tank in the Danube river? Do you think Merrill ever saw it?

There are many references in the story to urine. What is the meaning of the prominence of urine? Is this appropriate?

Why does Bogus feel so compelled to protect tiny, helpless things? Why does he want to help some animals but want to kill others?

A lot of the characters are promiscuous. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? How would the story be different if condom use were widespread?

Even though Bogus's father is a urologist, he is unable to help Bogus's urinating problem. What does this say about Dr. Trumper's relationship with his son?

Is Biggie right to leave behind a skiing career to be with Bogus? Do you think she regrets it?