

The Wrong Case: A Novel Study Guide

The Wrong Case: A Novel by James Crumley

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Plot Summary

The Wrong Case by James Crumley is the first in Crumley's Milo Milogovitch detective series. This novel finds Milo desperate for cases in his private detective firm after the change in state divorce laws. As Milo tries to decide how he might pay his bills that month, a woman walks into his office and asks Milo to find her brother. Milo sees the case as a dead end, but takes it because he needs the money and he is drawn to the woman. However, the case turns out to be much more complicated than even Milo could have imagined, dragging him into a drama that delves deep into the underbelly of the criminal world hidden in his beloved hometown. The Wrong Case is a detective novel that harkens back to the days of Hammett, leaving the readers begging for more.

Milo is watching a traffic accident outside his office window when Helen Duffy walks in. Helen is vulnerable, anxious to find some help but reluctant to share her story. Milo finally gets Helen to tell him about her brother, Raymond, a scholar who has suddenly gone missing. Milo decides to take the case not because he thinks he can help but because he is drawn to this beautiful, fragile woman.

Milo begins his investigation in his favorite bar, getting information on Raymond Duffy from a surprising source, his drinking buddy Simon. Milo finds some of Raymond's acquaintances, only to discover that Simon has beat him to the location. Milo tries to get information from Raymond's lover, Lawrence Reese, but finds Reese uncooperative. Milo ends up shooting the porch supports of Reese's house with a shotgun, bringing out the cops and Milo's old friend, Jamison. Milo is arrested.

The following day, Milo learns that Helen Duffy's brother has been found dead in a restroom of a local bar. The cause of death is a drug overdose, but Helen Duffy refuses to believe that her brother was a drug addict, let alone that he would kill himself. Helen returns to Meriwether and tells Milo a sob story, begging him to find out who murdered her brother. Milo agrees, once again because he is drawn to Helen Duffy.

Milo speaks to Raymond's ex-lover, a university professor, and learns nothing more than Raymond's fascination with guns and his tendency to violence. Milo also locates Reese on a farm a distance from Meriwether. Reese is still reluctant to speak to Milo, but finally tells him what little he knows about Raymond. What Reese has to say, however, supports the coroner's finding of a drug overdose. When Milo returns to town after visiting Reese, he learns that Simon has been found in Reese's former rent house and that the university professor is also dead.

As Milo continues to investigate Raymond Duffy, he is hired to follow a woman by Nickie DeGrumo, a local motel owner. Nickie appears nervous when he hires Milo and instructs Milo to drop all other cases. Milo agrees, taking Nickie's money, but continues to investigate Raymond anyway while he assigns a fellow drunk to Nickie's case. A short time later, Milo is jumped in the streets where he is forced to kill a man.



Milo has a breakdown and goes on a day's long drunk. When he recovers, Milo again interviews people about Raymond. When Milo speaks to the bar owner where Raymond was found dead, he makes a connection to Nickie. Milo confronts Nickie, causing Nickie to have a fatal heart attack. Members of Mama D's family try to convince Milo to hide Nickie's connection to the drugs that Raymond was selling and using, but Milo fights back, leaving both men dead.

Back at home, where Helen has been living with him since his long drunk, Milo finds Helen's mother. Helen's mother informs Milo that Helen is a compulsive liar. Not only this, but Helen was Raymond's biological mother. Helen leaves with her mother, leaving Milo heartbroken. However, Milo turns to the bottle and forgives Helen.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Milo is a private detective in a small to moderate sized city. Milo has lived in this town all his life and is the last remaining survivor of a family whose wealth and influence helped build this town. Milo is now struggling, however, because he will not inherit his trust fund until he is fifty-three and the divorce laws of his state have recently changed in such a way that he no longer has the cases he once depended upon.

In chapter one, Milo is drinking as he watches an accident in the streets below his office window. Milo is worried about his future because the state laws governing divorce have changed the need for his services in proving infidelity. Someone knocks on the door and Milo assumes it is someone looking for the dentist's office next door. However, it is a woman who has come to ask him to look for her brother. The woman, Helen Duffy, is an English Literature professor whose brother was living in Meriwether while working on a degree in Western studies. Three weeks ago he stopped communicating with his sister. Helen tells Milo that her brother, Raymond, was last known to be staying at the Grand Northern Hotel, but it has since burned down. Milo tells Helen that missing person cases are rarely solved, but he will take the case if she will pay him with sex. Milo becomes ashamed of himself at her confused reaction and sends her away.

In chapter two, Milo goes to the local bar, Mahoney's, and talks with his drinking buddies, including Simon, a disbarred lawyer, and Freddy, a former police detective. Dick Diamond, a local college professor, comes into the bar and asks Milo if Helen Duffy stopped by his office. When Milo admits she did, Dick tells him that he once had an affair with Helen in graduate school. They discuss Helen's brother and Simon suddenly becomes agitated, asking Milo to speak with him in his second office, a small room behind the walk-in refrigerator behind the bar. Milo goes, but has to return to borrow two bucks to pay Simon for some information. Simon tells Milo that Raymond Duffy hangs around with a man named Lawrence Reese and an old drunk called Willy Jones. Suddenly Milo recalls seeing Raymond Duffy with Reese one night when Reese beat up a couple of sawyers.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Milo is introduced in the first chapter, a lonely private detective drinking away his troubles. At first he appears to be just a little depressed, but when Milo witnesses a young man being killed by a car in the street below and he fails to react with anything more than mild curiosity, the reader begins to understand that Milo is an alcoholic whose normal emotional reactions have been dampened by his drinking. This impression grows when a beautiful woman comes into his office and Milo finds himself thinking more of getting the woman into his bed rather than the case she wants him to take on.



Helen Duffy is a beautiful, intelligent woman who appears both fragile and vulnerable to the reader and Milo. This behavior causes Milo to be drawn to her, obsessed with the idea of becoming her lover. However, Helen's behavior appears oddly child-like to the reader as she asks Milo for help but refuses to answer his questions in such a way that he might use her answers to help her. Helen Duffy is an odd person, but Milo is blinded by her beauty, suggesting that there will come a point when he will come to discover a truth about Helen that will change his opinion of her.

Although Milo has refused to take Helen's case, he still finds himself working on it out of hope of gaining Helen's admiration. Simon is a surprising source of information for Milo. Simon is a lawyer who one day became fed up with the legal system and decided to lose himself in a bottle. Now Simon appears like an unintelligent, perhaps mentally ill, drunk to the entire world except for Milo. With Milo, Simon shares information about Raymond Duffy that could help Milo find him. Simon proves to be of great help to Milo, illustrating the father-son relationship between them.



Chapters 3-5

Chapters 3-5 Summary

In chapter three, Milo visits his adopted son, Muffin, a young black boy whom Milo took in while he was a sheriff's deputy. Muffin deals in stolen goods and Milo has reason to believe he might know where to find Reese. Muffin resists at first, afraid that the wrong people will get the impression he has been talking to the wrong people. However, Muffin finally tells Milo where to look. When Milo arrives at Reese's rented house, he finds Simon already there talking to a young addict sitting on the front steps. Milo asks her about Raymond, whom she refers to as El Creepo, and learns that Raymond once lived at this address, but Reese threw him out. Reese himself comes out a minute later and Milo begins to question him. Reese refuses to answer questions and physically attempts to remove Milo from his property. Milo gets a shotgun from his car and threatens Reese with it. When Reese continues to ignore Milo, Milo shoots out the pillar that supports a section of the porch. Milo then shoots out the other pillar, causing it to fall on Reese.

In chapter four, the police arrive and arrest Milo. Jamison, an old friend of Milo's who happens to be a lieutenant with the sheriff's office, arrives and encourages Reese to press charges against Milo. At the police station, Jamison asks Milo about his case and then updates Milo on his biological son, a child Jamison is raising with his wife, a woman who was once Milo's first wife. Milo is released, thanks to Dick Diamond and Simon. Milo goes back to Mahoney's where he calls all the motels in town until he finds where Helen Duffy is staying. Milo goes to Helen's hotel room and learns that Raymond Duffy was found dead from an overdose in a bar bathroom. Milo calms Helen until she falls into a fitful sleep, then calls Dick.

In chapter five, a few weeks pass. Milo learns that Raymond Duffy's death is ruled an accidental overdose. Several of Milo's drunk friends are mugged. Milo parties with a girl he ran into in the bar, and this is where Dick finds him one Sunday after he and Helen return from Iowa. Helen wants to speak to Milo, so he sobers up and meets her in his office. Helen tells Milo she does not believe that her brother killed himself, either by accident or on purpose. Helen then tells Milo a story about how her father sued the New York Police Department for mistaking him for a drunk and how her mother kicked Raymond out of their house when she learned he was homosexual. Helen then begs Milo to find out who killed her brother.

Chapters 3-5 Analysis

Milo has an adopted son he took in as a teenager because he was messed up with drugs. This shows the reader that Milo once had a big heart, even as the reader learns quickly afterward that Milo has a biological son that he has practically given up to the boy's stepfather, Lieutenant Jamison. The reader has to wonder if Milo is attempting to



do something good for his biological son, or if he has simply given up on him because of his own demons.

Milo finds Reese, a man who is known to have spent time in the company of Raymond Duffy. The conversation does not go well and Milo finds himself arrested. This seems to suggest that this investigation is going to be even harder than Milo ever imagined it would be. It also opens up the relationship between Milo and Jamison. These two grew up together, but they are completely opposites. Where Milo is willing to take chances, to do what might not be considered legal, Jamison refuses to do anything that crosses the line. This distinction is important because there will be a time when the line between these two will become smudged.

Raymond Duffy is dead. Jamison knew when he arrested Milo, but failed to tell him. Milo figures the case is over since it appears to be a clear case of drug overdose. However, Helen Duffy does not believe that her brother would have killed himself, so she hires Milo to learn the truth. Milo does not believe there is a truth to learn, but he takes the case because he needs the money and he wants to make Helen Duffy happy. This sets up a premise for the rest of the novel, a situation that could place Milo in a difficult position with Helen.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Milo sits in his office thinking about Helen and the case she has given him. As he thinks, Milo sees Simon cross the street in an overcoat that was once a favorite of Milo's father. When Milo's father died, his mother gave all his clothes to charity. For a time, Milo bought all the clothes back and burned them, but finally stopped when he realized the clothes would not bring his father back. Now Milo is pleased to see it is Simon who has finally ended up with his father's overcoat.

Part of the story Helen told Milo about her brother includes the fact that he lived with a professor from the university for a time that past summer. Milo calls a friend from the university and learns the professor's name was Elton Crider. Milo drives out to Crider's home, but finds him gone and his wife angry at his absence. Milo tells the wife he needs to speak to Elton about a missing student. The wife finally tells Milo that her husband is most likely at the Riverside bar.

Milo drives out to the Riverside, a motel where he is well known because of his antics in attempting to catch cheating spouses. When Milo walks in he has to assure Nickie, the owner, that he is not there to cause any trouble. Milo goes into the bar and strikes up a conversation with the bartender, a woman he once had a sexual relationship with, before turning his attentions to Elton Crider. When Crider goes to the bathroom, Milo attempts to force him to answer questions, but Nickie interrupts. Instead, Milo corners Elton at his car. Elton finally tells Milo about his brief love affair with Raymond Duffy. Elton says that Raymond was a kind man, but that he was obsessed with guns and fast draw. However, Elton has not seen Raymond in several months, so he has no real information about Raymond's drug habit except that he did not have one when he was with Elton. Milo watches as Elton returns to the bar before he drives off. Milo sees Dick Diamond's van in front of a room in the Riverside motel and realizes it must be Helen's room.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Milo thinks about his father, revealing to the reader how Milo admired his father and has missed him since his suicide when Milo was only ten. This affection has been focused on Simon in recent years, symbolized by Milo's contentment to see that Simon has come into possession of his father's prized overcoat.

Milo begins working on Helen's case, beginning by interviewing a college professor who lived with Raymond briefly. This man is frightened and refuses to speak to Milo at first. However, he finally tells Milo that Raymond was a good man who had an aggressive personality and a fascination with guns and fast draw. This information seems inconsequential to Milo at this point, but will more than likely prove to be important as

the plot continues to develop. When Milo leaves, he sees Elton go back into the bar, a fact that will prove important later as well. Finally, Milo finds where Helen is staying this time because he sees Dick's van out front, suggesting their affair is continuing despite Helen's insistence that she ended it after Raymond's funeral.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

In chapter seven, Milo checks in with Helen before continuing on the case. Milo visits with the county coroner, a friend of his father's, and learns that the autopsy on Raymond Duffy stated his death was caused by a routine overdose. Back at his office, Milo returns a call to Nickie and learns that he wants to hire him for a job. Milo goes back to the Riverside and Nickie tells him a friend of his has a mistress he wants watched while he is out of town. Milo insists on being paid up front for the job, and Nickie gives him an envelope with twenty-five hundred dollars inside. However, Nickie insists that Milo work on this case only, no others. Milo agrees, though he has no intention to stop working the Duffy case. Back at his office, Milo arranges for two of his friends to take jobs as a construction site overlooking the house where the mistress of Nickie's friend lives. Then Milo puts the bulk of the money in his safe.

In chapter eight, Milo puts Freddy and Dynamite on Nickie's case. Simon wants to help, but Milo tells him he cannot. Simon keeps pushing Milo, so he gives him a small assignment for the Duffy case. Simon is to visit Reese's ex-neighbor and find out if she knows anything. Milo goes to the police station to speak to Jamison, hoping to learn where Reese is. Jamison is less than forthcoming, frustrated with an increase in crime in Meriwether.

In chapter nine, Milo returns to Mahoney's where he finds Mindy, Reese's roommate, having drinks with a friend. Mindy tells Milo that Reese is at Holy Light Hog Farm. When Mindy learns Milo is going to drive out to see Reese, she asks for a ride. On the drive, Mindy tells Milo that Reese does not deal in drugs because he is paranoid about going back to prison, and that she thinks he threw Raymond out of the rental house because he was dealing or using. Mindy also says that she thinks Raymond was paying for the rent house. Milo stops at Willomot Hill Bar, the same bar where Raymond's body was found, to speak with the owner, but he is not there. When Milo comes back out to the car, he finds Mindy naked on the roof. Milo and Mindy find a quiet spot and have sex. Afterward they talk about Raymond a little more before resuming their trip.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Milo visits with the coroner and learns there is nothing unexpected about Raymond's autopsy, suggesting that Raymond died of an accidental overdose as the death certificate suggests. Milo continues to doubt he will learn anything new, but continues the case because of his growing obsession with Helen Duffy. At the same time, however, Helen is carrying on an affair with Milo's married friend, casting doubt on Helen's moral fiber.



Milo is hired by Nickie DeGrumo to watch a friend's mistress. From the moment Nickie mentions the case, he is clearly nervous, clearly afraid of something. Milo puts Nickie's nervousness down to the idea that Nickie is hiring him for one of his mobster friends, but this will prove to be an incorrect assumption as the plot develops. In fact, the reader should make special note of Nickie's behavior at this point because it will prove to be important later.

Milo continues the Duffy case, traveling to find Reese in order to attempt to interview him once more, placing a great deal of importance on Reese's knowledge and placing himself in danger. Milo takes Mindy with him and sleeps with her despite his growing obsession with Helen Duffy. Milo is a man who takes many risks and who does not seem to care about his own safety as much as he should, suggesting to the reader he has something like a death wish.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

In chapter ten, Milo and Mindy arrive at Holy Light Hog Farm. Since Milo is known there by the owners and some of the residents because of prior visits to track down runaway wives, Mindy leaves Milo in the car while she goes to find Reese. Mindy brings Reese out to the car, but he again insists that he does not want to talk to Milo. Reese seems clearly concerned that Milo's presence will cause him to lose his room at the farm, so he tries to send Milo away with words. When that does not work, Reese punches Milo. When Milo recovers, they leave and go to a hospital to treat their wounds, then a bar to talk. Reese tells Milo he knows little about Raymond, but that he is sure that Raymond was dealing heroin for someone. Reese also suspects the heroin was stolen from a police evidence locker somewhere.

In chapter eleven, Milo returns Reese and Mindy to the farm and makes his way back to Meriwether. When Milo sees sirens in his rear view mirror, he hopes it is someone he knows because he is both drunk and high. The cop turns out to be a sheriff's deputy he worked with in the past. The cop tells Milo that Simon has been found dead and Jamison wants him on the scene. Milo arrives at Reese's rented house to discover that Simon fell down the stairs and was impaled by a wooden stake of some kind. Milo immediately guesses that Simon was pushed down the stairs, but the cops have already decided Simon died in a drunken fall. No one seems to wonder, however, where Simon's notebook has gone. Jamison also tells Milo that Elton Crider drove his car into the river and that Muffin is wanted for possession of heroin. All this leads Milo to wonder who he is getting so close to that they have become this frightened.

Determined to find the person responsible for Simon's death, Milo goes to his office for handcuffs and then to Mahoney's. The bar is filled to capacity with drunks who have come to mourn for Simon. Milo makes his way to his second office where he gets his automatic and extra clips. Freddy comes in to give Milo an update on Nickie's case. When Freddy realizes what Milo is doing, he advises him to carry a backup weapon just in case.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Milo tracks down Reese and learns that Raymond was definitely dealing heroin. This confirms what Milo has known all along, that Raymond most likely died from a drug overdose as everyone has said up to this point. However, when Milo learns that Simon is dead, and in circumstances that tell Milo it is murder, Milo becomes convinced that whoever Raymond was dealing drugs for is afraid that Milo is getting too close. The news that Elton Crider is dead and Muffin has been set up on phony drug charges seem to back up this assumption. Milo decides he must find and kill whoever is doing this to his family, showing the reader the depth of Milo's feelings for both Simon and Muffin.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

In chapter twelve, Milo goes out into the alley behind Mahoney's and is attacked by two guys. After Milo is beaten, one of the men expresses the desire to kill Milo because Milo broke his nose. Milo overhears the other one telling Milo that they have been told not to kill Milo. Milo also hears them comment that there should have been more money. The men make a move toward Milo, apparently intent on breaking his legs, when Milo pulls the backup gun Freddy told him to take. Milo kills one man with a shot to the face. The other man runs away. Milo is taken to the hospital and treated for multiple injuries. Before Jamison can talk to him, Milo sneaks away. Milo turns to Helen, but she forces him to leave because her mother is in town. Milo runs into Nickie at the hotel and tells him what has happened, too injured to notice Nickie's nervous reaction to the news.

In chapter thirteen, Milo goes on a two day bender, making himself so sick that he begins throwing up blood. Dick takes Milo home and calls Helen to care for him. After a few days, Milo returns to his old self. Helen and Milo become lovers. Days later, Milo returns to work. As he goes to leave the house, a cop comes to tell Milo that Jamison wants to see him. Milo takes advantage of the cop to learn a few things about the investigation into Simon's death, most notably that vomit in the house had brandy in it, suggesting the killer drank the brandy.

Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Milo is beaten by strangers on the street. At first it seems like another mugging in the rash of muggings that have been taken place in Meriwether lately. However, the men who jump Milo know his name, how much money he is supposed to be carrying, and suggest that they were told not to kill him. This information proves that Milo has been attacked because he is getting too close to something. Milo kills one of his attackers, but this act, combined with Simon's death, leads Milo to a depression made worse by Helen's rejection. Milo goes on a two day bender that requires Helen's help to get over. Helen and Milo then become lovers, making Milo happy for the first time since the novel began. However, Dick's continual presence suggests that he is not ready to give up quite so easily.

The reader should remember Nickie's reaction to Milo's description of his attack. Nickie is a nervous man with a bad ulcer, but even this nervousness should not account for his reaction to the news that Milo killed one of his attackers. Finally, the reader should also remember that Milo believes Simon's killer has a weak stomach and he threw up, leaving vomit with brandy in it at the scene. Milo believes this brandy will lead him to the killer, but with so many drunks in one novel, it is hard to make a guess as to who the brandy will point to.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Milo views a lineup, but refuses to point out the surviving man who attacked him because he wants to deal with it on his own. Jamison asks Milo to meet him at Milo's second office. When they meet a short time later, they begin comparing notes on both Simon's murder and the recent rash of crime in Meriwether. Milo tells Jamison what Reese said about the heroin Raymond was dealing. Jamison confirms that Simon's notebook was not on his body when he was found. Jamison tells Milo that he wants the man responsible for the drugs on Meriwether's streets to be found and dealt with. Jamison wants Milo to kill the man. Milo agrees.

Milo talks to Freddy about Nickie's case and learns the target sneaked out of a restaurant to visit a pay phone at the visitor's booth for the Chamber of Commerce. Milo goes to speak to the woman who mans the booth, but she is stoned and did not notice anything unusual. Milo then goes to Mrs. Crider's home in response to multiple messages she has left him. Mrs. Crider gives Milo a folder that belonged to Raymond Duffy. Mrs. Crider then tells Milo that she does not believe her husband's death was accidental and that she wants to hire him to find the man who killed him. Mrs. Crider then wants Milo to kill the man. Finally, Milo returns to the pay phone outside the visitor's booth to call Muffin. Milo tells Muffin that Jamison has promised that the charges will be dropped in a few days. However, Muffin does not trust Jamison and wants Milo to bring him some money so he can get out of town. Milo reluctantly agrees.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Milo talks with Jamison about Simon's death and the increased crime in Meriwether. Both Milo and Jamison believe the increased crime rate is connected to the heroin being sold by Raymond and whomever he worked for. Jamison also seems to agree that Simon might have been murdered. Based on this, Jamison asks Milo to kill the criminal when he finds him, figuring Milo is already planning on doing so because of his grief over Simon's death. Milo quickly agrees even though he does not quite trust this sudden change in Jamison's moral fiber.

Milo speaks with Mrs. Crider and learns that she believes her husband was murdered. Milo respects and admires Mrs. Crider, finding in her a tough kind of woman who was hurt one too many times by the man she counted on. Milo agrees to help Mrs. Crider in any way he can, showing the reader what a huge heart Milo has under his drunken cynicism. This goes to Milo's offer of help to his son, Muffin, as well.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Milo reads Raymond's article on the outlaw which was in the folder Mrs. Crider gave him. The article discusses outlaws in general and Dalton Kimbrough in particular. Milo is familiar with the story of Dalton Kimbrough because his great-grandfather killed Kimbrough during a robbery attempt and then grew the family fortune from his fame. This article leads Milo to think about his family, his father in particular. Milo thinks of the accident that killed his father and realizes his father was too careful with guns to have such an accident. For the first time, Milo realizes his father did commit suicide as people have long suspected. At the same time, Milo realizes why Raymond cut his hair and shaved his beard in the final days of his life and why the death of Willy Jones hit him so hard. Milo believes that Raymond accidentally killed Willy while practicing his fast draws, then burned down the motel to hide the murder.

Milo goes out to the Willomot Hill Bar again to see the owner. This time the owner is in and he tells Milo all he can remember about the night Raymond Duffy died in his bathroom. Unfortunately, all the owner can really remember is the drink Raymond ordered and the drink his companion ordered. Milo makes a connection between the drink and Nickie, realizing that the bearded man who was at the bar with Raymond that night, the bearded man seen at the house where Simon died, are all one man. That man is Nickie.

Milo goes into the bathroom to vomit and recalls a time when he saw his father doing the same thing. That day Milo's father gave him advice about drunks that Milo believes to this day: never trust a drunk unless he is on his knees. Vomiting in the Willomot bathroom where Raymond died, Milo feels closer to his father than he ever has before.

Chapter 15 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader learns about the murder that made the Milogovitch family rich. It was a different time and Milo's grandfather used his fame to provide for his family. However, it has a sense of irony when the reader remembers the path Milo is walking down as he continues his current investigation.

Milo thinks about his father, finally admitting to himself for the first time that his father committed suicide. Milo adored his father and knows that he was a weak man who suffered a terrible disease in his alcoholism. Milo has always missed his father and finds a connection to him now that makes him feel closer to him than ever before. It seems like a breakthrough that should help Milo stop drinking, but in reality it appears to be the kind of breakthrough that only encourages Milo's own disease. At the same time, Milo begins to figure out what happened the final days of Raymond's life. The first revelation,

that Raymond most likely killed a friend, seems to support the idea of suicide. However, the second, that Nickie was with Raymond the night of his death, suggests murder.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

In chapter sixteen, Milo wakes drunk in the Willomot Hill Bar. Milo goes home and argues briefly with Helen before making love with her on the entryway floor. Milo tells Helen he knows who killed Raymond. Helen orders Milo to kill the murderer. Milo goes to Mahoney's to make arrangements to get Muffin his money, but learns Muffin has already left town. From there, Milo goes to the Riverside and confronts Nickie. When Milo pulls a gun, Nickie suffers a heart attack and dies. Mama D. follows Milo out of the bar after discovering her husband's death and shoots after him, accidentally wounding a tourist.

In chapter seventeen, Milo goes to his office and receives a call from Mama D's cousin. The man wants to meet at Mahoney's. However, the thugs come to Milo's office and try to break in. Milo confronts them and a gunfight almost takes place, but they are interrupted by the dentist. Milo goes to Mahoney's with the older thug while the younger man waits outside. The older man offers to pay Milo to keep his mouth shut about what he knows in regards to Nickie's drug dealing. Milo makes it appear as though he agrees, but then grabs the man's tie and tightens it until it is choking him. Milo then throws him onto the shuffleboard machine where Pierre attacks him for making so much noise. The young man comes inside and pulls a gun, so Milo shoots him.

In chapter eighteen, Milo returns home only to learn that Helen's mother has come to visit. Milo sits out in the backyard with Mrs. Duffy. Mrs. Duffy tells Milo that Helen is a compulsive liar and that she has been sleeping with Dick throughout her relationship with Milo. Mrs. Duffy also says that Raymond was Helen's biological child whom Mrs. Duffy and her husband adopted. Mrs. Duffy does not approve of Milo or Helen's relationship with him and plans to take her home. To Milo's chagrin, Helen goes willingly. Milo has a drink and forgives her.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Milo has figured out who killed Elton Crider and Simon, and possibly Raymond. Now his morals will be put to the test. Everyone wants Milo to kill the person responsible for these deaths and for the sale of heroin in Meriwether, but Milo is not sure if he could do it. Fate takes the decision out of his hands, however, when Nickie has a heart attack. However, Nickie's death is not the end. Nickie's in-laws are concerned about his indiscretion and how it will reflect on them. They come after Milo and he kills one and allows a drunk to kill the other. This, in effect, is also revenge, because if not for these people, Nickie might not have felt inadequate in business and might not have wanted to get into drugs. Therefore, Milo has done what he has been asked to do, just not in the way everyone expected him to.

Helen turns out to be a compulsive liar. The reader might have suspected that something was not right with Helen from the beginning, especially when the reader takes her child-like attitude into consideration and compares it to her promiscuous behaviors. It turns out that Helen is something of a child emotionally and that her obsession with Raymond stemmed not from sisterly affection, but from the protective instinct of a mother. Once again Milo has been fooled and he is alone, but he does not seem to care, showing once more the emotional void he displayed early in the novel.



Characters

Milton 'Milo' Chester Milodragovitch

Milo Milodragovitch is a private detective who built his firm over state divorce laws that required proof of infidelity. However, the laws have recently changed and Milo's business has all but disappeared. Milo spends his days drinking and staring out the window, unsure how he is going to pay his bills in the future. Milo is the son of wealthy parents who were raging alcoholics, both of whom committed suicide at different times in Milo's youth. Milo was in the Army and was a sheriff's deputy, but he was a corrupt cop who disappointed his one good friend when the truth was revealed. Now Milo is an alcoholic who spends most of his time drinking, either in bars or alone in his office.

Milo meets a beautiful woman who convinces him to take a missing person's case despite the fact that he is convinced that he will never be able to find anything out about this woman's brother. When the brother shows up dead, Milo is asked to prove that his death was murder. Milo does not believe it was murder, but he takes the case because he likes the woman and he needs the work. This case takes Milo down a difficult road that will lead to murder and grief, but Milo hopes it will also take him to the woman of his dreams.

Helen Duffy

Helen Duffy is a highly educated woman who appears fragile and vulnerable when she first comes to Milo's office seeking help in finding her missing brother. Milo finds Helen appealing, even imagining what it would be like to take her into his bed. Helen seems too proper for this type of behavior, outright refusing Milo's suggestion of sex in exchange for his services, but quickly changes her tune when she returns to hire Milo to find her brother's killer. In fact, it turns out that Helen has been indulging in an affair with Milo's friend Dick for several years, off and on.

Helen helps Milo through a bad drunk, nursing him back to health and becoming his live-in lover. Milo finds himself hoping to make Helen his wife someday and is encouraged by Helen's apparent willingness to remain at his side. However, Helen also remains determined to prove that her brother was murdered. This obsession begins to concern Milo even as he begins to believe himself that Raymond was pushed into committing suicide. In the end, the answers to this obsession are made clear when it is revealed that Helen Duffy is a compulsive liar and she is Raymond's biological mother.

Raymond Duffy

Raymond Duffy is Helen Duffy's brother. Raymond has come to Meriwether to study at the nearby university to obtain his degree in Western studies. Raymond is working on an article about a famous outlaw when he goes missing. Milo learns that Raymond was



not just a devoted student, but that he was also fascinated with guns and he was a homosexual. Milo interviews Raymond's acquaintances and learns that Raymond began dealing drugs a few weeks before he became a drug user himself.

Milo follows Raymond's final few weeks of life and learns that he became friends with a man who claimed to be the descendant of the outlaw Raymond was writing about in his article. This man was killed in a hotel fire. While thinking of his own father's suicide, Milo realizes that Raymond must have killed this man accidentally while showing off with his guns, explaining the sudden changes that came over him in the last days of his life. This seems to support suicide, but Milo also uncovers evidence of murder, leaving the reader to surmise what really happened in the final moments of Raymond's life.

Simon Rome

Simon Rome was once a famous defense attorney who was known for getting off even the most notorious criminals. One day Simon became disillusioned with the legal system and quit, becoming an alcoholic. Simon lives his life in and out of bars, often acting like an unintelligent person to keep people from taking an interest in him. With Milo, however, Simon allows his intelligence to shine through, often offering Milo advice on his life and career.

When Milo takes on the Raymond Duffy case, Simon takes a special interest. Simon gives Milo information on Raymond's known associates and even locates one of these men before Milo. Simon begs Milo to be made a part of the case. Finally Milo relents and gives Simon a simple assignment. A few hours later, Simon is found dead. Milo knows that Simon was sober and that the death was not accidental and he vows to find Simon's killer. Simon was like a father to Milo.

Lieutenant Jamison

Lieutenant Jamison is an officer with the sheriff's department. Milo and Jamison have known one another since childhood and Jamison has always been determined to make Milo a better man. Jamison and Milo went to the Korean War together and were deputies with the sheriff's department together. However, Milo was proven to be a corrupt cop and chased out of the sheriff's department while Jamison has excelled there. Not only this, but Jamison is married to Milo's first wife and raising Milo's biological son.

Jamison is angry with Milo and is not kind to him during the investigation into Raymond Duffy's death. However, when it becomes clear that Milo's case has something to do with the increase in street drugs and violence in Meriwether, Jamison comes to Milo for help. Jamison wants Milo to kill the person responsible, turning from his personal morals in an attempt to fix what ails his beloved town. In this way, Jamison and Milo forge a kind of truce and work together to help protect Meriwether.



Dick Diamond

Dick Diamond is a professor at the local university and a friend of Milo's. Milo often attends parties at Dick's home and has had multiple affairs with the women Dick works with. When Helen comes to Milo, she tells him that a friend sent her and Milo later learns it was Dick. Dick and Helen had an affair in graduate school. The affair begins again when Milo calls Dick in to help Helen through the grief of her brother's death. This affair continues after Helen returns to Meriwether, even as she lives in Milo's home as his lover.

Lawrence Reese

Lawrence Reese is an ex-con who lives in Meriwether. Lawrence Reese is part of a group of people Milo refers to as freaks, the left over hippies from the sixties. Lawrence is known for his oddities and is a known homosexual. Milo goes to Lawrence for information on Raymond Duffy, who was known to be a friend of Lawrence's, but is unable to convince Lawrence to talk to him at first. Later, however, Lawrence tells Milo how Raymond paid the rent on the house where they lived, but Lawrence threw him out when he began dealing and taking heroin.

Nickie DeGrumo

Nickie DeGrumo is a businessman who, with his wife and her family, runs a successful motel business outside of Meriwether. Nickie has attempted multiple other business, but all of them have failed, leaving the gossips in town under the impression that the motel is run by Mama D.'s mob connected family. While investigating the death of Raymond Duffy, Nickie hires Milo to watch a woman who is reportedly the mistress of a friend of Nickie's. Nickie instructs Milo to drop all his other cases in order to concentrate on this single case. Milo agrees, but continues to work the Raymond Duffy case anyway while his friend Freddy handles Nickie's case. Eventually Milo realizes that Nickie is behind the increase in drugs in Meriwether and that he most likely is responsible in some part for Raymond's death. Nickie has a heart attack when Milo confronts him with this theory.

Freddy

Freddy is another drunk who spends much of his time in Mahoney's. Freddy was once a police detective and he taught Milo how to follow a suspect without giving himself away. When Nickie hires Milo to follow the mistress of a friend, Milo puts Freddy on the case. Freddy is happy to help Milo and does a superb job. Freddy also instructs Milo on carrying a concealed weapon for extra safety. That same night, Milo is mugged and kills one of his attackers with that concealed weapon.



Elton Crider

Elton Crider is a professor at the local university. Milo learns that Elton and Raymond had a homosexual affair several months before Raymond's death. Milo goes to speak to Elton at Nickie's hotel and learns that Raymond liked to practice quick draws with his antique guns. Elton has little other information to share with Milo except for a lover's opinion of Raymond. After Milo speaks to Elton, he is found dead in the river. Milo suspects that Elton might have committed suicide over the loss of Raymond, but Elton's wife believes he was murdered. The fact that Elton was last seen in Nickie's bar leads the reader to suspect Nickie killed him in a panic about what he might know regarding Raymond and the drugs.



Objects/Places

Shotgun

Milo still owns the shotgun with which his father shot himself when Milo was only ten.

Shuffleboard and Jukebox

There is a shuffleboard game and a jukebox in one corner of Mahoney's bar. Pierre, a drunk, sits beside them and waits for someone to use them, then becomes angry and often attacks the unsuspecting customer.

Office Bottle

Milo keeps a bottle of alcohol in his office for those moments when business becomes too tense or he does not feel like walking down the block to Mahoney's.

Office Safe

Milo has a safe in his office that once belonged to his grandfather and is an antique.

Overcoat

Simon buys the overcoat that once belonged to Milo's father from a charity shop. Once Milo attempted to buy up all of his father's clothing that his mother donated to charity, but stopped when he realized it would not bring his father back. Milo is pleased to see Simon in the coat until the day Simon dies wearing the overcoat.

Great Northern Hotel

The last place Raymond Duffy is known to have been living is the Great Northern Hotel. Unfortunately, the hotel burned down about the time Raymond went missing.

Holy Light Hog Farm

The Holy Light Hog Farm is a working hog farm where hippies and runaway wives often find refuge. Milo goes there to speak to Lawrence Reese, who has sought refuge on the farm after Milo destroys the porch of the house where he was living.



Willomot Hill Bar

The Willomot Hill Bar is the bar in which Raymond Duffy overdosed on heroin.

Riverfront Motor Inn

The Riverfront Motor Inn is a motel/restaurant/bar owned by Nickie DeGrumo and his wife, Mama D. Milo believes the Riverfront is a front for a mob organization.

Milodragovitch Building

Milo's office is in the Milodragovitch, a bank building his grandfather once owned.

Milodragovitch Park

Milodragovitch Park is a park created by the city after Milo's mother donated the property on which the family home once rested.

Mahoney's

Mahoney's is a bar that Milo helped the owner, Leo, purchase. Milo spends much of his time in Mahoney's, either drinking with his friends or in his second office, a small room behind the walk-in refrigerator.

Meriwether

Meriwether is the name of the small town where Milo lives and works. Meriwether is located in the American northwest, possibly Oregon, but the author never names the state.



Themes

Alcoholism

Milo is an alcoholic who comes from a family of alcoholics. Both Milo's parents were alcoholics whose addiction caused them to fight constantly. When Milo was only ten, his father died in a shooting that appeared to be accidental. However, as Milo grows older, he realizes that his father was too careful with his guns to die in such an accident. Milo suspects his father set a trap for himself to commit suicide without making it obvious. Slightly less than ten years later, Milo's mother would also kill herself while a patient in a rehab center. After all this drama in his life, Milo swore to never drink. Unfortunately, Milo began drinking from his father's glass at an early age and could not fight the addiction that began in him perhaps before birth.

Simon is an alcoholic. Simon was once a great defense attorney, but he gave it all up one day when he became disillusioned by the legal system. Simon has been an alcoholic ever since. Simon was a drinking buddy of Milo's dad, so it seems almost natural that they have become drinking buddies themselves. Milo looks to Simon as something of a parental figure. Therefore, when Simon dies and the police see it as the unfortunate result of his alcoholism, Milo is devastated and determined to get revenge.

Simon's death and the frustrations of life cause Milo to turn to the bottle. Milo goes on a three day binge that leaves him sick and unable to leave his bed for several days. Milo's alcoholism is out of control, taking over his life several times in the course of this novel. All of Milo's closest friends are alcoholics, with the exception of Jamison and Dick. Milo knows all the best bars in town and spends most of his time in them. Alcoholism is a theme of Milo's life, therefore it is a major theme of this novel.

Obsession

Helen Duffy is obsessed with the idea that her brother could not have committed suicide. Helen turns to Milo, not once but twice, in the hopes of learning that someone killed her beloved brother. This obsession draws Milo to the case despite the fact that it is the type of case that often goes years and years without any leads. Milo finds himself a target as he continues to investigate, pulled into a drama that he had no clue he would find in the quiet little town in which he has lived his entire life.

Dick Diamond is obsessed with Helen Duffy. Despite being happily married, Dick had an affair with Helen in grad school and is afraid that if he comes in contact with her again, the affair will begin again. Dick becomes angry with Milo for forcing him to come to Helen's aid when they learn of her brother's death. As Dick predicted, he begins the affair with Helen again. However, this time Helen attempts to end it in order to be with Milo. Unbeknownst to Milo, Dick cannot stay away and he continues his affair with Helen even while she is living in Milo's house.



Dickie DeGrumo is obsessed with proving he can be a successful businessman. Dickie is embarrassed that his only successful business venture is successful because of his wife and her family. Dickie has used his wife's money to begin many business ventures, including ice cream trucks and a miniature golf course. Unfortunately, all of these businesses failed because of Dickie's poor business sense. It is for this reason that Dickie allows Raymond Duffy to talk him into selling heroin in Meriwether. This venture leads to many murders, giving Dickie another business failure.

Family

Milo is the only child of two alcoholics. Milo has never had a true sense of family because of the dysfunctional nature of his own home. As an adult, Milo has found a new family among the drunks who populate Meriwether's bars. Milo looks to Simon as a father figure and the other drunks in the bar are his brothers, sisters, uncles, and cousins. Milo feels at home in a bar, more comfortable among drunks than those in the sober world. From these people Milo learns to be a good detective, to follow suspects and to protect himself with concealed weapons. Milo has gotten more love, respect, and guidance from the drunks of Meriwether than his own parents.

Helen Duffy claims to have a special relationship with her brother. Helen believes that her brother would not go anywhere without contacting her first, convinced that their relationship is so close that a three week silence is enough to cause panic. This relationship brings Helen to Milo, to try to find help in first locating her brother and later in learning the true nature of her brother's death. The reader finds Helen's attachment to her brother interesting, if a little unnatural, an attachment that is finally fully explained in the final chapter of the book. Helen is not Raymond's sister, but rather his biological mother, a relationship that better explains her obsession with his death.

Mama D. has a close family. Mama D. is from a New Jersey Italian family who came to Meriwether when she married Nickie. Everyone in town knows that it is Mama D. and her large number of cousins who run Nickie's motel business. Milo believes this family to be part of the mob, but he is never really able to prove it until after Nickie's death. In this case, family is more about business than blood relations, but it is a family close enough that two men come to Milo to avenge Nickie's death. For this reason, and the others mentioned, that family is a theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrating character is Milo Milogovitch, a private eye in a small town whose business has recently dried up because of changes in the state's divorce laws. Milo has sunk deeper into his alcoholism as he tries to think of another way to make the money he needs to pay two alimony checks and his own expenses. Milo takes on a new case at the beginning of this novel, and the novel is his first person account of the investigation and its repercussions.

The point of view of this novel gives the plot a feel similar to the old fashioned private detective novels that were often gritty and violent. Milo does not attempt to hide anything from the novel, often making comments in his narration that refer to mistakes he has made or things he might have done differently. Milo also does not attempt to hide his alcoholism, often referring to it as if it is simply an annoying habit he cannot break. This point of view gives the reader an interesting look at a broken man, making the story more gritty and surprising than other modern detective novels.

Setting

The novel is set in the seventies in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. The reader is given clues as to the state in which the novel is set, but the author never specifically tells the reader the name of this state. Meriwether, the town in which the novel is set, is a small to moderate sized town in which major crime is normally not an issue. Milo has lived in this town all his life and his family was once a wealthy, respected name in town. Now Milo is just one among many drunks who populate Meriwether's bars.

The setting of the novel is interesting to the plot for two reasons. First, Meriwether is where Milo's great-grandfather settled after killing a moderately famous bandit. Milo's great-grandfather built his wealth and fame on the success of this killing. Milo's grandfather continued to grow this wealth until Milo's family was the most prominent name in town. The family fell with Milo's parents, however, who were raging alcoholics. Now Milo is just another drunk in town, living in the shadow of his ancestors. This places a degree of pressure on Milo's shoulders, perhaps propelling his alcoholism. The second reason this setting is interesting is because Meriwether is a relatively small community. Murder and drug use is normally rare in a town of this type, but in Meriwether, drugs have taken over the streets, leading to multiple deaths the police cannot solve. This presents an interesting backdrop to Milo's current case and gives motive to his attempts to find the criminals behind the change in Meriwether's crime spree.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is a complicated combination of slang and formal English. Milo lives in a time when the hippies of the sixties are still roaming the countryside and drugs are the new high. Milo speaks in a somewhat educated language, suggesting a culture in his past consistent with his family's wealth. Milo's friends tend to speak in a less formal language. The drunks differ in their speech, but Milo's adopted son Muffin speaks in the street language common in the time period. The dialogue of this novel is written with many strange punctuations, attempting to replicate the accents and slang of the time.

The language of this novel attempts to remain true to the characters. While the exposition is often somewhat formal and uses the vernacular of the old fashioned detective stories, the dialogue often uses slang and uncommon punctuation to reproduce the accents and slang of the speakers. The author has used language to create a novel that is both gritty and true to its time. The language can be formal in some instances, but also becomes very casual to reflect the changes in speech that have taken place in the generations since the first detective stories of this type were published. However, despite these elements, the language is simple enough for the youngest readers to understand, and therefore friendly to the reader.

Structure

The novel is divided into eighteen chapters. Each chapter is fairly long and is divided by small spaces to indicated changes in scene. The novel is told in both exposition and dialogue, often incorporating sections of authorial voice in which the first person narrator reflects on his past or discusses his actions and how they might have been different had he known the outcome.

The novel contains one main plot. In this plot, Milo takes the case of a young woman who wants to find her brother. As Milo begins the case, he quickly becomes aware that this young woman did not know her brother very well. Milo is not surprised to find the young man has been found dead of a drug overdose, but is surprised to find the sister is unable to accept this mode of death. Milo is hired again to find the young man's killer, whom Milo doubts exists. The plot follows the twists and turns of this investigation, including Milo's own obsession with alcohol and his desire for his beautiful client. The plot and its subplots come to a conclusion together at the end of the novel as Milo solves his case.



Quotes

"There's no accounting for laws. Or the changes wrought by men and time." Chap. 1, p. 3

"Once, the Great Northern had been a fine Western hotel, where prospectors who had hit it and ranchers who could afford it came to raise hell in Victorian splendor." Chap. 1, p. 13

"During his more lucid moments, Simon often said that when I grew old enough to become a full-time drunk, he and I would have a worthless contest, and he maintained that I would lose because I lacked the necessary character to forgo the last vestiges of middle-class morality." Chap. 2, p. 24

"After two years and three months as an infantryman in the Korean War and ten years as a deputy sheriff, I knew how to be sacred." Chap. 3, p. 42

"Jamison and I, as they say, go way back. We had been raised in Meriwether—same age, same grade in school, all that—and even when we were children, I had been his project: he intended to make me a better person, no matter what." Chap. 4, p. 50

"Some of the people who had either been raised in Meriwether or had lived there for years were beginning to drift on, seeking that place they remembered, trying to find it again in British Columbia or Alaska or Australia." Chap. 5, p. 68

"I drove home to my empty log house, where the creek complained and the spruce needles rattled harshly against my windows." Chap. 6, p. 108

"Youth and strength might fail me and my sense of purpose be altered, but I knew how to get some of it back." Chap. 9, p. 137

"And he had been sober, I was sure, just as sure as I was that somebody had pushed Simon off the stairs, that I would find out who, and that I would kill him." Chap. 11, p. 173

"I knew better than to leave a gun in the hands of a dead man, since sometimes they only look dead, so I crawled over to the body, wrenched my bloody money out of his hand, jerked the automatic out of his waistband, trying not to look at what remained of his face." Chap. 12, p. 186

"She was a hell of a woman. She had asked me to kill without even flinching. I liked that, but it also sacred me." Chap. 15, p. 223

"He was the wrong man, but it wasn't my fault." Chap. 17, p. 261



Topics for Discussion

Who is Milo? What does he do for a living? What laws have affected Milo's profession? Why does Milo drink? Can Milo's drinking be traced back to his mother and father's alcoholism? Why does Milo not shun alcohol after seeing its effect on his parents? What impact does Milo's family heritage have on his drinking? What impact do Milo's friends have on his drinking? Would Milo drink if he had different friends?

Who is Simon? Why did Simon become an alcoholic? Why does no one attempt to help Simon sober up? What might have happened had Simon not become an alcoholic? How does Simon's drinking affect Milo's decisions to drink? Why does Simon take an interest in the Duffy case? Why does Simon attempt to help Milo? Do you think Simon would have taken a different role in the case had he known how it would end for him?

Who is Helen Duffy? Why does she want Milo to find her brother? Why does Helen believe her brother is in trouble? Where is Helen's brother found? Why does Helen not believe he died as the police tell her he did? What does Helen want Milo to find out about her brother? Does he? Was Helen right all along?

Who is Nickie DeGrumo? Why does Nickie hire Milo? What does Nickie want Milo to do? Does Milo plan on taking Nickie's case? What is unusual about the money Nickie gives Milo? Should Milo have figured out earlier where Nickie got all that money? What takes Milo so long to figure out Nickie's connection to Raymond Duffy? What happens when Milo does figure it out? Is Milo responsible for Nickie's death?

Discuss parental responsibility. How did Milo's parents fail him as a child? Is Milo repeating the pattern with his biological son? Why does Milo refuse to visit his son? Why does Jamison believe this is a bad idea? What impact does Jamison have on the life of Milo's biological son? How is this similar to the way Jamison attempted to help Milo as a young man? Did Jamison fail in his attempts to help Milo? To help Milo's son? Explain.

What is alcoholism? Why is alcoholism such a huge theme in this novel? Why is Milo an alcoholic? How does this story make a case for the inherited aspects of this disease? Could Milo have avoided his alcoholism? How? In what way did Milo's father perpetuate the disease in his son? Did Milo respect his father for his philosophies on drinking? Explain.

What is compulsive lying? Why does a person indulge this type of behavior? How does Helen's mother know that her daughter suffers from this disorder? How many lies has Helen told Milo? Can the reader see through these lies before Milo? Explain. Who is Raymond Duffy's mother? How does that explain Helen's reaction to Raymond's death?