

The White Boy Shuffle Study Guide

The White Boy Shuffle by Paul Beatty

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Plot Summary

The White Boy Shuffle is a novel posing as a memoir of a reluctant new hero, Gunnar Kaufman. The novel begins with Gunnar's earliest memories of being a black juvenile beach bum in Santa Monica and chronicles the hilarious exploits that lead him to become a young adult regarded as the black messiah.

Gunnar begins his own history by telling the history of his male ancestors. Some of his ancestors are involved in significant moments of history, such as Euripides Kaufman who is the youngest slave in history to purchase his own freedom and who is instrumental in helping to provoke the American Revolutionary War. Other relatives such as Swen Kaufman have the dubious distinction of being the only known black man to run to the American south and into slavery. More recent relatives include the likes of Wolfgang Kaufman who first paints Segregation signs in Tennessee and then, while working as a janitor in Chicago, helps to create the radio program Amos n Andy. Gunnar's own father, Rolf Kaufman, works as a sketch artist for the Los Angeles Police Department.

Gunnar describes a happy childhood in Santa Monica. He remembers being the "funny, cool black guy," and his days away from school are filled with bodysurfing and reading on the deck of his mother's two-story townhouse. At school he finds the obsession with multicultural issues ridiculous since almost all the students are white, and the teachers seem to believe that the best way to handle racial distinctions is to pretend not to notice them.

After Gunnar's mother becomes alarmed that her children have completely lost touch with their black heritage, she moves them from their affluent Santa Monica home to what Gunnar describes as a West Los Angeles ghetto called Hillside. From the moment Gunnar arrives he is a target. He dresses and speaks differently from the other residents, and the more he tries to fit in the more he puts himself in danger. Three events occur almost simultaneously that change Gunnar's standing in Hillside. He discovers that he has an amazing natural talent for the game of basketball, he finds his poetic voice, and he becomes friends with the most feared young gangster in Hillside.

Though on the surface Gunnar appears to have assimilated into the Hillside culture, he retains his genius intellect. As his fame from basketball increases, so does his renown as a street poet. Unfortunate external events cause Gunnar to get involved in some illegal activity, and in exchange for his father the policeman not turning Gunnar over to the authorities, Gunnar attends his final two years of high school at a wealthy suburban school.

As soon as Gunnar finishes high school his friends and family have a surprise for him. They have ordered him a mail-order bride, and Gunnar gets married before leaving to attend Boston University. Gunnar finds that his fame has preceded him to Boston University, and before he even has the opportunity to complete any classes he is hailed as the greatest of street poets and the new voice of the black American. Gunnar's fame

grows exponentially, and his life spins out of control in an ever-increasingly hilarious way.



Prologue and Chapter One

Prologue and Chapter One Summary

In *The White Boy Shuffle*, narrator Gunnar Kaufman tells his life story. He starts with his family history and then tells how he moved from being a black kid in a white neighborhood to being a basketball star in a black neighborhood to being a world-renowned poet.

In the Prologue, the narrator identifies himself as one who has been conscripted as the voice of all African-Americans. He does not conceal his feelings toward such a title. He makes it clear that it is a title and a role he does not want. The narrator says that the following book comprises his memoir.

In Chapter One, the first person narrator introduces himself as Gunnar Kaufman. He says he comes from a long line of subservient blacks. His parents are divorced, and he and his two sisters live with his mother. Gunnar's mother works in a venereal disease clinic, and she often tells the children stories of family history. Since she does not know her own family history, she tells the children the history of their father's family. The family history begins with the story of Euripides Kaufman, a slave in Boston.

Euripides is the youngest slave in history to purchase his own freedom. At age seven Euripides comes up with a scheme to make money. He rubs himself in lamp oil and then waits in a busy part of town and lets people pay to rub his head for good luck. In time Euripides becomes so popular that his fame attracts customers to his owner's blacksmith shop. At the age of nine Euripides purchases his own freedom.

Gunnar stops telling of Euripides to mention that his own father works for the Los Angeles Police Department as a sketch artist. Many times Gunnar visits his father and hears the other police officers telling black jokes.

Once while in the company of some other men, Euripides taunts some British soldiers. After his insults, Euripides goes to the back of the crowd before the British soldiers open fire.

During Black History Month, Gunnar's class is assigned to chart their family trees. Most students can go only as far back as their grandparents, but Gunnar delights the class with his tales of family history.

Euripides's grandson, Swen Kaufman, is the only known black man to run away to the southern United States and into slavery. Disappointed that he cannot make a living as a professional dancer because of his race, Swen stows away on a ship and lands in North Carolina. Swen arrives at a tobacco plantation. Hearing the songs the slaves sing while working inspires Swen to create a new dance and he joins the slaves working in the fields. In time both the master and the other slaves come to hate Swen.



Swen's son, Franz von Kaufman, is born around the same time that the master's wife has a child, and Franz von is assigned as the servant of the master's boy, Compton. Compton is nearly blind, and Franz von serves as his guide. Franz von lacks any sort of imagination or ambition and faithfully serves Compton. During the Civil War, Compton serves as a negotiator and often has to make train trips to Washington D.C. Franz von meets Compton at the train station every evening. One evening Compton does not return because he dies during the trip. Franz von still goes to the station every evening for the rest of his life.

Another of Gunnar's relatives is Wolfgang Kaufman who has a job in Nashville, Tennessee painting the signs for segregation in public places that say "For Whites Only" or "For Coloreds Only." After Wolfgang is spotted using a whites only restroom he is fired. To avoid being lynched he moves to Chicago and gets a job as a janitor at a radio station. Once at the radio station Wolfgang overhears some white actors rehearsing lines for their roles portraying black men. Wolfgang offers his advice on how to make the lines more accurate and funny. This inspires the white actors to create the famous program Amos 'n' Andy.

Wofgang's son, Ludwig, becomes a manager of white musical acts that imitate popular black Motown acts. Wolfgang unintentionally becomes involved with the Black Muslims and may inadvertently play a role in the death of Malcolm X. Months later police find Wolfgang murdered.

Gunnar's father, Rolf, grows up in a white area of Mississippi, and despite the laws of segregation of the time, Rolf has such a meek personality that the nearby white high school lets him enroll. After high school Rolf enlists in the army and is sent to Vietnam. He is placed in charge of a platoon of black troops, but he is so hated by his own men that they shoot him.

Gunnar hopes he will not be like the other men in his family.

Prologue and Chapter One Analysis

In the Prologue the narrator immediately adopts a sarcastic, if not completely cynical, tone in describing how others feel about him. He says historians and society will one day compare him to other notorious cult leaders, but in the closing lines of the Prologue he makes it clear that he never wants to be regarded as a savior of any kind.

In Chapter One, the Gunnar Kaufman begins the story of his past. His tone goes from light to flippant to outrageous. It is impossible to know how much of what Gunnar says consists of extreme exaggerations for the purpose of humor and how much is the truth. One of the first things a reader might notice early in the story of Gunnar's ancestors is how they all have Germanic names. This is very unusual for black men.

The running theme in the retelling of family history seems to be that Gunnar's male ancestors lack the imagination and will to stand up to their oppressors. More importantly, they seem oblivious to the notion that they are being oppressed. In fact,



Gunnar's ancestors seem to have a habit of adding to the oppression. A fine example would be Wolfgang Kaufman's role in the creation of Amos n Andy, a popular radio comedy that many believe perpetuates the minstrel shows of the previous century by characterizing blacks as little more than comedic children.

Gunnar's family history ends with his father who works for the Los Angeles Police Department. It is significant that Gunnar's father works for this organization because at various times in its history the LAPD has been accused of being motivated by racism. It seems that Gunnar views his father's choice of an employer as a continuation of the spineless actions of his earlier relatives.



Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

Gunnar recalls living in Santa Monica, playing with white friends, and having fun at the beach. Sometimes Gunnar gets into trouble with the police at the beach for pranks and gets escorted home, so Gunnar's mother makes him join the Cub Scouts. Gunnar gets kicked out after three meetings.

After days spent playing at the beach Gunnar likes to go home, listen to the radio and read. Even at a young age Gunnar is an avid reader and enjoys reading about a variety of topics, especially World War II aviation. Gunnar is known among his friends for his sense of humor and his ability to keep a straight face regardless of how outrageous the joke. He is known as the "funny, cool black guy."

Gunnar's elementary school is sensitive to multicultural issues to the point of absurdity. Despite being nearly an all-white school, the educators find ways to incorporate multicultural aspects into every facet of the curriculum. To Gunnar, this reduces race to irrelevance. The teachers encourage the students to be colorblind. Gunnar says that the lessons in the class are in stark contrast to the playground where ethnic jokes are the most popular.

One day some city health workers come to the school to give free health examinations. Some of the children are scared, so Gunnar wildly exaggerates what his physical exam entails when he returns to the classroom. One female classmate who is nearsighted does not want to have to wear glasses, so she asks Gunnar if he remembers the letters at the bottom of the eye chart. He tells her the letters are "F-E-C-E-S."

One of Gunnar's Classmates, Eileen Litmus, passes Gunnar a note and then reports Gunnar to the teacher for passing notes. Gunnar has a crush on Eileen. Gunnar is the fastest boy in the class and Eileen is the fastest girl. They often have races, but Gunnar usually loses because he is distracted by staring at Eileen rather than trying to run as fast as he can. The other boys berate Gunnar for losing a race to a girl.

Gunnar's mother believes her children have lost touch with their black heritage. Once when one of Gunnar's sisters complains about summer camp, their mother suggests maybe they should go to a camp for black children. Gunnar and his sisters all protest. Gunnar's mother decides that the family needs to move. Gunnar composes letters to the friends he leaves behind.

The morning after arriving in their new house in a neighborhood of Los Angeles, Gunnar's mother tells him to go out and get something for breakfast for the rest of the family. Gunnar speaks to the first person he encounters to get directions to the nearest store. The young black man is shocked first by Gunnar's speech and then by his clothes. After



some remarks commenting on Gunnar's use of proper grammar, he comments that Gunnar's clothes are too colorful and loud.

Chapter Two Analysis

Even at a young age Gunnar displays wit and ideas that indicate an above average intelligence and from the narration we can see that he remains the "funny, cool black guy" well past the childhood he describes in this chapter.

Gunnar accurately observes the defeatist nature of the type of emphasis placed on multicultural issues at his elementary school. Rather than being a celebration of diversity, the lessons taught at the elementary school seem to say that there is something wrong with even acknowledging basic differences in people. The lessons seem to promote absurd blindness at best and dishonesty at worst.

In some ways this portion of Gunnar's childhood seems idyllic, but the reader can also see the basis for the mother's fears that her children have lost touch with their own heritage. It is possible that the children's elementary school with all of its misguided stress on multiculturalism has helped to separate the children from understanding their true heritage.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

Gunnar and his family have moved to a West Los Angeles neighborhood named Hillside. It is a neighborhood at the bottom of a hill. The Hillside neighborhood is composed of low-income families. At the top of the hill is Cheviot Heights, a neighborhood composed of wealthy, mostly white residents.

After the family has lived in their new residence a week, two police officers visit for no reason other than to warn Gunnar about illegal activities. They ask Gunnar if he is affiliated with any gang. Gunnar thinks the question is absurd since he has not lived there long enough to make any friends, let alone join a gang. To show his contempt but without the officers realizing it, Gunnar says that on weekends he is involved with the Gang of Four.

Gunnar and his sisters are subject to daily beatings by the other neighborhood children. They try to stick together as much as possible and they try to avoid encountering other kids their age. Tired of seeing her children staying in the house all the time, Gunnar's mother orders them to go play in the park. The children know that it means a certain beating but they must go. Gunnar describes the park as being a dangerous place full of broken glass and used hypodermic needles.

While Gunnar pushes his sister Nicole on the swing, two young girls, Betty and Veronica, arrive and shout at the three Kaufman children to get away from their swing. When the girls charge at the swing, Nicole accidentally strikes one of the two as the swing goes forward. Within minutes many more children arrive, and Gunnar and his sisters receive a severe beating.

Gunnar feels like a foreigner in Hillside. The rules of etiquette he learned in Santa Monica seem to get him beaten up in Hillside. The more he attempts to make friends, the more beatings he receives. In an effort to avoid trouble Gunnar begins spending time alone in the Montgomery Ward department store. He often spends time in the section with camping equipment while he reads. One day some members of a gang called the Gun Totin' Hooligans find Gunnar in the store and beat him.

Chapter Three Analysis

In yet another hilarious scene, Gunnar insults the police without them realizing that Gunnar holds them in contempt. His mention of the Gang of Four refers to the leaders of the communist party in China who were guilty of encouraging some of the worst atrocities during the later part of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The police, of course, think Gunnar is referring to a real Los Angeles street gang and they are astounded that new gangs can form so quickly.



Though it is his mother's intention that Gunnar live in a culture that is his own by birth, Gunnar could not feel more foreign and unwanted anywhere during his first few months in Hillside. To Gunnar it seems that the residents of his new neighborhood speak a different language complete with customs that he cannot understand.



Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Gunnar arrives early on his first day at his new junior high school. On his way to the office to register for classes he looks at the photographs in the display cases and notices how the students' racial demographics have changed in the many years the school has been open. The receptionist in the office is surprised to see a student arrive so early. After the receptionist gives Gunnar his class schedule, Gunnar asks what the aptitude portion of his file says. The receptionist is reluctant to give Gunnar the information, but after some coaxing, he tells Gunnar that the files says that Gunnar's intelligence and willingness to betray others means he will one day make a good CIA operative.

When other students arrive in Gunnar's classroom, Gunnar realizes that this is the first time he has ever been in class with other black students. During his first semester, Gunnar makes friends with some less popular students. When it comes time to choose classes for the following semester, Gunnar has a choice between a second home economics class and a class in drama. Gunnar chooses drama.

Gunnar is assigned to Nicholas Scoby as a partner. Nick is a jazz enthusiast and after a brief discussion Nick says that Gunnar's knowledge of jazz is lacking and he ought to learn more. Nick also observes that Gunnar has an unusual name for a black man. Gunnar goes to Nick's house to study and enjoys watching roller derby films with Nick's mother.

At the drama tournament, Gunnar and Nick's team must compete with teams from wealthy, predominantly white schools. When it comes time for Nick to recite some lines, he makes mistakes. During Gunnar's turn, Gunnar modifies his Shakespearean speech, and the audience is shocked. Nick is impressed with Gunnar's rebellious nature and he invites Gunnar to join him at lunch the following Monday.

When Gunnar arrives at the meeting spot, he finds Nick already there with nine other boys. They scale a fence to leave school property. A teacher sees Gunnar, but Gunnar ignores the teacher and follows the other boys. The boys intend to play basketball, but Gunnar has never played. During the game Gunnar does his best to avoid receiving the ball, but near the end of the game Gunnar gets the ball by mistake. Though he has never played before, Gunnar managed to slam dunk the ball. The other boys are in awe.

One Saturday morning Gunnar waters the front yard and tries to mentally compose a poem while a music video is being filmed nearby. When his mother comes outside, Gunnar asks her for some basketball shoes. His mother worries because she has heard media reports about teenagers being killed for expensive shoes. She also listens to the lyrics of the music playing nearby and says she could do better.



With Gunnar in the yard again alone, Betty and Veronica arrive and tell Gunnar they want him to play hide and seek. He says he does not want to play, but they threaten him with weapons. As Gunnar runs away, Betty and Veronica count down from one hundred. Gunnar runs to a nearby apartment complex and hides in the laundry room. Betty and Veronica find Gunnar and immediately force him to participate in sexual acts.

While walking home Gunnar sings and he encounters one of his neighbors, Juan Julio Sanchez, better known as Psycho Loco. Gunnar has heard many stories about the infamous Psycho Loco. Psycho Loco is the leader of the gang the Gun Totin' Hooligans. Gunnar and Psycho Loco have a brief and pleasant conversation.

Gunnar spends eight hours writing his first poem. The following morning Gunnar takes some stencils and some black paint to the massive wall in Hillside and paints his poem on the wall. Later that day Nick arrives with an ironing board and some white t-shirts. While Nick shows Gunnar the proper way to iron his t-shirts, he tells Gunnar that he has heard that Gunnar is friendly with Psycho Loco. Nick cautions Gunnar about the consequences of being friends with a known criminal.

Gunnar and Nick go to buy Gunnar's first pair of basketball shoes, and afterward Nick takes Gunnar to a place where he can get a haircut that will allow him to better fit into the neighborhood. That evening Gunnar's father calls on the telephone and speaks to Gunnar. Gunnar tells his father that he needs a basketball. Two hours later a police car drives slowly past Gunnar's house and a policeman tosses a basketball in Gunnar's yard.

Chapter Four Analysis

The information from Gunnar's file shared by the high school receptionist seems to echo the roles played by Gunnar's ancestors. Those in power have assumed that a black man that shows intelligence can be used to further promote the status quo.

Gunnar's first real friend at his new school is also intelligent and, after he introduces Gunnar to basketball, Gunnar finds that he has a way to finally fit in. It is during this time that Gunnar also finds his poetic voice, his way of interpreting and processing the external events and conditions he sees. Nick cautions Gunnar about fitting in too well in the neighborhood once Nick realizes that Gunnar is on friendly terms with a known criminal.

It seem odd that even Gunnar's mother believes the sensationalism of the televised news and other media when Gunnar asks for a pair of basketball shoes. Due to media attention on a few incidents, Gunnar's mother, like many other parents during this time, has come to believe that getting her child an expensive pair of athletic shoes is a sure death sentence.

Nevertheless, Gunnar does get new shoes, some wardrobe advice, a haircut and a basketball. Gunnar has now become an involved resident of Hillside. Unlike other residents of Hillside that show talent at basketball, Gunnar has an additional source of

fame. Gunnar's poetry is becoming well known and even those he meets on the basketball court have heard of his work. He has moved on from merely fitting in to his new neighborhood. Gunnar has become the voice of the neighborhood.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

During the summer before Gunnar's first year in high school, Gunnar has reached a height of nearly six and a half feet tall. During the past three years, he has become close friends with both Nick and Psycho Loco. Gunnar can walk the neighborhood and say anything he wants because of his friendship with Psycho Loco, but Psycho Loco often asks Gunnar to hide evidence that could tie Psycho Loco to crimes.

One night Psycho Loco comes to Gunnar's house very upset. One of Psycho Loco's gang members has died. During an attempted robbery of a Korean owned store, Psycho Loco fired his gun, and the bullet hit a large display. The display fell and killed Pumpkin. To honor Pumpkin and other members of the Gun Totin' Hooligans who have died, the living members have a drinking ritual.

Gunnar tells the history of the Gun Totin' Hooligans. They had originally been named the Body Eccentric and were a group of dancers. After suffering many defeats at dance contests, the group became a gang and picked what they thought was a tough sounding name. Despite the name, the gang in the early days did not carry firearms. Instead they preferred weapons like blow darts and spears.

After the ceremony commemorating Pumpkin the gang members and Gunnar ride through the wealthy neighborhood of Cheviot Heights committing acts of vandalism. In particular the gang members destroy a large motor home. Gunnar arrives home the next morning while his mother is having breakfast.

All of the gang members attend Pumpkin's funeral. Gunnar also attends and recites a poem. Gunnar has developed a reputation for being a poet and sometimes other poets challenge him, but Gunnar always triumphs.

The Gun Totin' Hooligans plan to avenge the death of Pumpkin. They will not attack Ms. Kim, the person who owned the store where Pumpkin died. Instead they plan to attack a rival gang called the Ghost Town Black Shadows. In order to get close enough to the gang to attack, the Gun Totin' Hooligans all dress as women. When the gang is about to leave for the raid, Gunnar starts to go home, but Psycho Loco says that since he attends all of Gunnar's basketball games, Gunnar should come watch the Gun Totin' Hooligans attack another gang. The Gun Totin' Hooligans do not use firearms during the raid and the only casualty in the opposing gang is a member that gets hit with one of the Gun Totin' Hooligans balloons filled with liquid drain cleaner.

Chapter Five Analysis

In this chapter Gunnar as narrator reaches new heights of absurdity. Even the death of Pumpkin is related in a humorous manner. He is killed by a falling display in a store he



is attempting to rob and his own gang leader causes the display to fall. Still, the gang members must honor him with a ritual that seems more fitting a comrade who died in a valiant battle. Perhaps it is Gunnar's purpose to show that those so-called valiant battles are every bit as absurd as the Gun Totin' Hooligan's adventures.

Despite having been themselves responsible for Pumpkin's death, the Gun Totin' Hooligans must avenge Pumpkin and they must do so against a formidable rival gang armed with firearms against the Gun Totin' Hooligan's primitive weapons. They also feel the need to exact revenge while dressed in drag.



Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary

Every male student at Gunnar's high school is required to attend monthly assemblies discussing racial prejudice. The motivational speakers usually consists of business leaders, athletes, or ex convicts. Gunnar notices that no matter who the speaker is, the message is always the same.

Gunnar develops a close relationship with his high school basketball coach. Coach Shimimoto learns to play basketball while incarcerated in a camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II. Both Gunnar and Nick become very popular because of their talent at basketball. Gunnar handles the attention better than Nick. Gunnar and Nick's friends from outside of school also come to watch all of their games. Once when a player on an opposing team strikes Nick, Psycho Loco threatens the entire other team with a shotgun.

While Gunnar enjoys playing the game, he is indifferent about organized basketball. He thinks people who do not even play the game put too much importance on whether their school's teams win. Both students and teachers alike pay a great deal of attention to Gunnar and Nick because of basketball. In order to escape some of that attention, Gunnar and Nick sometimes have lunch in Coach's office.

Nick gets increasingly troubled by the attention he receives, especially after other students start wearing buttons that show his face. To avoid some of the attention, Nick stops trying so hard at basketball. Gunnar works even harder to make up for Nick's lack of effort, and this increases Gunnar's fame. Gunnar handles the fame associated with basketball well, but he has problems with other social situations.

Gunnar dreads being dragged by his friends to establishments that have dancing. Gunnar cannot dance and being forced to do so makes him uncomfortable. Many girls want to dance with Gunnar, but he is skilled at avoiding dancing except when it comes to Betty and Veronica. Like so many other things with Gunnar, Betty and Veronica do not take no for an answer when it comes to dancing.

Sometimes Psycho Loco tries to help Gunnar dance better by giving him alcohol to drink. That never works, but Psycho Loco's habit of starting fights with the other patrons in the dance clubs usually relieves Gunnar of the need to continue dancing.

One night after leaving a dance club, the guys talk about police harassment they have endured and they discuss the possible outcomes of the upcoming trial for the police officers caught on film beating a black motorist named Rodney King.



Chapter Six Analysis

Just as in his Santa Monica elementary school, Gunnar notices some problems in the way the school administrators discuss racial relations at his mostly black high school. Perhaps he sees each as extreme approaches to the same problem.

Gunnar goes beyond his goal to fit in. He achieves celebrity status on two fronts. He is admired for his athletic abilities, and he is held in high regard for his poetic artistry.

Gunnar's feelings about organized sports seem to be a smaller version of his feelings toward society and government in general. While he loves the game of basketball, he seems to think that the efforts to organize it and make it affiliated with particular institutions have caused the activity to lose its appeal.

Mention of the trial of the officers involved in beating Rodney King gives a more precise timeframe for the setting. This real-life event occurs in the spring of 1991 and the outcome of the trial comes in late April of 1992.



Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary

One afternoon Coach Shimimoto keeps the basketball players at practice much longer than usual. Coach gathers the players and says that they can go if one of them can give him the definition of the word "concatenate." When one player says that it means to bring together, the Coach says that is close enough, but he also refers to them as "soon-to-be-revolutionaries" and says he hopes they remember the definition.

Once outside Gunnar sees first one column of smoke and then another. People gather on the streets. Gunnar and Nick ask a man what is happening, but Gunnar is confused by the man's answer. Gunnar and Nick go into the man's house and watch the television news coverage. Gunnar soon understands that the police officers accused of excessive brutality in the beating of Rodney King have been acquitted of all charges and many of the black residents of Los Angeles are rioting.

Gunnar sees that a store's windows have been boarded up and in black paint the owner has written "black owned." Gunnar thinks he has never before felt so worthless. Gunnar and Nick leave the man's house and walk toward the commotion. Two trucks collide. One of them is a bread truck and Gunnar and Nick beat the driver with loaves of bread. Gunnar goes to Ms. Kim's store to get something to drink, and when he arrives he finds Ms. Kim giving youths Molotov cocktails and begging them to burn her store. Ms. Kim is too well liked, and no one will start the fire. Ms. Kim takes one of the Molotov cocktails and starts the fire herself.

The next day Gunnar Nick has the idea to try to get items of value like other looters. They visit a couple of stores but have no luck in getting anything of real value. When they visit Montgomery Ward they discover that Psycho Loco has stolen a huge safe. While Gunnar and Nick help Psycho Loco take the safe, Gunnar hears the police arrive. Gunnar says he will distract them while the others get away. Gunnar is surprised to see that his father is among the police that have arrived. Gunnar begins to speak to his father, but his father hits Gunnar with the stock of a shotgun.

While Gunnar is unconscious in the hospital he thinks he hears the voices of his mother, Coach, Nick and Psycho Loco.

Once out of the hospital Gunnar visits Psycho Loco and finds that Psycho Loco has the safe in his house. Gunnar helps Psycho Loco open the safe. The safe is full of vast amounts of jewelry and cash. Gunnar refuses to accept any, but Psycho Loco says that he will make sure that Gunnar profits and soon after Psycho Loco begins taking a greater interest in Gunnar's personal life.



Gunnar spends the final two weeks of his summer at a baseball camp in Oregon. He writes letters to his mother, his now pregnant sisters, Nick, Psycho Loco and Coach Shimimoto.

Chapter Seven Analysis

Gunnar thinks it seems as if Coach is reluctant to let them go or that Coach is intentionally trying to bring them to complete exhaustion. Only when the players can hardly stand does he begin to consider letting them go. Later Gunnar discovers that Coach was trying to keep his players away from the violence of the riots.

With the commencement of the riots we now know the exact date: April 29, 1992. Six days of violence and looting follow. Although much of Gunnar's narration contains its usual humor, there is little funny about the real-life riots. Gunnar describes a scene where he and Nick beat a truck driver with loaves of bread. Gunnar mentions that two trucks collide prior to the beating. In the actual riots, two different truck drivers were severely beaten and nearly killed at the same intersection.

Though Gunnar's narration does contain humorous elements, it is almost as if Gunnar falters at the beginning and later recovers his "funny, cool guy" composure. He begins by describing his shock and dismay and even says he never before felt so worthless. Slowly as the chapter progresses Gunnar regains his usual flippant attitude. Gunnar is momentarily angered that Nick and the man are talking about Gunnar's poetry, but thinking of his poetry at a time when he is so upset makes Gunnar realize that his poetry serves the same function as Psycho Loco's violence. Gunnar uses poetry to help him cope with external events, and Psycho Loco uses violence for the same reason. In this chapter Gunnar seems to be using Psycho Loco's coping tools.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary

Gunnar's father will not report his looting if Gunnar agrees to attend El Campesino Real High School. Gunnar agrees, but he is miserable during his time at that school. It is a predominantly white wealthier school and Gunnar thinks that the whites, especially the teachers, are condescending. Gunnar is particularly disgusted with the few other black students who intentionally try to act not black. During his free time Gunnar's mother forces him to associate with students from the new school rather than his Hillside friends.

Gunnar finds refuge in the school's well-stocked library. He frequently skips classes and goes to the library. Every afternoon one of the basketball team's assistant coaches goes around to Gunnar's classes and picks up his assignments. Gunnar is not the only minority student brought in to improve the school's basketball team. There are a few others brought in from other poorer neighborhoods.

One day during his senior year Gunnar meets with the school's guidance counselor. The counselor cannot believe that a young black man could get such high SAT scores. Soon Gunnar is as pursued for his academic abilities as he was for athletic prowess. Many of the top schools send representatives to visit with Gunnar and offer him academic scholarships. A recruiter from Harvard takes Gunnar to dinner and then back to his home in Cheviot Heights. Gunnar finds the man's pretentious nature distasteful, and during the discussion Gunnar learns that the man stands to gain a large bonus if he can get Gunnar to agree to attend Harvard. He says that he will buy a new motor home with the money. While the man demonstrates some rappelling equipment, Gunnar uses the equipment to descend down from the rich neighborhood into Hillside.

A recruiter from Boston University visits Gunnar at home and drinks beer and plays cards with Gunnar, Nick, and Psycho Loco. Gunnar is impressed with this recruiter who says she can also get admission for Nick based on his academic scores. The recruiter even tries to entice Psycho Loco to attend Boston University. Psycho Loco says he does not intend to go to college, but he asks about housing for married students in reference to Gunnar and this confuses Gunnar.

During the playoff game between El Campesino and Hillside, Gunnar mocks the event by painting his face white and engaging in other antics. He is removed from the game and he goes to sit near his former coach and friend, Coach Shimimoto. Gunnar says that his mother and Psycho Loco sit together in the stands making wedding plans.



Chapter Eight Analysis

If the previous chapter did not prove Gunnar's departure from the traditional role of his male ancestors, this chapter certainly does. Gunnar will not play the white man's game. He torments some of the college recruiters and he makes a farce of the playoff game.

The motor home that the Harvard recruiter mentions must be the same motor home that Gunnar and the Gun Totin' Hooligans destroy in Chapter Five. Given Gunnar's estimation of the man, this revelation must be satisfying for Gunnar. The Harvard recruiter does not know that Gunnar is a resident of Hillside, and certainly the man would have never considered visiting Gunnar at home. This is in stark contrast to the recruiter from Boston University who seems at home playing cards and drinking beer with the likes of Psycho Loco.

Twice mysterious mention of an upcoming marriage is made. First Psycho Loco wants to know about housing for married students at Boston University, and then psycho Loco and Gunnar's mother make wedding plans during the playoff game. Gunnar seems surprisingly calm and uninterested in events and planning that should concern him.



Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine Summary

Psycho Loco arranges a marriage for Gunnar and purchases the bride. The wedding takes place on the front lawn of Gunnar's mother's house as soon as the bride arrives and is signed for. The UPS driver performs the ceremony.

Betty and Veronica crash the wedding and say that Gunnar belongs to them. They square off against Yoshiko, Gunnar's wife, but Yoshiko's calm politeness wins them over.

The family holds a reception in the backyard and then Gunnar's mother lends him the car so he can go on a honeymoon. He and Yoshiko go first to an amusement park and then the beach.

Chapter Nine Analysis

Once again the narration takes a turn for the outlandish and perhaps the surreal. The reader cannot possibly believe that UPS sends a woman to Gunnar's house and that the delivery truck driver performs the wedding ceremony. The lack of believability, however, does nothing to diminish the hilarity of the chapter.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, Gunnar does not protest. Though he does not show much enthusiasm, he does not show much desire to revolt either. The reasons for Psycho Loco's requests for biographical information are now clear.

Though the reader cannot yet tell much about Yoshiko, we can tell from her interaction with Betty and Veronica and by Gunnar's perception of her that she is a strong character.



Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten Summary

Gunnar attends only one class during his time at BU, and he stays for only one hour of that class. Gunnar finds that the other members of his creative writing class are a talentless lot displaying little or no original thought. When they discover his identity they begin to gush hero worship. Gunnar leaves the class and begins walking home. He is so rattled by the experience that he discards his clothing as he walks. The other members of the creative writing class, including the professor, follow behind and gather his clothing as if they are relics from some deity. By the time Gunnar reaches his apartment he is naked and the police have arrived. He is spared arrest because his professor shouts to the police that Gunnar is a brilliant poet.

The members of his creative writing class follow Gunnar into his home where Yoshiko is studying on the couch. They implore Gunnar to put together a poetry collection. The professor says he has some connections in the publishing industry and will arrange to have Gunnar's book published. Nick arrives while the group is in Gunnar's house. The members of the class want to know what Gunnar will give the book as a title, and he says *Watermelanin*. Yoshiko tires of the group and throws all but Nick and Gunnar out of the apartment.

Gunnar, Nick, and Yoshiko do not have much of a social life in Boston. They find nothing familiar or enjoyable in Boston's typical pubs and have few places to go until they discover Boston's Roxbury neighborhood.

To occupy some of his free time, Gunnar contemplates joining an organization. First he considers joining Ambrosia, the black student union. Gunnar finds their rhetoric to be pretentious and ridiculous. When asked to speak, Gunnar offends the group and leaves. On his way out he is approached by the leader of another student organization, but thinks little of that organization. Gunnar's next attempt to find an organization to join involves attending a meeting of an organization made up of white students who believe they can help the oppressed black people. Gunnar says they do not need the help and declines to join.

One morning Gunnar and Yoshiko wake and talk. Yoshiko says she thinks she is pregnant.

Unable to find an extracurricular activity, Gunnar returns to playing basketball. He joins Nick on the university team and he is often away from Yoshiko. During one game away from Boston, Gunnar writes a long letter to Yoshiko. He says he misses her and that he has no one to talk to since it appears that Nick is losing his mind. Gunnar also talks about how he refuses to wear the brand of shoes the coach is paid to promote and how he refuses to stand for the national anthem. Once some television reporters ask Gunnar



why he does not stand for the national anthem and they find his answer so disturbing that they do not bother him further.

Gunnar tells Yoshiko that he thinks part of the reason that Nick is going insane is because of all the attention he and Gunnar receive. It is far more intense than the attention they received in high school. Gunnar mentions one enjoyable game when the team plays in New York and many African-Americans attend and cheer for Gunnar and Nick. Gunnar asks Yoshiko to make an appointment for Nick to see a psychological counselor.

Gunnar closes the letter with an ink print of his hand and asks Yoshiko to hold it on her pregnant belly.

Chapter Ten Analysis

Gunnar is disgusted with all the posturing and posing of the students in his creative writing class. He is even more disturbed when he finds that they have conferred upon him the title of "street poet" and seem to worship his every word. Gunnar must wonder if they are genuinely affected by his poetry or if they claim to admire it because they believe it is the trendy thing to do. One student even says that the only reason she did not initially cite Gunnar as her favorite poet is because she thinks she will not be taken seriously if she mentions a black author.

Gunnar does not hold the student political organizations in much higher esteem. He thinks the black student organization's claim to be ready to die for others' freedom is extreme and a lie. He compares the white student organization to Abolitionists of the past who were all too eager to get black people killed.

Basketball gives Gunnar a way to fill his time and it gives him an opportunity to demonstrate his disdain. Just like in high school, Gunnar handles the notoriety much better than Nick does. Though Gunnar often jokes, and anything is fair game for being the target of a joke, Gunnar seems serious when he speaks of Nick's developing problems. He even asks Yoshiko to make an appointment for Nick to see a professional.



Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven Summary

Gunnar is invited to speak at a rally protesting Boston University having granted an honorary doctorate degree and a hundred million dollars to an African politician. Gunnar becomes irritated by the introductory speaker and he openly shows his contempt. When he finally approaches the stand to speak, Gunnar decides that the best course is honesty. He says that while many people claim to be ready to die for an idea, few really are. As for himself, Gunnar says he is not ready to die for an idea, but he is simply ready to die. After he says it, Gunnar realizes his words sound like a promotion of suicide.

The following day reporters come to Gunnar's house and ask about his speech. They also ask for his comments concerning the recent suicide of the leader of the black student union, an act that seems prompted by Gunnar's speech. When the reporters ask for clarification on Gunnar's message of suicide, he answers that he is advocating his own suicide and no one else's.

Chapter Eleven Analysis

Some of the more disturbing things that Gunnar says in the Prologue, such as being compared to a cult leader, are beginning to make sense now. He sees himself being regarded as some sort of savior, but he does nothing to halt the process. On hearing himself described as the new black leader, Gunnar merely thinks, in sarcastic fashion, that he ought to get a scepter to go with his new title.

When the reporters visit Gunnar at home, he does nothing to halt the wave of suicides, much like he does little to halt his promotion to black messiah or even his own arranged marriage.



Chapter Twelve and Epilogue

Chapter Twelve and Epilogue Summary

Nick is afflicted by acute homesickness. All around him he notices differences between Boston and Los Angeles. Nick complains about the climate, the fire trucks not being painted red, and the unfamiliar cuisine. He does strange things like trying to pay Puerto Ricans in the Roxbury neighborhood to act like Mexicans and trying to bottle bus exhaust so he can release it in his room because he misses Los Angeles smog. Gunnar tries to take Nick to the beach to help him relax. Nick cannot simply go home to Los Angeles because his mother has sold their house and returned to roller derby.

Nick brings up the subject of suicide and asks Gunnar about the tallest buildings in Boston. Gunnar mentions two of the tallest, but they do not have public access to the roof. Gunnar mentions the law school at Boston University and how it does have access. After discussing suicide and tall buildings, Gunnar and Nick discuss whether music can be finite. Gunnar says that there are only so many musical notes and so many combinations of musical notes. Nick points out that Gunnar forgot to factor in the concept of time.

The following morning Gunnar's coach wakes him and informs him that Nick has committed suicide. He left a suicide note addressed to Gunnar attached to a case of beer on the roof of the law school. Gunnar opens a beer and pours part of it on the ground in the manner that the Gun Totin' Hooligans did to honor their dead.

Gunnar and Yoshiko return to Los Angeles. Reporters at the airport surround Gunnar and Yoshiko, but Psycho Loco rescues them. As he drives away he tells Gunnar that he cannot take him to his mother's house because the Los Angeles Police Department is waiting there to talk to Gunnar. Gunnar suggests they go to the beach. During the drive to the beach Psycho Loco talks about the pride that the residents of Hillside feel at Gunnar and Nick's success.

At night at the beach Psycho Loco sarcastically asks when Gunnar intends to kill himself. Gunnar responds that he intends to do it right now, and he walks into the surf. While under the water Gunnar reconsiders and returns to shore. Both Yoshiko and Psycho Loco are frantic with fear that Gunnar has really died. When they see that he is still alive, they are upset because they think he has played a joke on them.

Since Gunnar cannot go to his mother's house, he and Yoshiko check into a cheap motel. They discuss whether to return to Boston. They decide to remain in Los Angeles and they enroll in a series of correspondence courses. Often they read the suicide poems that fed up black people send to Gunnar, and they also listen to talk radio.

One night Yoshiko has a craving, so Gunnar leaves the motel to walk to the store. On the way he is spotted by a police helicopter that trains a spotlight on him. No matter



where Gunnar goes at night he is under the light of the helicopter. Soon he and Yoshiko begin talking walks at night under the light, and they spread word that she will give birth to her baby in Reynier Park.

When Yoshiko goes into labor, Gunnar takes her to Reynier Park. A huge crowd is already waiting. The Gun Totin' Hooligans provide security, and Gunnar's mother delivers the baby. After the successful birth of the baby a box of cigars attached to a parachute descends from the helicopter overhead with a note of congratulations. Gunnar thinks he recognizes his father's handwriting.

After the birth of Gunnar's daughter, Naomi Katsu Kaufman, Gunnar and the residents of Hillside begin holding celebrations they call Black Bacchanalian MiseryFests. The MiseryFests are all-night affairs that often include poetry readings under the light of the police helicopter. Popularity of the MiseryFests begins to grow, and black people from all over Los Angeles come to Hillside. After the television networks begin showing the MiseryFests, black people from all over America come to Hillside. At the two year anniversary of Nick's suicide, Gunnar challenges the government to drop a nuclear bomb on Hillside. The residents of Hillside paint concentric bull's eye circles around the neighborhood with the center at Gunnar's motel room so that from the air Hillside resembles a target.

Epilogue

Gunnar spends most of his time in his motel room taking care of his daughter. He tells her the story of her family history beginning with her grandfather Rolf Kaufman who finally gets fed up with working for the LAPD and kills himself.

Chapter Twelve and Epilogue Analysis

It is unclear whether Gunnar realizes that Nick is serious about suicide when they talk on the beach. It is also unknown whether Gunnar would have done anything to stop it. Gunnar seems to be accepting things as inevitable. If Gunnar did not know that Nick was serious, he should have when he saw that Nick left behind his ever-present cassette player when Nick left the beach that final night.

Once back in Los Angeles, when Psycho Loco tells Gunnar of the pride the people of Hillside feel in his accomplishments, it is unclear how Gunnar feels. He seems to be increasingly ambivalent about matters. Perhaps he thinks that the people of Hillside should not feel pride about his accomplishments or perhaps he remembers the treatment he received when he first moved to Hillside.

Like so many other things, Gunnar seems to merely accept the presence of the police spotlight. Rather than have an emotional reaction, he simply finds a way to use it.

The lack of feeling on the part of Gunnar could be his way of explaining what has driven many to suicide. He seems to be saying that nothing anyone does matters, so why not end it?

Epilogue

In the conversation with Psycho Loco, Gunnar explains what Psycho Loco refers to as "suicidal madness." Gunnar says there is no way to win, so it is a waste of effort to even try. He also says that he, as symbol of the African-American, and the United States are not enemies. He is simply tired and does not want to go on any longer.



Characters

Gunnar Kaufman

Gunnar is the narrator of *The White Boy Shuffle*. He tells the reader in the Prologue that the remaining text is his memoirs. He begins with an outrageous and hilarious account of his male ancestors. When the reader first meets Gunnar, he is an elementary student at a predominantly white school in Santa Monica, California where multicultural issues pervade every facet of the curriculum. Even at such a young age Gunnar already has a developed and sarcastic sense of humor, and he sometimes unleashes it on unsuspecting adults in positions of authority. The most notable early example of Gunnar's sense of humor is described during the preemptive visit by the police after Gunnar's mother moves the family to a poor black neighborhood. Gunnar is asked about his gang affiliation, and he finds the question absurd since he has not been in the neighborhood long enough to even make friends. He says he is affiliated with the Gang of Four, the ruling elite of China from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, and he says he has plans for the following week to fight the Bowery Boys, a New York City gang from the mid-nineteenth century. The police believe he is speaking of real Los Angeles street gangs.

Gunnar retains the same sarcastic worldview as he matures into a renowned poet and is drafted as leader of the black people in America. Gunnar says repeatedly that his poems are expressions of his views and he did not ever intend to become the voice of millions.

Nicholas Scoby

Nick becomes Gunnar's first real friend after Gunnar's family moves to Hillside. Gunnar first encounters Nick in a drama class during his second semester of junior high. Nick is a jazz enthusiast and he is always in possession of a cassette player and headphones. The only thing that Nick likes nearly as much as jazz is basketball. Soon after Gunnar encounters Nick, he sees that Nick, like himself, is a young man with above average intelligence. In a way, Nick discovers Gunnar's hidden talent at basketball. After being impressed with Gunnar's rebellious performance at a drama competition, Nick invites Gunnar to join him and some other boys for lunch and basketball. Nick learns that Gunnar can slam dunk, and Gunnar soon learns that Nick has the amazing ability to never miss when he throws a basketball.

Beyond giving Gunnar his introduction to basketball, the proper way to dress and the proper haircut to wear, Nick serves as sort of an anchor for Gunnar. Nick is one of the few people who sees Gunnar for who he really is and is not drawn into the hero worship that often comes after Gunnar's displays of athletic prowess or literary brilliance. Nick also cautions Gunnar about the consequences of getting too involved with the local criminal element.



Given Nick's stabilizing effect on Gunnar, it is surprising that it is Nick that has difficulty handling the pressure of notoriety and being far from home. It is not fully clear if Nick takes his final action because of Gunnar's influence or because of being depressed and weary of being far from home in a place he does not like.

Psycho Loco (a.k.a. Juan Julio Sanchez)

Gunnar has heard of Psycho Loco long before he ever meets him, but unlike many who have inflated reputations, Psycho Loco's reputation for violence is well deserved. Gunnar encounters Psycho Loco while Gunnar is walking home one afternoon and, for some reason, Psycho Loco takes an instant liking to Gunnar. That affinity becomes a life-long friendship.

Psycho Loco lives up to his name. He is prone to extreme violence and, though part of a gang called the Gun Totin' Hooligans, he is feared on his own merits. In fact, the entire reputation of the Gun Totin' Hooligans rests on Psycho Loco's exploits. Sometimes Psycho Loco's fits of violence can endanger his own allies, such as when he fires a pistol and strikes a convenience store display which falls and kills one of his own gang members or like the time he does not like something a subordinate says and so he grabs and holds that gang member by the eyelids.

Despite Psycho Loco's career choice, he remains a trusted and devoted friend to Gunnar. He always seems to have Gunnar's best interests in mind. When Gunnar refuses to take a share from the theft of a safe, Psycho Loco says he will manage Gunnar's share and ensure that Gunnar profits from the venture. It is also Psycho Loco who arranges Gunnar's marriage without Gunnar's knowledge.

Yoshiko Katsu Kaufman

This character arrives via UPS and marries Gunnar in his mother's front yard.

Coach Motome Chijiwa Shimimoto

This character learns to play basketball in an internment camp during World War II. He is a mentor and friend to Gunnar.

Brenda Kaufman

This is Gunnar's mother. She does not know her own family so she tells Gunnar the history of his father's family.



Rolf Kaufman

This is Gunnar's father. Originally from Mississippi, he serves in the army before getting a job with the Los Angeles Police Department.

Nicole Kaufman

This is Gunnar's youngest sister.

Christina Kaufman

This sister of Gunnar is the middle Kaufman child.

Betty

This girl, always in the company of her friend Veronica, is a delinquent who takes an instant, though often violent, liking to Gunnar.

Veronica

Like her ever-present friend Betty, this character often expresses her affection for Gunnar in violent ways.

Ms. Kim

This half-Korean woman owns a convenience store in Hillside.

Pumpkin

This member of the Gun Totin' Hooligans gang is killed when a store display falls on him during an attempted robbery.

Eileen Litmus

This fellow elementary school student of Gunnar's is the fastest girl in class.

Naomi Katsu Kaufman

This is Gunnar and Yoshiko's daughter.



Objects/Places

Santa Monica

This seaside city near Los Angeles, California, is where Gunnar spends part of his childhood.

Hillside

This West Los Angeles neighborhood is where Gunnar's mother moves the family so they can become closer to their black heritage.

Boston

Gunnar attends college in this eastern U.S. city. This is also where one of Gunnar's relatives, Euripides Kaufman, participates in some important events in American history.

Roxbury

Gunnar, Nick, and Yoshiko often go to this neighborhood in Boston to seek the types of bars and musical entertainment they enjoy.

Amos n Andy

This radio program is popular in the United States from the 1920s through the 1950s. It features stereotypical black characters.

Gun Totin' Hooligans

This Los Angeles street gang is once a dance troupe. After becoming a gang they suffer many casualties because they prefer bows and arrows to firearms.

Reynier Park

This municipal park located in the neighborhood of Hillside is where Yoshiko gives birth to Naomi.



Cheviot Heights

This wealthy predominantly white neighborhood is located above the hill the neighborhood of Hillside is built into.

Hot Mama-sans of the Orient

This is the mail order bride service that Psycho Loco contacts to purchase a wife for Gunnar.

Black Bacchanalian MiseryFests

Gunnar begins hosting these events in Reynier Park after the birth of Naomi. They become popular locally and then become a televised national sensation.



Themes

Self Discovery and Discovery of Self Within a Group

Much of Gunnar's life involves discovering himself and much of learning about himself involves learning how he fits in with his racial group. This quest, though not necessarily a conscious or directed search, takes place over many years and in a variety of settings.

Gunnar first mentions his peculiar role in the African-American community in the Prologue. He says he was chosen for a role he never sought, the savior of the black people. In what seems to be a sarcastic tone Gunnar says that he is ideally suited for the job because he has written a popular book and is a highly regarded poet. He then says that his message of wisdom consists of the notion that all is futile and the African-American might as well give up.

From the moment that Gunnar arrives in Hillside he is involved in a constant struggle to find a role within that society that does not involve daily beatings. He seems to find simultaneous roles of athlete, poet, and friend of known criminals. To Gunnar, these labels are always lacking. He enjoys basketball but does not take organized sports seriously. He feels compelled to write poetry but always seems confused by people's instant adulation. He is a friend to Psycho Loco, but he is not a gang member.

Oddly, if ever there was a time that Gunnar felt like he knew his true role, it was as a child in Santa Monica when he knew what others knew, that he was the "funny, cool black guy."

Satire: Reality Presented as Comedy

Gunnar often speaks of grave conditions in a comedic manner. Some of these situations, such as the police visit to the Kaufman house a week after their arrival in Hillside, are relatively generic. Though they involve negative topics, like the police believing that all African Americans are involved in crime, they work well as comedy because they call to mind no one specific event. In other instances Gunnar mentions actual historical incidents. Gunnar mentions the events surrounding the trial and the acquittal of the officers charged in the beating of Rodney King. He even describes himself and Nick beating a truck driver with loaves of bread. For those familiar with the history of events in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, it may be harder to find humor in Gunnar's narration in Chapter Seven.

One definition of satire is "the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc." With this in mind, it is possible that Paul Beatty, through the narrator Gunnar Kaufman, has been conditioning the reader to see the folly in some of the real problems in society. Early in the book the things that are held up to ridicule are light by comparison to the problems mentioned later in the book. Early in the



book Gunnar gets into trouble for garnishing a family's beach picnic with sand crabs, and later he is guilty of beating an innocent citizen. Perhaps by changing the context slowly over time, the narrator is successful in showing us the folly of society's real-world problems.

The Black Man as Unwitting Accomplice In His Own Oppression

Throughout the novel, beginning with tales of his own ancestors, Gunnar speaks of black men who have unwittingly aided in the oppression, even persecution, of their own race. One of Gunnar's relatives first works painting signs promoting and enforcing Segregation and then later goes on to help create the radio program Amos n Andy, a program many think set the portrayal of black people back to the ridiculous stereotypes of the minstrel shows of the previous century. Gunnar's own father works for the Los Angeles Police Department, a governmental agency many black men at the time the novel regard as the supreme enemy.

Gunnar's own relatives are not the only examples of what he believes are black men hurting themselves. Some of these individuals appear in the most unlikely places. Gunnar grows quickly disillusioned with the leader of the black student union at Boston University. He sees this individual as one who is full of braggadocio and posturing but devoid of any real knowledge and perhaps any desire to make changes. Gunnar has even less regard for leaders of other student organizations.

If Gunnar has any distinct goals or desires, it is simply to not be like his ancestors. He does not want to be used to further oppress the people of his race. Gunnar often doubts his ability to break free from his family heritage. His academic report that mentions his tendency to betray friends is an expression of his greatest fear about himself. It is this element of longing to break free from the status quo that gives Gunnar what is perhaps his only motivation in life.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel *The White Boy Shuffle* comes from the perspective of first person narrator Gunnar Kaufman. Since the novel is supposed to be a memoir the narrative voice is consistent, as one would expect from a text written from a perspective looking back in time. However, the older Gunnar looking back into the past does manage to give voice to the younger Gunnars and how they see the world around themselves at their particular point in time.

The pre-adolescent Gunnar living near the beach in Santa Monica does not see the world in the same way as later versions of Gunnar. The young Gunnar is aware of his family history and certainly he is aware that he is African-American, but for this Gunnar the term has a different meaning than for the Gunnars yet to evolve; at this stage in his life, the term African-American has a different context. The only other blacks in Gunnar's life are his immediate family members, so Gunnar measures himself by how well he fits into the surroundings outside the home. The criteria are how funny his beach-time pranks are, how many World War II aircraft he can name and whether he can beat his classmates in a foot race.

The later stages in Gunnar's development change his perspective. After struggling to fit into the community of Hillside, Gunnar has a new perspective on those of his race and those who oppress people like him. When Gunnar moves beyond Los Angeles, his perspective changes yet again.

Setting

The physical settings of *The White Boy Shuffle* include two locales in the Los Angeles area of California and the city of Boston. In California Gunnar first lives in the city of Santa Monica. He describes an almost idyllic childhood consisting of daily trips to the beach and reading outside on his mother's two-story townhouse balcony. In Santa Monica Gunnar holds the identity of "funny, cool black guy" and the closest he ever comes to any sort of fight consists of arguing over the best World War II fighter planes.

Hillside confronts Gunnar in an unfamiliar and hostile way. Whereas his home in Santa Monica is among mostly privileged and happy white people, Hillside is populated by economically struggling and angry people, mostly African-American and Mexican-American. Gunnar describes Hillside as a place where the residents treat outsiders as they have been treated: suspect until proven innocent. When Gunnar first arrives he does not know the proper way to dress or how to speak. This makes him easily identifiable and subject to daily beatings.

Boston is another alien environment for Gunnar and his friend Nick. After a year it has driven Nick insane. The reader cannot know how much of Nick's final act is due to being



influenced by Gunnar's speech at the protest rally and how much is due simply to homesickness. To Nick and Gunnar, Boston is a place devoid of black entertainment and possessing a fascination with shamrocks. The sun sets in the wrong direction when they visit the beach and the fire trucks are painted the wrong color.

Language and Meaning

The language gives the novel *The White Boy Shuffle* its unique flavor. The language is a combination of the elevated prose Gunnar is accustomed to reading and the vernacular he hears in everyday life. Since the narrator, Gunnar, is a poet, the language is always vivid, evoking images of the unfolding action.

One recurring trait involving language is the juxtaposition of elevated language with mundane or decidedly unintellectual situations. When a gang of rowdies find Gunnar hiding in a Montgomery Ward department store, they communicate via hand gestures, but Gunnar does not understand. He says, "That thing you do with your hands is awfully cryptic." The gang misunderstands Gunnar and thinks he is calling them Crips, a well-known network of Los Angeles street gangs.

Yet another recurring use of language that gives the novel much of its humor comes in situations where Gunnar uses his vastly superior vocabulary to confound those in positions of authority. Gunnar is able to do this even at an early age. Asked by his elementary school teacher what will happen when black and white elephants intermarry, Gunnar responds that not all elephants will come out gray. Some will be genetic throwbacks and come out all black or all white, and "then the whole monochrome utopia is going to be all messed up." Later in high school Gunnar has an encounter with a condescending guidance counselor, and he tells her that he appreciates her "eleemosynary concern." Her immediate response is to ask for the meaning of the word.

Structure

The novel *The White Boy Shuffle* poses as a memoir and mimics the format. The story is told in a linear fashion and in mostly chronological order. The Prologue introduces the topic of the book and declares that the text to follow is the personal memoir of the narrator.

Part 1, which includes Chapters One and Two, tells the story of the ancestors of Gunnar Kaufman, the narrator, and Gunnar's happy childhood in Santa Monica, California.

Part 2 is in sharp contrast to the idyllic environment described in the previous part. Part 2 consists of Chapters Three through Six and tells the story of Gunnar's early days in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Hillside and his assimilation into the neighborhood culture.

Part 3 consist of the single Chapter Seven. Chapter Seven chronicles a pivotal moment in the development of Gunnar. It begins in the aftermath of the acquittal of the police officers accused of brutality and ends with Gunnar writing home from basketball camp.

Part 4 includes Chapters Eight through Twelve. Chapter Eight tells of Gunnar's time at a wealthy suburban school far from Hillside. Chapter Nine tells of Gunnar's abrupt and unexpected wedding. Chapter Ten covers Gunnar's brief time at Boston University. The final chapter tells of Gunnar's move back to Hillside.

The Epilogue ends where the Prologue began, with Gunnar as the unwilling new leader of the blacks in America.



Quotes

Mom raised my sisters and me as the hard-won spoils of a vicious custody battle that left the porcelain shrapnel of supper-dish grenades embedded in my father's neck. The divorce made Mama, Ms. Brenda W. Kaufman, determined to make sure that her children knew their forebears.

(Chapter One, pp. 5-6)

I was an ashy-legged black beach bum sporting a lopsided trapezoidal natural and living in a hilltop two-story townhouse on Sixth and Bay. After an exhausting morning of bodyboarding and watching seagulls hovering over the ocean expertly catching French fries, I would spend the afternoon lounging on the rosewood balcony.

(Chapter Two, p. 26)

I was the funny, cool black guy. In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white sanctuaries from urban blight, "cool black guy" is a versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics.

(Chapter Two, p. 27)

After a week in our new home, a black-and-white Welcome Wagon pulled up in front of the house to help newcomers settle into the neighborhood. Two mustachioed officers got out of the patrol car and knocked on our front door with well-practiced leather-gloved authority. Tossing courtesy smiles at my mother, the cops shouldered their way past the threshold and presented her with a pamphlet entitled "How to Report Crime and Suspicious Activity Whether the suspects Are Related to You or Not."

(Chapter Three, p. 46)

The people of Hillside treat society the way society treats them. Strangers and friends are suspect until proven innocent. Instant camaraderie beyond familial ties doesn't exist. It takes more than wearing the same uniform to be accepted by one's ghetto peers.

(Chapter Three, p. 53)

"Okay, it says, 'Despite his race, subject possesses remarkable intelligence and excellent reasoning and analytical skills. His superb yet raw athletic ability even exceeds the heightened expectations those normally accorded those of his ethnicity. Family background is exemplary, and with the proper patriotic encouragement, Gunnar Kaufman will make an excellent undercover CIA agent.'"

(Chapter Four, p. 61)

We played until nightfall. During what was shaping up to be the last game of the evening, it became impossible to see the basket farthest away from the streetlight. It was as if we were playing at the lunar surface during the half-moon.

(Chapter Four, p. 94)



I wanted to explain to her that living out there was like being in a never-ending log-rolling contest. You never asked why the log was rolling or who was rolling the log. You spread your arms and kept your feet moving, doing your best not to fall off.
(Chapter Five, p. 102)

The rest of the way home we talked about our experiences with police harassment: being frisked in front of our parents, forced to pull our pants down near the day-care, made to wait face-down in the street with our hands interlocked behind our heads and feet crossed at the ankles, gritty footprints on the nape of our necks.
(Chapter 6, p. 125)

I never felt so worthless in my life. Uninvited Scoby and I walked into the man's living room, set our bookbags on his coffee table, and sat on the couch. I looked out a window and saw a store owner spray-paint BLACK OWNED across her boarded-up beauty salon. I wanted to dig out my heart and have her do the same to it, certifying my identity in big block letters across both ventricles.
(Chapter Seven, p. 130)

The most important lesson I learned at El Campesino was that I wasn't in arrears to the white race. No matter how much I felt indebted to white folks, I owed them nothing. My attitude changed. I began treating the bus ride out to the Valley as a daily vacation.
(Chapter Eight, p. 155)

"Now I'm not going to front, act like the first thing I did when I got to Boston University was proceed directly to the Martin Luther King Memorial Only reason I know what it says is that I was coming out of Taco Bell on my way to basketball practice when I dropped my burrito deluxe at the base of the monument.
(Chapter Eleven, p. 199)



Topics for Discussion

The White Boy Shuffle has been described as a satire. What are Beatty's possible targets for satire in this novel?

The protagonist and narrator of the novel is a young black man, yet the novel is titled The White Boy Shuffle. What could this title possibly mean?

All of the male ancestors that Gunnar mentions have Germanic names. Does Beatty have a purpose in giving all of these African-American men German names?

Gunnar Kaufman, a young genius, and Psycho Loco, a career thug every bit as violent as his name, are close friends. What forms the basis of friendship for such an unlikely pair?

Gunnar does not seem to put much effort into controlling the course of his life and this lack of exertion or ready acceptance seems to increase over time. Is this a matter of Gunnar believing he cannot change his situation or is it due to his lack of concern?

Early on Gunnar says that he does not want to be like his male ancestors. When does Gunnar begin to display traits that indicate that he is not like his ancestors and when is it certain that he is not like any of his male predecessors?

Gunnar says in Chapter Three that "the people of Hillside treat society the way society treats them." What does Gunnar mean?