

# **Wolf in White Van Study Guide**

## **Wolf in White Van**

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# Plot Summary

In a fragmented narrative style that frequently and unpredictably moves backwards and forwards between past and present, between reality and invention, narrator and protagonist Sean contemplates two key events in his life. The nature of those events, as well as their causes and consequences, are all slowly revealed over the course of the story: piece by piece, bit by bit, connection by connection. Eventually, Sean is forced into confrontations with significant personal truths, avoiding one truth in particular until the novel's very last words.

Exploration and/or narration of those truths begin with references to an "accident", which occurred when Sean was a teenager and which, the reader learns, left him with a frighteningly disfigured face, and also a court case. That case investigates the possibility of Sean being declared in some way responsible for the death of a participant in a role-playing game he designed and ran. As exploration of these two truths continues and deepens, the narrative reveals that the game, "Trace Italian", was invented by Sean when he was first in the hospital recovering from his "accident"; developed during his long months and years of recovery; and finally turned into a profitable business, from which he (in the present) makes his living.

Narration eventually reveals the nature and purpose of the court case: a pre-trial hearing of a potential lawsuit being brought against Sean by the parents of a young woman who, along with her boyfriend, played Trace Italian with an intensity that bordered on obsession – gameplay that eventually resulted in the young woman's death. Even as a judge decides that there are no grounds for such a lawsuit, Sean (in narration) spends a great deal of time contemplating / remembering the game's development, and asking himself how much, if any, responsibility he has to bear in relationship to the young woman's death.

At the same time, and in parallel / interconnected narrative, Sean explores and comments on the circumstances before, during, and after the accident. These include his experiences in the hospital; his experiences being brought home to recover; and his experiences in the aftermath of both accident and recovery as he, his parents, and the world in general become accustomed to who Sean has become, what he looks like, and how he now interacts with the world.

Chance encounters with friends, including an ex-girlfriend, lead Sean to further contemplations of what happened (in terms of both the game and the accident), and of his responsibility in both areas. As he, like the court, comes to the conclusion that ultimately, he had no responsibility for what happened to the dead game-player, he also comes to the conclusion (never actually verbalized, but nonetheless very clear) that he has to face the truth about "the accident".

In the novel's final chapter, that truth is revealed: in an extended flashback, narration describes how, one night, after spending time with friends and making out with his almost girlfriend, a discontented Sean went home; talked with his mother (who



attempted to understand why he was being so moody); stole his father's shotgun from a closet; momentarily contemplated shooting both his parents; changed his mind; and took the gun into his bedroom, where he placed it so that when it fired, it would blow his head off.

And there, the novel ends.



## Section 1, Chapters 1 – 2

### Summary

Chapter 1 – Narrator (and protagonist) Sean goes through a series of memories – of his return from hospital to his parents' home; of his being carried through the house by his father (who, Sean comments, wasn't strong enough to do so but willed himself into it); and of regularly painful trips to the bathroom, where bathing is painful on what he describes as "reconstructed skin". "This happens several times a day," Sean comments, "or it's a single thing that's always happening somewhere, a current into which I can slip when I need to remember something." He also describes a memory of his grandparents' home, with its backyard pond that, after the disappearance of its last fish, was filled in with cedar chips and became, in Sean's imagination, the central fire-pit of a fantasy world in which he was the evil king. He describes how these memories came back to him as the result of an encounter in the park with a young boy who asks what happened to Sean's face. Sean tells him the truth, which is not revealed to the reader. The boy then asks why he did what he did, and Sean, while commenting in narration that he's looked for a "why" for a long time", says he doesn't know. The boy calls him a "fibber", saying that if anyone knows, it should be him. Sean agrees, but then says to both the boy and the reader that even now he still doesn't know. Back in his apartment, Sean fills a restless day with a bit of work, with listening to old music, and with checking the savings account that his grandmother started for him shortly after his accident. Finally, he is visited by Nurse Vicky, whom he has nicknamed Victory, and tells her that instead of responding to her casual inquiry about how he's doing with an equally casual response, he says he "felt his life was filled like a big jug to the brim with almost indescribable joy", a feeling that he says was very close to the surface of his experience in that moment.

Chapter 2 – The first part of this chapter is subtitled "The Bridge". Presented in italicized type, it seems to be an introductory piece of writing from some kind of apocalyptic role playing game, describing a situation in which a radiation leak from the meltdown of a nuclear reactor killed large numbers of people, and the gamer was in the role of a survivor. "Welcome to Trace Italian," this section concludes, "a game of strategy and survival! You may now make your first move."

The next section resumes Sean's narrative perspective as he describes his first few days in the hospital after the "accident". At one point, he has a fantasy / hallucination involving a character named Marco who took him out of the hospital and out into the desert, where he (Marco) morphed from a friendly face from a magazine cover into a tall, gangly giant. He also focuses intently on the ceiling above his bed, its cracks and flaws and patterns, its connections to rooms next door, imagining the life of the hospital before he came through its doors. He likens himself to the character in the opening moments of Trace Italian: hidden, in the weeds, ready to make his move. But where the character in the game actually does start moving, Sean comments, he figures it's safer to stay hidden. His narration refers to other characters – Chris Haynes (who, Sean says,



understands how it feels to look at things differently after a traumatic experience), and “Lance and Carrie”, whose pictures he is “made” to look at by an attorney for Carrie’s parents, pictures that he (Sean) says were “impossible to understand”. He admits to having seen them, which is what the attorney asked: he adds in narration that it was a long time ago, and that the reader “wouldn’t understand”.

## Analysis

As this section introduces the novel’s central character and protagonist (first person narrator Sean) and some of its key themes (including perceptions of reality and initial hints of the guilt/responsibility theme, but most particularly the unreliability of memory), it also introduces and develops key plot elements in a particular style that place this novel somewhere within the mystery genre. In works of that sort and style, clues are left for the reader that, when put together over the course of the narrative, eventually reveal a core truth, about a character or circumstance or event, close to the novel’s conclusion. These clues or hints often manifest as narrative elements that receive particular attention in the storytelling for reasons that the reader doesn’t, or can’t, immediately understand, attention in the form of unusual phrasing, imagery, or emotional content (to name a few). In this section, there are several such attention-drawing elements: the references to being carried through the house and to reconstructed skin, for example, suggest to the reader that something traumatic and debilitating happened to Sean at some point, but don’t ever clearly indicate what that something was. These and other such references, in this section and throughout the novel, draw the reader further and further into the mystery of what happened to Sean in the same way as similarly placed / developed “clues” draw readers into other sorts of novels in this genre – the crime thriller, the suspense thriller, the murder mystery.

Other important elements in this section include the conversation with the boy, whose comment that Sean is a “fibber” both introduces and foreshadows a key development in the story and Sean’s journey of transformation: the sense, ultimately confirmed at the novel’s conclusion, that he is truly a fibber, in denial about what happened to him. A related point to note is the reference to Sean’s choice of gameplay in Trace Italian: specifically, to staying hidden, a reference to his tendency, throughout the narrative, to keep himself “hidden” from the truth of what happened to him until forced out into the open by a succession of circumstances, chronicled by the novel.

There is also the reference to Sean’s sudden, overwhelming (momentary?) experience of joy, one of only a few references to his more positive feelings and, at the same time, an ironic one, given that so much of what he says about himself here and throughout the book reflects and/or reveals his LACK of joy. Then there is the introduction of Trace Italian (a key element of both plot and character that plays a defining role in both aspects of the story throughout the book); the references to three of its players (Chris, Lance, and Carrie), whose individual stories also play defining roles in Sean’s personal story and in the narrative; and, in the closing lines of Chapter 2, references to Carrie’s parents and an attorney, references that again draw the reader into the mystery and, at the same time and like other examples of the above-referenced elements of mystery,



foreshadow the eventual revelations of the truth of what actually went on in the triangular relationship of Sean, the game, and its players. One last piece of foreshadowing: the references to Marco, whose actual identity is revealed in the next section.

## Discussion Question 1

Identify the various clues or “hooks” into the mystery of what happened to Sean. What possibilities do they suggest to you? At the end of this section, what do you think might have taken place?

## Discussion Question 2

Under Sean’s circumstances, why might his nickname for Nurse Vicky be metaphorically significant?

## Discussion Question 3

What events / situations referred to in the narration of this section hint at the novel’s thematic interest in questions of guilt and responsibility?

## Vocabulary

continuous, innumerable, interchangeable, identical, vista, optical, communal, hoist (v.), enthrone, impervious, hew, ornate, latticework, receptive, arbiter, decree (v.), improbable, barbarian, plunder, coherent, ascend, flay, solidify, femur, gardenia, petrify, contaminate, afflicted, burgeoning, terminal, tenacious, ganglia, calcify, aggrieved, fallow, posit, conjecture, verifiable, febrile, vertical, tableau, coherence, butte, squadron, catastrophic, palpable, centaur, trowel, lucidity, desolate, incoherent, prophecy



# Section 1, Chapters 3 and 4

## Summary

Chapter 3 – Sean describes how, in the long days and weeks of his recovery in hospital and afterwards, he created the game Trace Italian. He starts by describing how he became obsessed with its name, an adaptation of a term for a particular kind of star-shaped series of walls surrounding and defending medieval castles. He then describes how, while lying in his hospital bed, he developed a story to go with this idea: of a nuclear apocalypse, of survivors building a Trace Italian over the course of several centuries, of how the fortress became both a real and a mythic goal for other “hominid” survivors, and how a layered city and sequence of dungeons came to be formed beneath it. He goes on to describe how game play originated, and continues to work even in the age of the internet: players express interest by letter; he sends them background information (including their placement at the beginning of the game, at one end of The Bridge); and then, over time, correspondence takes them closer and closer to the Trace Italian, eventually further and further within it as they search for a core experience in the city and dungeons beneath the Trace that, Sean says, they will never reach. The chapter concludes with Sean’s description of his delay in opening a gameplay letter with a familiar postmark: from a player named Lance, whose letter refers to his intention to keep playing the game even with all the “stuff” going on in his life; to “stuff” that was going on with “us” that wasn’t related to the game; to a “judge” dropping a “lawsuit”; and to his belief that, in gameplay, his “digging” will reveal some “antidote”. The letter is signed “Love, Lance”. Sean describes how, in his circumstances, he “could see how Lance would want to just forge forward”; comments on how the return letter to Lance is sent care of someone else; describes how he puts “getting close” onto the seal of the return letter; and comments that he (Sean) believes he needs to get out more – “go to the park and just sit, and see what comes up.”

Chapter 4 – This chapter begins with Sean’s recollections of a high-school acquaintance named Teague, an outsider and fan of fantasy and science fiction like himself, by whom he was inspired to create the “Tularosa Fortune Shack”, an important part of the Trace Italian game. Sean also describes another component of the shack: a recollected house that was home to a palmist, a home that Sean investigated on the day that the palmist was moving out. Sean describes an encounter with a man at the house in which the man gently said “None today, friend”. Sean comments in narration that while it’s more likely that the encounter happened after the accident because of remembered details and circumstances (i.e. his being on the way to see his dermatologist), he can’t help imagining what it might mean if it had taken place before the accident. He then describes meeting Teague a short while ago at a used bookstore, their conversation revealing that Sean, in his delirium, referred to Teague as Marco; how Sean’s dad told Teague to stay away; and how Sean and his dad used to go on hunting trips. Meanwhile, present-day conversation also refers to Teague having seen a news story that referred to Sean, a situation that “looked bad but ... blew over after a while.” Sean





comments in narration that he would have liked to keep in touch with Teague after high school but that it became impossible “almost the second the shot rang out.”

Sean then goes into a detailed explanation of what Trace Italian players find when they get to the Tularosa Fortune Shack: the dead body of the fortune teller; a series of astrological charts which contains important clues to help later in the game (which Sean comments no-one ever finds, and few people, if any, will ever get far enough to use anyway); and contemplates the implications of players finding the dead astrologer. This leads Sean to contemplation of how players leave the game: often just drifting away or growing “out of it”, but some, like Chris Haynes, making an active choice to leave. He describes Haynes’ particular, detailed style of correspondence, and his departure from the game: having realized that his gameplay was starting to dominate his thoughts, in the world of imagination, he killed himself after burying the body of the astrologer.

Sean’s contemplations here include references to “preparations for the trial”, during which time he considered destroying important documents, but eventually chose not to. He then describes how he created a death certificate for Haynes’ “character”, commenting on how he takes “a lot of pride in his work.”

## Analysis

Much of this section is taken up with exposition: that is, the offering of background information into characters and situations that the reader needs in order to understand elements of the story. In this case, that exposition includes information about how the Trace Italian works; how people play; and how or why people leave. This later is particularly important, in that the description of the departure of a specific player (Chris Hayes) ties in with later revelations about characters who DIDN’T leave, and perhaps should have. This description is also a powerful and important evocation of the novel’s thematic explorations of perceptions of reality: Haynes clearly realized that his perceptions of his two realities (his lived reality and that of the game) were becoming uncomfortably blurred, and too active to get his mind clear on what was real and what wasn’t. This, in turn, renders the description of Chris Haynes’ departure ironic foreshadowing: Chris’s choices are the exact opposite of those whose fate is revealed in the following section.

Important information aside, there are a number of other significant elements in this section, several of which perform the previously discussed function of being clues or hints to the truth at the core of the mystery of what happened to Sean. Particularly noteworthy hints include the references to hunting trips and to the “shot” ringing out. Meanwhile, there are also important clues to the nature of what ultimately makes up the novel’s sub-plot, or secondary plot having to do with the still mysterious lawsuit. Here, the primary elements to note are the various comments made by Lance in his gameplay letter (the truths behind those comments is revealed in future sections), and the attention paid by the narration to Chris Haynes, the latter serving as ironic foreshadowing of the eventual truth at the core of this secondary plotline – a truth that clearly and vividly explores the narrative’s thematic interest in the nature of reality, and



also, to develop one of the book's central metaphors introduced here, that lies at the heart of Sean's story in the same way as a secret core lies at the heart of the Trace Italian game. In the same way as players in the game are on a quest for a truth at the heart of the city, readers of the novel are on a quest for the truth at the heart of Sean, the book's central character.

One last noteworthy element in this section is the reference to Teague (a character who appears later at a pivotal point in the book's climax), which also ties in with the reference to "Marco" in the previous section".

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does this section explore the theme of the unreliability of memory?

## Discussion Question 2

How do the references to two psychics, the palmist and the astrologer, tie in with the novel's thematic interest in the unpredictability of outcomes?

## Discussion Question 3

What is your reaction to the various descriptions of the Trace Italian – to the game itself, and to how it's played? Is it a game you might be interested in? Why or why not? What do you think its appeal is?

## Vocabulary

medieval, fortification, reticulate, supine, hominid, scrutinize, explanatory, methodical, contemplate, decrypt, theoretical, evaporate, meticulous, primitive, cursive, palmistry, hexagon, nebula, miraculous, conjecture



# Section 1, Chapters 5 and 6

## Summary

Chapter 5 – “When I got back from the courthouse,” Sean says in narration, “I was pretty shaken up.” In narration, Sean describes his efforts to calm himself; refers to the judge dismissing the case, saying there was actually no case there, “no reason to go forward. Just several sad people and their partially wrecked lives”. Sean adds that he felt the judge’s comments and attitudes were intended to calm and comfort “Carrie’s parents” in some way. He describes making himself a sandwich and cutting up “into manageable pieces so [he] could eat it with a fork”, then going out and picking himself up some videos to watch. This leads him to contemplation of the different types of science fiction and fantasy books of his childhood, both the more positive ones he actually read (featuring the heroic and honorable Conan the Barbarian) and the more frightening ones he didn’t, the latter causing him to develop his own stories. He describes his re-watching of a film he enjoyed as a young man; his recollection of a character in the film resembling a dimly remembered friend named JJ; the dream he had while napping afterwards (of a ghost holding its own head, the face of which he – Sean – could not see); and his contemplations of the film (which, he says, was not bloody enough for him when he was younger, and which inspired some of his ideas for the Trace). This, in turn, leads him to contemplate what Lance and Carrie found in the Trace, narration revealing that their journeys had “neither climax nor punch line; it wasn’t even a conclusion at all, except for Carrie. It was a headline ... ‘One Dead, One Critical in Sci-Fi Game Pact”.

Chapter 6 – This chapter begins with “The worst part of the hearing was I guess the presentation of the artifacts ...”, and continues with a descriptions of evidence brought into the initial hearing by the prosecution. One piece of evidence is a postcard written by Lance and Carrie on their way to “inside”, seemingly a reference to their location within the imaginary Trace Italian world. Discussion of the postcard leads Sean to consideration of Carrie’s parents (having flown in from Florida; to Sean laying out the case; to a description of how Lance and Carrie had gotten further in the game than almost anyone else; to deeper descriptions of the post-accident circumstances in which Sean developed the game; and to how Lance and Carrie ignored Sean’s standard suggestions about what their next turn might be and made up one of their own: to “start digging”, narration revealing that after completing the hole they dug for themselves, Carrie died of exposure.

The narrative then includes a statement written by Sean in response to the charges against him, a statement that (like previous narration) refers to his physical appearance (which he seems to know makes people uncomfortable) and his difficulty speaking (a result of how he was scarred by the “accident”). In the statement, Sean explains his rationale for creating the game; his intention that it was intended to take place solely in the imagination of the players (as opposed to being played out in reality as Lance and Carrie did); and that in the end, he was just trying to do his job. Narration after the



statement reveals that it left out a great deal of material Sean wanted to put in, including a reference to Chris Haynes' departure from the game after realizing it was becoming too important to him. He also asks rhetorically "Don't these people know I'd never hurt anybody again?" and then reveals that Lance's parents had sent affidavits saying they held him blameless, adding that they were aware that Lance had had difficulties, and that they were focusing on his future. This, he indicates, was the final piece of evidence that led the judge to rule that Carrie's parents had no case. Sean concludes by saying that he "had come through the day no worse off than I'd come into it, which, as I have been telling myself for many years now, is a victory whether it feels like one or not."

## Analysis

There are two key points to note about this section. The first is the piece of information that comes into the story at the end of Chapter 5 – specifically, the fact that game-player Carrie died as the result of getting too involved in the Trace Italian. This piece of information answers several questions that, up to this point in the story, have driven and shaped its primary subplot having to do with the court case Sean is facing. The second key point to note about this section is related to the first: the way in which the revelation about Carrie, and the commentary of the court case triggered by what happened, are evocative of two of the book's primary themes.

The first theme evoked by the specific reference to Carrie's death is the book's consideration of perceptions of reality. In contrast to the description of Chris Haynes in the previous section (which focused on his decision to leave the game because he felt reality and imagination were becoming indistinguishable), narration of Carrie and Lance's experience in this section takes the exploration of this theme in the opposite direction: unlike Chris, neither Lance nor Carrie seemed able - or willing - to tell the difference between reality and fantasy, with the result that Carrie lost her life and Lance ended up in what amounts to a hospital. There is the clear sense that Lance and Carrie, by their actions and without actually knowing Chris, have proved him right: it seems he was wise to get out of the game while he still could.

The second theme evoked by the narration of the whole section is that exploring the nature of guilt and responsibility. While the narrative makes it clear that according to the law, Sean has no real legal responsibility for what happened to Carrie, the narrative also makes it clear that he feels a certain degree of guilt for what happened. There is the sense that this guilt is not crippling or debilitating in any way: Sean can still function, and still believes in the value of his game. Nevertheless, Sean's sense of guilt about what happened performs the important function of giving him a conscience: this, in turn, can be seen as foreshadowing the eventual revelation of the truth about his "accident" as revealed later in the novel.

Meanwhile, while the mystery of what the court case was all about is essentially solved in this section, the mystery of what happened to Sean deepens, with further significant, if glancing, references, to who he has become after the accident.



## Discussion Question 1

The consequences of Carrie's actions (i.e. dying as the result of her choices in the game) can be seen as a manifestation of which of the novel's central themes?

## Discussion Question 2

What comments or references in narration can be seen as further hints or clues to Sean's condition in the aftermath of his "accident"?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the last line of Chapter 6? What events or circumstances might Sean be referring to here?

## Vocabulary

concurrent, fluorescent, sanctity, primal, perdition, arrogant, terminus, cavernous, endangerment, scenario, affidavit, capacity



## Section 1, Chapters 7 and 8

### Summary

Chapter 7 – After a brief contemplation about how much he used to enjoy going grocery shopping with his mother before the accident, and after commenting that he never goes to the grocery store himself anymore because of how he looks, Sean describes his trip to the liquor store to pick up some candy: the liquor store first thing in the morning, he says, is fine for him to go to because very few people are there, and those who are there won't be looking at anybody's face. He buys his candy (having a twinge of memory as he passes the "dirty magazines", but doesn't say a memory of what) and then goes outside, where he encounters a pair of teenagers, Kevin and Steve, who ask what happened to his face – not angry, not grossed out, just out of what Sean sees as genuine curiosity. He goes over and talks with them, conversation revealing that he doesn't have a nose left: where it was is now an exit wound from a bullet. Conversation also refers to Carrie and Lance, revealing that Kevin and Steve know about the court case and are curious about what is going to happen to Sean. Sean, who is getting more and more comfortable with Kevin and Steve (and their unguarded, uncensored honesty and curiosity) suspects that he will end up broke. The conversation ends with the three of them again talking about the court case, and agreeing to "Fuck 'em". And Sean smiles what he says is his "horrible smile".

Chapter 8 – This chapter begins with Sean commenting on how "terrible" he felt when he learned that Carrie died; continues with his recollections of how she and Lance played the game together (recollections that trigger memories of a girl named Kimmy who came to visit him while he was covered with bandages in hospital; and of how sympathetic nurse Vicky was when he described to her what he knew of Lance, now in a rehabilitation center for adolescents. He describes what happened to Lance (going a long time in a cold environment without food or warm clothing), how Lance and Carrie tried to save each other; and how Lance didn't really know how to think ahead. Vicky's comment that young people don't really know how to think ahead at all makes Sean laugh a little, and reveal what he's learned about the kind of couple Lance and Carrie were in high school. He comments that what little he knows about Lance came from bits of himself that Lance revealed in his letters while playing the game, and comments in narration that he "felt a ravenous grief for nice boys who are too stupid to take care of themselves."

### Analysis

The mystery of what happened to Sean – of the exact nature of the accident – deepens in this section, with the reference to the place where his nose used to be being the site of a bullet's exit wound. The pieces are starting to come together into a kind of picture: still blurred around the edges, but starting to become clearer.



Meanwhile, Sean (and the reader) have an intriguing encounter with a pair of individuals who, contrary to Sean's apparent, and consistent, expectations, don't react with anything more than curiosity to his face (the description of which now includes the concept of his "horrible smile"), an encounter which seems to have taken place before events of previous chapters – specifically, the judge's dismissal of the case. There is the sense here that, perhaps combined with his relationship with the compassionate nurse Vicky (don't forget: her nickname is Victory) that Sean is taking slow, small steps along the way to psychological rehabilitation: that is, he is perhaps beginning to understand that he is not the physical monster which he sees himself to be. This, in turn, entwines with both the results of the court case and his feelings about it, to suggest that he is also coming to believe that he is not the psychological monster he and others see himself as. And this in ITS turn can be seen as relevant to his overall journey of transformation towards the truth of what happened in the accident: there is the sense that, on some level, as a result of the Kevin and Steve encounter, Sean is coming to believe that if they can face the truth about his face without revulsion, he can face the truth about the "accident" in the same way. In other words, the key conversation with Kevin and Steve can potentially be seen as carving out a small opening for Sean through which he can see that the truth of himself is perhaps not something to be as feared and/or rejected as it had been in the past. As such, the conversation can be seen as foreshadowing of the moment later in the narrative when he finally admits to himself the truth of what happened on the night of "the accident".

Other important elements in this section include the reference to the twinge of memory when Sean glimpses the "dirty magazines" (a reference the narrative never explains); more details about the Lance/Carrie situation; the introduction of a new important character from Sean's past (Kimmy), the appearance here foreshadowing the important role she plays later in the narrative in Sean's journey of self-discovery; and Sean's reaction to Vicky's comment about young men which, along with the last lines of Chapter 8, can be seen as having a wryly ironic double meaning.

## Discussion Question 1

At this point in the novel, consider all the clues / hints about what happened to Sean that have been referenced so far: what, at this point, do you suspect was / is the nature of the "accident"? What, for example, are the implications of the "exit wound" reference in this section?

## Discussion Question 2

In what way does narration in this section suggest the theme of guilt and responsibility in relation to Carrie's death?



## Discussion Question 3

Why are Vicky's comment about young men and the last lines of Chapter 3 particularly ironic? What other "young man" in the story might these lines be seen as referring to?

## Vocabulary

deference, taint (v.), thermal, gestural, semaphore, excruciating, carnivorous, disinfectant, aquifer





# Section 1, Chapters 9 and 10

## Summary

Chapter 9 – Sean describes how people “freeze up” when he opens the door and they see his face, commenting that this is exactly what happened when the process server brought him the letter informing him that he was being accused of responsibility for Carrie’s death. He describes the reaction, or rather his triggering of the reaction, as a kind of power that he doesn’t really want to have, adding that his reaction to getting the summons was to feel a surge of anger that he hasn’t felt for several years. The text then includes a threatening letter from someone accusing him of guilt in what happened to Carrie and Lance then follows, one of several letters (Sean says in narration) that came to him either absolving him of blame or hitting him hard with it. This leads him to contemplations of other hearings – specifically, the ones around the “accident”, from which his father emerged “distant, detached”, and his mother “finding the quiet mask from which her face would never fully emerge again.” This leads him into recollections of, and commentary on, the constant low-grade sound he hears ever since the accident; how hard, loud, rock music was, for a long time, the only thing that would quiet that music; how his playing it at home in the months and years after the accident worried and upset his mother; how he has been tempted to send his old tapes to those sending him hate mail; how such mail often comes in waves (“I wondered if swells in volume meant there’d been some editorial in a local paper somewhere about a gunshot survivor who’d lured a couple of teenagers to a frozen grave.”); and how he only first learned of what happened to Lance and Carrie after receiving such mail.

Chapter 10 - While cleaning out his bathroom cabinets, Sean discovers a collection of his old medicines that he imagines might have just been forgotten, but actually believes they were left there on purpose: they’re too well organized. He has an intense experience of unreality in the aftermath of his discovery, recalling a therapist who told him his “good fortune was to learn what special really meant.” Sean continues to clean, and then looks more closely at the medications, his thoughts turning to things he inherited after his grandmother died, things including an old-fashioned black and white TV which he used to fall asleep to and which he used to tell his bewildered parents gave him “shelter”. His thoughts then return to the various medications as he describes, in narration, the various stories he made up for how they came into being, and how he promised himself that everything he was going through was temporary – that he would get away from it all and do something with his life that had nothing to do with any of the suffering. His recollections lead him to remember how his parents used to ask him what he wanted to be safe from; how, after the accident, no-one ever asked him that again; and how that was “the best thing about the rifle blast that destroyed most of [his] face.”

The chapter, and the first part of the book, conclude with a detailed recollection of how, when he was a child, Sean saw a religious program that discussed how satanic messages were being written into music, messages that were only audible if the music was played backwards. He talks about how that program, like many others, was



frequently repeated, with only slight variations; how the program suggested that the phrase “wolf in white van” was apparent when a particular song by a particular artist was played; and how “nobody had a very firm idea of what that was supposed to mean, but ... that it was a hellish picture to paint, and for young people to hear.” Sean describes how, when the repeat / variation of the show was broadcast, he got the idea to call in and ask why Satan made his images appear backwards (it seemed like a lot of extra work), but instead (and without conscious choice) pretended to be possessed. He describes how the perky woman who answered the phone prayed that he be released from the devil, and how in the aftermath of his prank, he realized something about himself: he doesn't really know why he does what he does. Finally, he recalls looking at the program again and having a powerful, overwhelming image of the wolf in the white van and how it was out in the world. Back in the present, Sean bags all the leftover medications, with the intention of throwing them all out, but then he realizes he can't, and puts it in a cabinet: there is still more, he thinks, to clean: “no shortage of things to do.”

## Analysis

The action of these two chapters marks the climax of this section of the book, the point of highest narrative, thematic, and emotional intensity to this point in the story.

Narratively, and in terms of the mystery plotline (that is: the plot that reveals, piece by piece, the true nature of the “accident” that caused Sean's injuries), the high point is the revelation that the weapon involved in the “accident” was a rifle. The reader, at this point, would be justified in having the idea that a weapon owned by Sean's father was somehow involved: recall the reference earlier to how Sean and his father used to go hunting (Chapter 4) which generally doesn't happen with weapons smaller than a rifle.

Thematically, the climax of the book to this point has two components. The first is the detailed, intensely written description of the television program and the “wolf in white van” reference. The emphatic detail and placement of this story (i.e. as almost the last thing in this first section), both can be seen as craft and/or structural elements that suggest “climax” about this moment, a suggestion reinforced by the intensity of the writing, particularly around and within the description of the wolf in the van. The sense here that in both time frames at play in this moment (i.e. Adult Sean recalling, and trying to analyze, Teenaged Sean's actions), there is animal nature in play: instinctive, raw, violent, and barely contained. That is the “wolf” component of the image: the “white van” component suggests society, that which is man-made (as opposed to that which is natural, i.e. the wolf), control, and innocence (i.e. whiteness). The image as a whole suggests a kind of imprisonment, or entrapment: in the same way that Teenage Sean felt entrapped or imprisoned by his life, Adult Sean is entrapped or imprisoned by the lies and denial he's constructed (i.e. an artificial innocence) around the raw, violent, barely contained truth about the “accident”. In other words, and in this moment, Young Sean perceived / Adult Sean recalls his reality in metaphorical, image-based terms that he doesn't consciously seem to understand but which the reader can clearly see as manifesting a core truth about the character. Meanwhile, the “wolf in white van section”,



and particularly Quote 9, is by far the most rawly, frankly, and viscerally emotional section of the book to this point – its emotional climax.

The second component of the thematic climax comes in the opening and closing lines of this section – specifically, in the references to the medicine, which can be seen as representing the “medicine” of self-honesty that Sean has to take, the truth he has to face about himself – the sense of responsibility for the accident that, by the end of the novel, he finally does come to face. The fact that he discovers it represents / externalizes subconscious knowledge about his truth (i.e. that he has to rediscover, in the same way he rediscovers the medicine, the reality of what happened); the fact that he doesn’t throw it away metaphorically suggests, and foreshadows, his eventual confrontation with, and acceptance of, that truth. He is, to continue the metaphor, taking the medicine of truth in order to finally feel better about himself and his life. That’s the key thing he “has to do”, in fact (to paraphrase the final lines slightly): face the truth about himself.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Sean doesn’t like the feeling of power he says he has in response to people’s reaction to him when they come to the door?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the implications of Sean’s description of his parents in the aftermath of the accident? What do these descriptions suggest about who they became, and why? Which of the novel’s themes do you think might be at play here?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the most likely reason that Sean’s parents stopped asking him what he wanted to be safe from? Why do you think they asked him that question at all?

## Vocabulary

spectrum, tendril, denizen, delirious, recipient, jacaranda, oleander, artillery, barrage, prominence, caustic, expiration, sheathe, scabbard, cyst, cadaver, infuse, octagonal, distal, gradation, emissary, proximal, epidemic



## Section 2, Chapters 11 and 12

### Summary

Chapter 11 – The chapter begins with a brief conversation between Sean and Vicky in which Sean learns (or is reminded, he can't tell which) that Vicky works part time at a care facility (Loma Linda) that does facial reconstructive surgery; that in her opinion, techniques have advanced significantly since the first round of surgery on his face; and that she thinks Sean should call them. This thought triggers a fleeting echo in Sean's mind of one of the tracks in Trace Italian: "DON FACE MASK. TRACE BACK. CONTINUE DUE EAST. DIG SHELTER." This leads Sean into several recollections: of when his father told him of his grandmother's death (in which Sean, in narration, refers to his accident, shooting himself "in the face with a Marlin 39A"); of the lies that the family constructed to tell Sean's grandmother after the shooting (that Sean had been in a car accident in which everyone else in the car had been killed); and that the only thing Sean was angry at his parents for, in relation to the shooting, was the construction and maintaining of those lies. Narration then shifts to another recollection: Sean's recollection of his family being told that the only person they might be able to sue in the aftermath of the shooting was the person who sold his father the gun (a friend of Sean's grandfather's named Ray); how, shortly after the accident, Sean and his father visited Ray; how, after some small talk, Ray began to lecture Sean on the importance of respecting guns; and how Sean responded with compassion, not anger, to that lecture.

After an interjection of text from Sean's Trace Italian gameplay (which refers to characters having climbed down a long underground silo, only to reach a series of platforms), Sean describes his and his father's return home from Ray's, in which the efforts of Sean's mother to connect with him end in failure as, Sean says in narration, they tended to do. Narration then returns to Sean's conversations with his father in the aftermath of his (Sean's) grandmother's death, conversation revealing that his father doesn't want Sean to attend the funeral. Sean describes how he controls his anger (which he describes as "a freshly uncoiled snake"), and the chapter ends first with Sean's father tearfully, and with a return of his characteristic childhood stutter, referring to how happy Sean's grandmother was when he was a baby ... and then with another reference to a move in Trace Italian: the phrase "Clan Scarecrow" appears in Sean's mind.

Chapter 12 – As the chapter begins, Sean continues to comfort his father at the same time as he imagines the view at the top of the silo referred to in the previous section. This leads Sean into recollections of how, in the early days of Trace Italian, he let players play for free (in order to get them fully engaged and eventually become paying customers); how early turns included major turning points and choices; the specifics of one particular turning point (while hiding from marauders under an abandoned movie theatre, the player has to choose which group of fellow refugees to align with); how he changed the name of one clan from "Seeker/Digger" to "Scout" in the aftermath of the first time a player chose it; and how he kept the ID card he wrote out before the change



for himself. This leads to a recollection of an assignment in school in which his true responses to a quiz, based on and defined by his love for fantasy and quest, were read out in class and mocked by his classmates, an experience that makes him simultaneously angry and defiant to continue to speak his truth ... but only to himself.

Narration then returns to the events around the day of Sean's grandmother's funeral: specifically, his decision to renew his business license that day, instead of going to the funeral. Amidst descriptions of how he tends to react to people's reactions to his face, there is also narration of Sean's discovery that Chris Haynes is a teller at the bank where he (Sean) does his business. Following a description of an odd mosaic in the sidewalk outside the bank, and after narration of a turn played by two new and enthusiastic Trace players, Sean's narration returns to contemplation of Chris Haynes, and how he (Sean) integrated Chris' initials into some graffiti on a gas station wall in the game. "CH ... Chris Haynes. Chris the digger. Dead Chris, who'd seen the future and counted himself out."

## Analysis

There are several important, sometimes glancing, things to note about this section. In Chapter 11, these include the reference to facial reconstructive surgery (which can be seen as metaphorically foreshadowing the psychological reconstruction – i.e. of his reality – that Sean begins as the novel concludes); the concurrent metaphoric evocation of one of the narrative's central themes (i.e. perceptions of reality); and the new details about Sean's relationship with his family in the aftermath of the "accident". These last include the references late in the chapter to Sean's experiences in the aftermath of his grandmother's death, which are arguably / potentially among the most traumatizing responses Sean experienced in the aftermath of what happened.

Then there are several comments in the Trace Italian reference worth noting: the concept of masks; and the reference to digging shelter (which is clearly an ironic echo of the options given to Lance and Carrie, their reaction to those options, and their ultimate choice, which ended in Carrie's death). Another important Trace Italian reference: Sean's inclusion of the "arrival at the platforms" moment, which suggests a simultaneous ending and beginning, a suggestion that echoes several points in the story, including the endings of both lawsuits referenced in the plot. Meanwhile the mystery of what happened to Sean not so much deepens as gets more detail when the make of rifle is identified (the first time in the book that this has happened). Finally, themes developed in this chapter include the aforementioned reference to the "perceptions of reality" theme; and the guilt and responsibility theme (manifest primarily in the mini-storyline about the lawsuit).

In Chapter 12, significant elements include the metaphoric relationship between the view from the silo (a seemingly endless series of platforms to be passed through) and Sean's conversations with his father, the implication being that for Sean, getting to some kind of peace / comfort with his dad seems to be a similarly endless process. Then there are the references to the name change of the "Seeker / Digger" clan with its



implication that Sean considered himself more of a seeker/digger than a scout. This can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the psychological process he's currently undergoing (i.e. seeking and/or digging for the truth of what happened to him) and also as a similarly metaphoric foreshadowing of the point at which he arrives at the novel's conclusion. Then there are the references to Sean's experience in high school, which functions on two levels: as a glimpse of the kind of treatment by the rest of the world that might have contributed to the choice he makes in relation to the "accident" (the truth of that choice is revealed in the novel's final moments); and, as such, explores a dark facet of the novel's thematic interest in the power of fantasy (that is, to provoke dislike, resentment, and/or contempt). The portrayal of these reactions can also be seen as metaphorically relating to Sean's concerns about going out in public: there is the sense that he experiences people's reactions to his face in the same way as he experienced his classmates' reaction to his beloved fantasy books.

Finally, there are the references to new game players (which reinforce the idea that even after tragedy or challenge – in this particular case, the lawsuit – life goes on); and to the mosaic. This is a briefly glimpsed metaphoric representation of how life is made up of a collection of events, moments or experiences, placed together either randomly or carefully, to make up a whole in the same way as a mosaic is made up of a collection of tiles or other materials, placed together either randomly or carefully, to make up a picture. Finally, there are the references to Chris Haynes, who seems to be a very important person to Sean but to whom, nevertheless, he doesn't speak. There is an inescapable parallel here to his experience with his grandmother's funeral (i.e. avoiding connecting with important people out of fear of their reaction to his face). Other things to note: the "light" that Sean experiences which can be seen as representing a kind of self-forgiveness (i.e. Chris survived, everyone else survived, meaning that Carrie's death was the exception and more the result of her than of Sean). There is also a clear irony in the chapter's references to how Chris was memorialized in the game. As noted earlier, Chris made the choice to "kill" his avatar (character) in the game, a choice which, even though the "death" is memorialized in a way that only Sean can and will understand, the person who made the choice (as opposed to the character / avatar) is still alive. By choosing to "die", Chris remained alive, unlike Carrie.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphoric relationship between the concept of masks (glimpsed briefly in the options from Trace Italian) and other aspects of the novel – thematic? plot? character?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance, metaphoric and/or literal, of the reference in this chapter to Sean's father having a stutter?



## Discussion Question 3

What do you think the narrative is suggesting by having the opening section of Chapter 16 read like an excerpt from *Trace Italian*, but look like regular narration? What themes are evoked / suggested here?

## Vocabulary

glycerin, commemorate, negotiate, perilous, squalor, grievous, tranquil, antecedent, convulse, lilt, admonishment, impasse, pervasive, composure, liability, canopy, arcane, decisive, delinquent, predicate, conjecture, pirouette, gauche, consolidation, mosaic



## Section 2, Chapters 13 and 14

### Summary

Chapter 13 – In the middle of everything else that’s going on, Sean is surprised by the unexpected, unannounced rival of Kimmy. There is an interjection of some of Sean’s game commentary (which refers to a towering structure emerging from earthquake-shaken ground), and a reference to it having been an early piece of writing that Sean has never sent to anyone, even though he feels that what he sends instead feels, to the players, like a substitute (here he inserts a comment from Lance’s gameplay that seems to suggest exactly that, and which also references his gameplay choice to “gather bones”). Narration then shifts to Sean’s recollection of Kimmy’s visits when he was in hospital: how she was the only friend who came regularly, and who seemed unfazed by his appearance; how she kept asking what he did and, even without an answer, exasperatedly kept calling him a “dumb shit” or a “stupid asshole”; and how, when he remembers her visits, he imagines a happy future with her. “When I picture the scene just then,” he says, “when I remember it right, I imagine a story where Kimmy and I grow up and get married. To each other.”

After an interjection of a recalled, mysterious correspondence from Chris Haynes prior to his leaving the game, Sean then describes visits from his father to the hospital while Kimmy was there; his attempts to get her to admit that she knows why Sean did what he did (attempts she successfully fends off); and his eventual attempts to get Sean to admit that it was a suicide pact with Kimmy that went wrong, an explanation that Sean believes his father and mother came up with as the only one they could collectively imagine and/or accept. Then, in the middle of a discussion of how much he hates mystery stories, Sean describes how Kimmy’s visits became less frequent and eventually ended, wondering whether it was something his parents arranged.

Back in the present, Sean describes Kimmy’s brief visit: how they discussed her marriage to a man named Paul; how Sean asked her about their high school friend JJ, and how she told him that JJ had died after being shot by someone who was connected to his drug use. Sean later tells his mother of Kimmy’s visit, but isn’t able to convince her that Kimmy only stopped by casually.

Chapter 14 – This chapter contains several lists taken from Sean’s Trace Italian files that map out possible routes for players to take. The first list, triggered by a question from Vicky about what’s in the bottom of Sean’s filing cabinet, shows a series of routes through the mid-western and western states that all end up back in Kansas. Following the list, Sean’s narration describes how working on, and developing, all the aspects of the Trace helped him get through the various agonies of his recovery. He also describes how happy his family was, “a rare grace”, when he announced that he was too busy to keep watching the TV in his room, the implication being that he was too busy on the game. The second list from the game includes a list of items available for exchange, and leads into references to how the different versions of younger Sean are fading from





the memory (and the needs) of older Sean, and how it felt wrong to him, as he was developing the game, to have a player gain information and/or supplies simply by killing another, entirely innocent, character. This leads into the third list, of routes through Kansas that all lead to the town of Coronado, a ghost town that Sean says is “still on all the maps” and that “to get there you’d have to crawl through Kansas forever.” He refers to it as proof of the value of seeking a final shelter which, in turn, opens the door to an even deeper search for an even more final shelter.

## Analysis

As the mystery of what exactly happened to Sean continues to develop more layers (primarily through the reference to a suicide pact which, taken into account with other references earlier in the text, suggest that the truth is both grimmer and darker than previously suggested), it’s interesting to note how much emphasis Trace Italian takes on at this point. From the first interjection of material from the game at the beginning of Chapter 13 to the content of Chapter 14 (the biggest single piece of material related to Trace Italian in the book), there is the sense that for some reason, there is a stronger connection between the game and Sean’s feelings about Kimmy than there is between the game and Sean’s feelings related to just about everyone else in the story.

Meanwhile, another comment in Chapter 13 has a connection with Kimmy, but one that doesn’t manifest until later in the novel: this is the comment about gathering bones, which foreshadows a glimpsed moment in the final, climactic chapter that also refers to bones.

Other important aspects of this section include the reference to Chris Haynes (whose letter, received just before he quit the game, suggests that his state of mind was such – i.e. becoming obsessive and fragmented – that his choice to leave was a good one) and the reference to JJ, a character barely glimpsed earlier (Chapter 5) whose fate seems to have a metaphoric connection to that of Carrie: both characters got themselves too far into potentially dangerous realities, and both lost their lives as a result.

Moving into Chapter 14: at the same time as the action of this chapter contains a lot of references to Trace Italian, it also contains a lot of references to Kansas, which seems to have played an important role in developing and defining Sean’s fantasy life. That said, it’s not entirely clear from narration why this is the case: there are references to Kansas being “fascinating”, but no particular references as to why. Possibilities include its wide open spaces, land and sky (open spaces representing limitless possibilities that Sean no longer has, but which he likes to experience by offering choices and possibilities in his game); and a concurrent sense that in some ways, even though it’s in the middle of the continent, Kansas is somehow isolated and separated – or rather, the people who live there (in communities separated by wide open spaces) are isolated in the same way as Sean feels isolated from the world.

Finally, there are the metaphorically significant resonances to Coronado. There are several layers to this metaphor, all of which seem to relate to Sean’s experience of moving towards his core personal truth (i.e. what happened in the accident. The ghost



town reference suggests that for Sean, the truth is a “ghost” for him, unclear and ethereal and untouchable. The reference to “crawling through Kansas forever” suggests that for him, the search of that truth is as long-lasting, as difficult, and as humiliating as the kind of crawl he describes. There is also the sense, however, that that crawl is ultimately worth it when you get to the goal – or, in the metaphorical reading of the image, the truth that has been long and painfully both sought and avoided. That truth is revealed in the final chapter: for now, though, and in the narrative, Sean has a little further to go.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the likely metaphorical connection between Kimmy’s entry into the narrative and the interjection of this particular excerpt from Trace Italian? Why do you think there’s so much emphasis on Trace Italian in general? What does this large amount of material have to do, do you think, with Sean’s feelings about Kimmy?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the connection between Sean’s comment about mystery stories and his comments about Kimmy’s disappearance from his life?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Kimmy stopped visiting Sean in hospital? What made her stop coming to see him?

## Vocabulary

bulwark, peripheral, susceptible, indulgent, summation, variant, composite, percussive, talisman, judicious, annotate, inexplicable, protrude, monstrous, pacify



## Section 2, Chapters 15 and 16

### Summary

Chapter 15 – Sean describes how, in the days and weeks before he left the hospital, a series of meetings (“discharge conferences”) took place. These meetings assessed his physical health, his mental / emotional state, and how he envisioned himself functioning in the world after he left. He describes his mother’s tearful concern for him, and her eventual confession that she was worried he would be lonely. His response: “I was going to be lonely anyway.” Contemplations of his answer lead him to reminiscences of how Lance took charge of his and Carrie’s gameplay; how some of Lance’s choices changed how Sean thought of the game; how Lance tended to sign his letters with a personal note; and how one of which triggered, in Sean, “a terrible thought, which [he was] ashamed to have had, and which [he] will probably never able to bring [himself] to write down.” (Narration doesn’t reveal what that thought is).

Time jumps to the final discharge conference, in which Sean’s statement that he will fill his life with developing a game seems to simultaneously please and puzzle the social worker interviewing him. The conference ends with the social worker asking what happened to the gun in the house, and Sean’s mother saying that it was gotten rid of. Sean comments that her statement led him to believe that “things had been going on in the house while [he’d] been away, hard conversations.” He also says that he looked out the window of the conference room and imagined that the road out of the facility led to “a safe refuge hidden deep in the ground somewhere in Kansas.”

Narration then describes high-school pictures sent to Sean by Lance and Carrie; how the pictures made him feel warmly, almost parentally, towards them; and how he stifled those feelings by focusing on how they played the game. He then describes his refusal to go into a care facility, and his determination to have an independent life after just “a little more time at home.” At first his parents say that his physical needs (i.e. his wheelchair) simply cannot be accommodated, but then they say they’ll talk about his request and make a decision later.

Chapter 16 – The chapter opens with what seems like a piece of writing from the game, but which is not italicized in the way that other game excerpts in the book are. It describes an “I” character (Sean?) coming face to face with “men from a degraded ocean-side kingdom somewhere far off”, and having a choice: stand and fight, or drop down into an opening in the ground. This leads Sean to a recollection of when he was in his early twenties, post-accident, at a time in his life when he was very much aware of the pity of others. He receives a phone call from a physician who wants to try some new reconstructive surgery on him. This leads to a recollection of some of Chris’s gameplay: specifically, his choice of a scalpel (in the game) to take a cyst off his arm. Sean recalls how this led him to purchase a scalpel of his own; how he sent the scalpel to Chris later in Chris’s gameplay; and how Chris occasionally talked about using the scalpel in the game.



Sean then describes the first few months of his recovery at home, time that was filled with both his parents' anger and his development of the game. He describes how he found himself drawn to looking Northwards, and how Chris, Lance, and Carrie all headed north in their gameplay. Sean comments that after a while he purged most of the letters he received from game-players, but kept one of Chris's final letters (sent before he removed himself from the game) in spite of it making him feel uncomfortable.

This leads to recollection of Sean's meeting with the surgeon, in which potential risks were implied without actually being discussed, and how plans were made to move forward. Recollections of the night of the accident ("...the lights of the ambulance and the sound of the voices yelling. The chaos...the raw, open feeling all over my face") are juxtaposed with recollections of making plans for the surgery, both of which are followed by Sean's detailed description of watching a truck driver, parked outside Sean's house, deliberately backing into another car. He says there was a vague, "prophetic" feeling associated with the incident, and then a memory "from childhood, not childhood really but a while afterward, but what felt, in that moment, like childhood."

## Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its emphasis on the past: for the most part, the action of both chapters is set some time before the present, either immediately afterwards or just before the "accident". There is the sense here that the narrative is preparing the way for revelations of the truth of the "accident", revelations that appear in the next chapter. Among the most significant of these explorations of / visits to the past are the reference to Sean's loneliness (which is very telling, particularly in hindsight: that is, once the ending of the book is reached and the truth is revealed); Sean's reference to a "terrible thought"; and another reference to Kansas which, as in the previous section, seems to suggest a place of safety and freedom for Sean.

Then there is a return of the references to reconstructive surgery (which, in its reference to physical repair of Sean's body, metaphorically foreshadows the psychological repair of Sean's mind and spirit that begins with the revelation of the truth in the next chapter); and the seemingly odd references to the scalpel (with its symbolic implications of cutting away, metaphors for Chris' cutting himself off from the game and Sean's cutting himself off from himself, which is, essentially, what he is doing with the accident-related actions revealed in the following chapter). Also: there is the juxtaposition of the present-day meeting with the surgeon (to discuss repairing damage done in the past) with images OF that past (i.e. the ambulance lights), a juxtaposition that suggests Sean's past and present (and perhaps his future) are coming closer together, fitting together more effectively, perhaps making Sean's life a little more whole. The reference to the "raw, open feeling" of his face echoes the reference earlier to his nose being destroyed (and being replaced with an exit wound).

Finally, there is the reference to the encounter with the truck driver, which is significant on a number of levels. First, it serves as one last reiteration of the theme of the unreliability of memory - interestingly enough, just before the only section of the book in



which Sean's memory seems perfectly clear, accurate, and functional. Second, what the truck driver does is clearly an image of choice, an echo of other, similar images of choices made by characters throughout the book (particularly in terms of Trace Italian gameplay) and, simultaneously, a foreshadowing of key, defining choices revealed in the following section. That foreshadowing carries through into both the nature of what Sean witnesses (i.e. an act of violence) and his comments about childhood, both of which lead into the events of the next and final chapter, in which the truth of what happened to Sean is finally revealed, a truth that has aspects of both violence and childhood associated with it.

## Discussion Question 1

What do you think Sean's "terrible thought" was? What relationship might it have to the situation with Lance and Carrie at that time: remember, he had the "thought" before Carrie died.

## Discussion Question 2

Sean suggests there were "hard conversations" between his parents in the aftermath of the "accident". What do you think those conversations might have been about / sounded like?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think the narrative is suggesting by having the opening section of Chapter 16 read like an excerpt from Trace Italian, but look like regular narration? What themes are evoked / suggested here?

## Vocabulary

clarify, diligent, terrarium, imminent, intrusion, premonition, vantage

## Section 2, Chapter 17

### Summary

This chapter consists mostly of memory. Sean hangs out with JJ and his girlfriend, Teague, and Kimmy, listening to music. Teague, who is reading “The Dungeon Master’s Guide”, asks for some different music. As Kimmy rummages through her large, very full purse, Sean describes the sound made by the numerous cassettes in there as sounding like rattling bones. As Kimmy changes the music, Sean notices that JJ and his girlfriend are starting to make out. He realizes that he might be in trouble if he hangs out too much longer, so he heads home. His narration here describes the distant nature of his memories of this event.

When he gets home, Sean finds that he’s received a couple of parcels, one of which contains a membership patch from a Conan the Barbarian fan club. He phones Kimmy and asks if she will help him sew the patch onto his backpack, and after some teasing, she agrees. They arrange to meet at Kimmy’s house later that evening. After he’s finished on the phone Sean draws a picture inspired by one of the bands playing on a mix tape that accompanied the patch, a picture of a skull with tiny, diamond-shaped flames embedded deep in the black eye sockets. At dinner, Sean’s Mom asks him what he’d been drawing. He doesn’t tell her, she lets it go, and dinner continues: as usual, with Sean’s father reacting angrily to the television news, which he watches every night; and, also as usual, with Sean’s mother asking why Sean doesn’t seem as happy to be eating her meatloaf as he used to be.

Sean’s narration reveals that after dinner, he took his father’s rifle from out of the hall closet where it was kept and hid it underneath his bed. He listens to some more music, reacting happily to what seems to be a hesitation in the singer to find words and meaning in a lyric, “saying something anyway because your mouth just keeps moving and the rhythm is behind you and you can’t stop.” Later that night, Sean goes to pick up Kimmy at her house. They have a few furtive cigarettes on their way to the Golden Arcade, where they play a few games and then hang out outside, where they have a conversation in which Kimmy reveals she believes in Jesus being the Savior and Sean reveals that he believes “something about Jesus” but isn’t sure what. He realizes that their conversation has led him to contemplate “letting her into the dark, distant corners where Conan grew cruel and lived inside me ... where the dull edges of my life grew sharp enough to cut through rock”. But instead of speaking, he kisses her, and she kisses him back. His narration then discusses how beautiful he suddenly found his home in Southern California.

When Sean gets home, his mother is waiting up. They have a brief conversation about a Jehovah’s Witness magazine he’s brought home, in which, Sean comments in narration, there is an underlined phrase (“Its glory is like a blossom of grass”) which he says might have been underlined when he picked it up, or he might have done it himself “during the next hour or two”: he can’t really remember.



Later that night, Sean “thought about taking out the whole house at once”, the implication being that he was thinking about shooting his parents. He takes the rifle and stands outside their door, but instead of shooting thinks about what he really wanted to be remembered for; how Conan won his battles with honor; and about how (as he comments in narration) he just wanted to make the right decision. He describes how his imagination explored a number of possible life paths from that moment on, his narrations merging into the same visual style (i.e. italics) in which the sections of the game are written and then coming out: “I thrive. I fail to thrive. I fall. I rise. Too many. Too late. Not that, not those, not these: this.” He describes going back into his room, realizing he’s crying “either because I didn’t want to do this or because I did”, realizing that he “had yet to learn the way of the jigsaw”, and so put the end of the rifle underneath his chin, “lay down on [his] belly, and listened to the rising squall beyond the door.”

The end.

## Analysis

There are several points to note about this section, which contains the book’s overall climax: or, more specifically, its entwined narrative, thematic, and emotional climaxes.

The book’s narrative climax comes in its very final moments, when the full truth of what happened to Sean, the truth that has been hinted at over the entire course of the narrative, is fully revealed: the “accident” that caused his (psychological and physical) injuries and changed his life forever was not an accident at all – it was a suicide attempt. The point is not made to suggest that this is the last layer of truth about the incident to be explored: the narrative never explicitly defines why Sean wanted to kill himself. There are possibilities: loneliness, fear, resentment of his parents (which also may have contributed to his initial temptation to kill THEM) ... aspects of the revelation that reaffirm references at the end of Section 1 that he doesn’t know why he does what he does. But why, it could be argued, is less important to the story as a whole than WHAT – specifically, it’s more important that Sean first acknowledge WHAT happened and his own responsibility for the event than anything else. Reasons why, and healing from those reasons, can come later. One last point about this structural climax: there is a very clear sense of narrative momentum throughout this chapter, of various layers and levels of intensity building and/or leading up to this climax: there is almost the sense of the reader being led into holding his/her breath throughout the final pages of the book as the ultimate revelation approaches.

One of the book’s thematic climaxes also occurs in its final moments, as Sean finally faces the truth and takes responsibility for what happened to him. This aspect of thematic climax also manifests the book’s thematic interest in the power of fantasy, looking at it another way: in these final moments, Sean’s fantasy actually has no more power, and he is finally coming face-to-face with reality, perceiving it fully and in all its potential for pain. The irony, of course, that suicide attempts are often the result of an inability to cope with reality: this means that the event itself also evokes this theme, but



in a negative way, while the fact of the event finally being faced truthfully evokes it in a positive way.

The book's fourth thematic element also climaxes in the book's final moments: there is definitely an unknowability of the outcome to this moment, although there is the (hope? suspicion? possibility?) that finally, in the aftermath of facing the truth about himself, Sean will finally find himself on the road to full and thorough psychological recovery. The remaining thematic element (exploring the unreliability of memory) is actually the first to climax in this section, as Sean prologues his description of the events that led to his suicide attempt with perhaps the most poignant of all the book's references to the unreliability of memory.

Finally, there are two layers to the piece's emotional climax: the layer experienced by Young Sean (i.e. the intense emotions of despair and confusion), a layer described more literally and/or overtly; and the layer experienced by Older Sean which is more implied than referred to explicitly. There is a sense of relief in here, and above all, a sense of honesty and clarity that fuels and defines that sense of relief. What he's going through is painful and difficult, but there is the clear sense that he has been building to this moment, this confrontation with himself, all along; that he knows, and has known, it has to happen; that reaching this point has been his subconscious goal; and that finally, he has reached this point in his life where he can face and acknowledge what has happened, and can at last move on. He has reached, perhaps, the final moves of the real life equivalent of the Trace Italian: he is about to move into the last dungeon where, it seems, he might actually free the prisoner (i.e. his truest, deepest self) that he has been searching for all along.

Other points to note: at the beginning of this chapter, Teague is described as reading "The Dungeon Master's Guide", a book essential for successful playing of a role playing game similar, in some ways, to Trace Italian. Then: the reference to rattling bones has a very definite feel of death about it, a foreshadowing of the attempted death described at the end of the chapter. Meanwhile, the reference to the singer's hesitation, and the immediately subsequent reference to meaning being present, can be seen as metaphorically evoking Sean's own search for meaning in his hesitant life. There is the telling contrast / juxtaposition between Sean's vague belief in Jesus (who is, arguably, all about light and life and hope) and the sense of his cruel inner Conan (who was, arguably, all about darkness and death and despair); there is his sudden despairing discovery that the world around him (the physical world at least) is beautiful, an experience that seems clearly tied to his kissing Kimmy and the brief reference to beauty in the magazine; and, perhaps most tellingly, the final merging of fantasy and reality, glancingly poetic evocations of the perceptions of reality theme, the power of fantasy theme, and the unknowability of outcomes theme.

## Discussion Question 1

What aspects of his story are metaphorically represented by the skull and eye sockets drawing that Sean does?





## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is meant by Sean's reference to "learning the way of the jigsaw"?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think narration means when it refers to "the rising squall beyond the door"?

## Vocabulary

phalange, acclimate, contingent, careen, acoustic, strafe, explicit, perceptible, cohere, falchion, machete, impermeable



# Characters

## Sean Phillips

Sean is the novel's central character, its narrator and protagonist. There is no explicit identification of his age or race, but there is a sense that he is in his mid-thirties.

Sean's story consists of two primary, inter-twined elements. The first element, or narrative line, reveals the true nature of the incident that Sean refers to as an "accident" through his narration - until, that is, the final chapter of the book reveals just what that "accident" actually was. There is the sense throughout the book that, in the same way as Sean is keeping the truth about that "accident" a secret from the reader, he is doing so because he is himself in denial about that truth, until his contemplation and narration of the second key element of his story takes him to a place where such denial is no longer possible. That second element has to do with the story of Sean's relationship with secondary characters Carrie and Lance – more specifically, the death of the former and the injuries (both physical and psychological) to the latter. In short, as Sean is forced to understand and confront the truths about his involvement in the latter sequence of events, he is similarly forced to confront and try to understand the truths of his actions in the former sequence of events.

Throughout the novel's exploration of both narrative lines, Sean is portrayed as secretive (when it comes to both the public and himself), lonely (but trying to make peace with it), creative (his development of the Trace Italian game is evidence of a clever, inventive mind), and in many ways, eager to escape from the reality in which he lives. This, narration reveals, began at an early age, manifesting in his love for fantasy and adventure novels, and continues into his adulthood when, as narration makes clear, the solace and refuge from reality that they offer ultimately proves useless in defending him from facing the various truths with which he is ultimately confronted.

## Vicky

Vicky is Sean's nurse and current caregiver. She is portrayed as being professionally empathetic, friendly and understanding. She provides important information to Sean about possibilities in which the impact of injuries he experienced in the "accident" might be reduced.

## Sean's Father

Throughout the narrative, Sean's Father is portrayed as being stoic, strong, and quiet. He seems to do what needs to be done in order to make Sean's recovery after the "accident" safe and restorative. There are hints that he carries with him a sense of guilt as a result of what happened (more specifically: as a result of having kept a gun in the



house), but those hints are really just glimpses, and not explored in Sean's narration in any significant depth.

## Sean's Mother

Sean's mother is portrayed as having a more emotional reaction to her son's injuries than Sean's father. There is the sense that she cares more deeply about how Sean is doing emotionally and/or psychologically in the aftermath of what happened. There is also the sense, however, that while she makes several well-meaning efforts to reach out to him, her son's basic identity and struggles to avoid talking about both what happened and how it affected him render her as quietly frustrated as Sean's father.

## Carrie

Carrie is one of two characters whose involvement in Sean's game, "Trace Italian", became deeper and more inter-related with reality than Sean originally intended. As the narrative unfolds, it eventually reveals that Carrie died as a result of taking the playing of the game too much to heart. Not a great deal is revealed about Carrie, but there is the sense that she is a follower sort, rather than a leader; that her parents cared for her a very great deal; and that there was a longing for something in her that led her to make the intense, game-related choices that she did.

## Lance

Lance is Carrie's boyfriend. Like her, he had (and continues to have) an intense connection with the game of Trace Italian, a connection that, in its psychological depth and mistaken connection to the real world, led them both into self-endangering situations. Lance physically survived his and Carrie's final game-related choices, but where Carrie died, Lance emerged psychologically damaged: narration indicates that he ended up in a special care facility.

## Dave and Anna

Dave and Anna are Carrie's parents. They attempt to bring a lawsuit against Sean, saying he contributed to Carrie's death and should be made to pay compensation. They are described as being sad and very wounded by what happened, and are told that legally, their lawsuit has no chance of success. Nevertheless, their actions are catalysts for Sean's inner explorations and emergent confrontations with important, long-denied truths.



## Chris Haynes

Chris is another player of Sean's Trace Italian game. Intelligent, fiercely committed to game play, and an inventive player, he is nevertheless unique in Sean's experience, in that he (Chris) realized that he was getting too psychologically involved in the game, and took himself out. Chris is, therefore, a clear and vivid contrast to Carrie, who lacked the same sort of awareness that Chris has, and got herself too deeply into the game. Chris is later revealed to be an employee at the bank where Sean does his business banking. While Sean never actually talks to him, Chris' presence at the bank serves to remind him (Sean) of the potential for deep involvement in his game.

## Teague (Marco)

Teague is one of a group of Sean's high school friends that is referred to throughout the narrative, one of only a small number of those friends that actually visit him in hospital after the "accident". Teague's visits during that time have a particularly noteworthy effect on Sean, in that he (Sean) imagines that Teague is, in fact, Marco, a mysterious / somewhat monstrous entity that seems to be drawn from Sean's fantasy and science fiction reading material. When Sean encounters Teague later in life, their conversation is comfortable, but ultimately serves to remind Sean of the need to move on with his life.

## JJ

This character is another of Sean's high school friends. Unlike Teague (above) and Kimmy (below), JJ plays a relatively small role in both the present day narrative and, seemingly, in Sean's past life in high school. The important thing to note about JJ is that he is portrayed as having been killed by someone with whom he was involved in drug use.

## Kimmy

Kimmy is the third member of Sean's circle of friends who has a significant presence in both his pre- and post- accident life. She is portrayed as being the closest thing he had to a girlfriend before the accident (close enough, in fact, that Sean's parents suggest that the "accident" was, in fact, a failed suicide pact between Sean and Kimmy), and the closest thing he has to a best friend in the accident's immediate aftermath. Her presence in his later post accident life is much less significant: narration indicates that she has gotten married and moved on with her life in ways in which Sean seems mostly unable to do.



## Kevin and Steve

These two teenaged characters have an encounter with Sean that makes him feel, at least for a short while, less of a somewhat freaky outsider and more of a real, somewhat normal human being. The open, non-judgmental, honest curiosity of the two teens makes him feel recognized for who he is, not feared for what he looks like.

## Ray

Ray is the owner of the gun shop where Sean's father purchased the rifle used by Sean in "the accident". Sean's father attempts to force Ray to accept at least partial responsibility for "the accident", but conversation between the two men convinces Sean's father that Ray has no responsibility for what happened.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Trace Italian

Trace Italian is the imaginary role-playing game (similar in some ways to Dungeons and Dragons) developed, marketed, and run by protagonist Sean Philips. On one level, the choice-defined journeys made by the game's players (and the consequences of some of those choices) form important foundations for the novel's plots. On a symbolic level, the quests of the game players for a truth that the game master (Sean) says they will never actually reach metaphorically represents Sean's own movement towards a truth that, in contrast to the truth at the core of the game, he actually DOES reach.

## The Bridge

"The Bridge" is the setting for the first move of Trace Italian: the place where each player begins his / her individual journey. In the same way as the game symbolically represents Sean's personal journey, "The Bridge" can be seen as metaphorically representing the beginning of that journey - specifically, the inciting incident in the novel that causes him to start on his journey inward ... the potential lawsuit brought against him by the parents of someone who lost her life while playing Trace Italian.

## The Hospital Ceiling

As he describes his experience in the hospital in the days immediately following his "accident", Sean refers to the ceiling in his hospital room - more specifically, to the networks of cracks and flaws therein. This can be seen as metaphorically representing and/or foreshadowing the "cracks" in his identity / psychology that the story eventually leads him to explore and contemplate.

## "Swords Against Death"

This is the title of a fantasy novel read by Sean and commented on by the observant Teague, who comments that the initials of the words in the title spell "SAD". There is the clear sense about Teague's comments, and about the moment in general, that there is a symbolic reference here to what Teague and the reader can see is Sean's state of mind.

## The Tularosa Fortune Shack

In Trace Italian, the fortune shack is a key turning point in the gameplay. Inspired by specifically narrated experiences in the life of game-master Sean, the contents of the shack (if explored correctly) reveal important truths about the forthcoming game, truths that Sean says most players never find, given that they tend to not explore the contents



of the shack that closely. This aspect of the shack, and of the game, can be seen as symbolically representing and/or foreshadowing Sean's unwillingness and/or inability to explore and/or face important truths about himself.

## **Conan the Barbarian**

Conan is the hero-protagonist of a series of highly popular fantasy / adventure novels and films. Conan is something of a hero for Sean, his actions, attitudes, and values being of the sort that Sean strives to attain. In short, he represents an ideal to Sean, an ideal that he criticizes himself for not living up to.

## **Rock Music**

Rock music, or more accurately hard rock music (i.e. heavy metal, death metal) plays an important role in Sean's recovery from the "accident". While the connection between the music and Sean's healing is never explicitly defined, there is a clear sense that the anger, rage, and intensity of such music provides Sean with a cathartic opportunity to release his own.

## **"Wolf in White Van"**

In the middle section of the novel, Sean reflects on his childhood experience of watching an evangelical television program that focused heavily on satanic messages in rock music, and in particular on the message "wolf in white van". Of the several messages referred to in the program, this is the one that sticks with Sean through much of his life: while the exact meaning of the image is never actually defined, there is the sense of some kind of symbolic connection between the unlikely juxtaposition of a wolf in a white van with aspects of Sean's identity / struggle: his denial of the truth about the accident, his fear and guilt about what happened to Carrie, his grieving the loss of Kimmy in his life.

## **Lance and Carrie's Postcard**

As the truth of what happened to Lance and Carrie is eventually revealed, their final gameplay (written on a postcard) serves as an important indication, to both the reader and the judge considering the potential lawsuit brought by Carrie's parents, of just how deeply they were involved in Sean's game. It represents the intensity of their commitment and, at the same time, represents a conscience-triggering contemplation by Sean of just what the game means to both himself and to other people.



## The Rifle

The rifle owned by Sean's father is referred to several times throughout the narrative, in increasingly specific relationship to Sean's "accident". At its climax, narration reveals that that "accident" was, in fact, the result of Sean's deliberate attempt to use the rifle to harm himself. Ultimately, it can be seen as an external manifestation of Sean's dislike for himself, and his determination that he has no life worth living.

## Sean's Game Prompts

Throughout the narrative, there are references to clues written and distributed by Sean that offer game players options and/or possibilities for their next moves. These prompts lead players down carefully designed paths, and function as signposts for their journeys towards the Trace Italian. There is the sense here that incidents in Sean's life (such as, for example, his encounters with Teague and Chris Haynes) offer him similar choices, potentially functioning as similar signposts along his own personal, inner journey towards truth.

## The TV from Grandma

After his grandmother's death, Sean receives an old black and white TV from among her possessions. That TV provides background noise that, while he's recovering from the "accident", enables him to sleep and therefore escape too many dark thoughts about what happened. The TV and its noise can therefore be seen as representing and foreshadowing Sean's intense denial about the situation, denial that is eventually broken down when forced to face the truth.

## The Seeker / Digger Card

As the "Trace Italian" game evolved, Sean discovered that ideas about certain components changed, or needed to change, from his original concept. One such change saw the "Seeker / Digger" player designation evolve into "Scout", the original (and only) "Seeker / Digger" game card being kept by Sean as a souvenir of his original impulse. The card can be seen as representing Sean's desire to hold on to parts of his life that he once felt important - or, more specifically, the parts of his life that existed before the accident.

## Coronado

Kansas ghost town Coronado (which actually exists) is the name given to the setting for the castle at the heart of the quest in "Trace Italian". The fact that the real-life town is, in fact, empty and abandoned suggests the ultimate emptiness of the game, an emptiness



that, in turn, represents the "emptiness" of Sean's denial of the truth about himself and about the accident.



# Settings

## Southern California

This is the novel's primary setting, the area in which Sean and his family make their home.

## Kansas

Kansas, which has occupied Sean's mind and imagination ever since he was a child, is the setting for the game "Trace Italian". It is also the home of Carrie and Lance, two players of Trace Italian whose experiences with the game trigger both external challenges (i.e. a potential lawsuit) and internal challenges (i.e. contemplation of personal truth) for protagonist Sean.

## The Past

Much of the narrative is set in the past: in the months and years of Sean's late adolescence and young adulthood. In this novel, there is a very clear sense that the events of the past both define and haunt the present, with the action of the novel consisting primarily of Sean's confrontations with that past.

## The Hospital

The hospital where Sean recovered from the "accident" is one of two primary settings in the past. The hospital is the setting for important encounters with physicians, friends, and with imagination.

## Sean's Childhood Home

While the hospital is the primary setting in the past for Sean's non-family encounters in the aftermath of "the accident", his childhood home is the setting for the encounters with his parents (and with himself) that, before the accident, set its events in motion; and, in the accident's aftermath, define the denial-related choices of both Sean and his parents. His home is where Sean learns to keep secrets from himself.



# Themes and Motifs

## Perceptions of Reality

The novel's central theme explores questions of how people perceive and relate to reality – the reality of who they are, the reality of the world around them, and the level of reality in what they imagine and/or believe to be true.

The first aspect of this theme – people's perceptions of who they really are – manifests primarily in the story and narrative journey of central character, protagonist, and narrator Sean Phillips. On one level, there is the very clear sense that he knows exactly who he is: he makes comments about his appearance, his physical capabilities, and his physical well-being that clearly suggest he has a relatively realistic perception of that aspect of his reality. On another level, however, and more importantly, there is the very strong sense that when it comes to his inner / psychological reality, he is in denial: that is, he perceives his reality to be something other than it is. The major example of this aspect of his character has to do with his reference, throughout the narrative, to what happened to him (i.e. the disfiguring of his face, the debilitation of his body) as an “accident” when, in fact, the narrative slowly and carefully suggests it was something else, indicating in its final moments that what happened was, in fact, the result of a failed suicide attempt. The implication here is that by the time the narrative reaches its final moments, there is the clear sense that Sean, for reasons perhaps of self-protection, both perceives and has portrayed his reality as something other than what it actually was and is.

The second and third aspects of the novel's thematic exploration of perceptions of reality have to do with how people perceive the world around them; how they perceive the imaginary worlds available to them; and how the lines blur between the two. Sean's beliefs and denials about himself also fall into this category, in that for him, the line between what is true (he is truly physically damaged, and the world around him tends to react negatively to that) and what he believes to be true (that that damage was caused by an accident) has blurred significantly. The other main example of these entwined thematic elements manifests in the Lance/Carrie subplot: their story hinges on the fact that they have come to perceive the imaginary world of the Trace Italian game as being their physical world: the line between what is real and what is imaginary blurs, with tragic consequences for them both, and potentially troubling consequences for Sean.

## The Unreliability of Memory

Three secondary themes in the novel resonate with the primary theme, the first of which relates to the unreliability of memory. Throughout the text, and in his narration, Sean refers to incidents, events, and relationships that he recalls with relative clarity, but doesn't know when in his life they occurred: before his accident, after his accident; in his childhood, in his more recent history; or even in his imagination. The reality of when or



whether something happened is, for him, confused in and by his memory, which has arguably been damaged by both the physical and emotional traumas not only of his attempted suicide, but of the life lived up to that point – the life that led him to want to kill himself in the first place.

A key question arising from this aspect of the story is the question of how reliable a narrator Sean actually is. If his memory, as he himself suggests throughout the story, is both unreliable and unclear, how trustworthy is the story that he tells? Combine this aspect of his identity and psyche with the above-referenced sense that he is, in fact, in denial about the truth of what happened to him (i.e. that the “accident” he repeatedly refers to was, in fact, a deliberate choice that went wrong, albeit in an “accidental” way), and upon deeper reflection, the reader is arguably left with the sense that there is quite possibly very little about what Sean says in the story that is actually true.

This is not to say that the narrative is entirely lies: the point is made, rather, to suggest that there is potentially deep and pervasive uncertainty for the reader who, upon deeper reflection upon his repeated references to uncertainty about what is remembered, comes to understand these aspects of Sean’s personality and, with hindsight, looks at the story with them elements in mind.

## The Power of Fantasy

Throughout the novel, various forms of fantasy play important roles in the action, both positive and negative. In terms of the former, escaping into worlds of fantasy has healthy aspects in both the pre- and post-suicide attempt lives of protagonist Sean. Before the attempt, reading fantasy novels (particularly those featuring his favorite character, Conan the Barbarian), provide him with an escape from a world that, although somewhat unspecific in terms of the nature of its “threats”, is nevertheless unwelcoming or unpleasant for him. After the attempt, his intense concentration on Trace Italian, the fantasy game he designs and runs, is a key component of his healing process, keeping his mind off his physical and emotional pain. It could be argued that there is a dark side to these positives: that such frequent, intense, and longed-for escape constitutes a denial of reality, and there is certainly, in the novel, a very fine line between the two. Ultimately, though, Sean’s relationship with fantasy is, at first, positive and to a degree healthy: it’s only later that it starts shading into that denial and takes on darker elements.

But even though Sean’s experience of fantasy does become darker, it doesn’t ever seem to become as dark, as negative, or as destructive as the experience of Lance and Carrie, two young people who play the Trace Italian game and who find the power of the fantasy and escape it represents too alluring to fully resist. In a secondary manifestation of the novel’s primary thematic interest in various perceptions of reality, Lance and Carrie (but particularly Carrie) are taken over by the power of the fantasy world into which they enter, with the result that it in fact becomes their reality, in spite of its dangers. This is perhaps the book’s most significant point about the power of fantasy: its attractions and apparent safety can become destructive. This is dramatized not only in



the story of Carrie and Lance, but also in the story of Chris Haynes (who recognizes that he is on a path to being taken over by the power of the fantasy and gets out in time) and of Sean himself. By the end of the novel, he clearly has come to realize that his fantasy about “the accident” is, in fact, destroying him, and that it’s necessary for him to realize and accept the truth: what happened to him was no accident.

## Guilt and Responsibility

This third sub-theme relating to the novel’s primary theme of perceptions of reality, like the other sub-themes, manifests on a couple of levels. Firstly, and in the case of protagonist Sean, over the course of the novel the sense grows and deepens in the reader that not only is he denying reality, but that on some level he is also denying responsibility for that reality. By the end of the book (i.e. the last chapter), when he finally admits the truth of what really happened to cause his disfigurement, the reader has had that sense confirmed by the fact that he IS taking responsibility: growing suspicions are confirmed by the novel’s final words, which indicate both that he is aware of his responsibility for what happened to him, and that he is finally prepared to take that responsibility, the term “accident” being used throughout the novel as an indication that up until the final moments of the book, he is not.

The guilt and responsibility theme also manifests in a related, but even more subtly developed way. There is the quiet but clear and insistent sense that Sean’s parents feel a significant, at times overwhelming, sense of responsibility for what happened to their son. In everything from having a gun in the house to being apparently unsuccessful in trying to get him to pay attention to the world around him (i.e. to stop reading so much), Sean’s parents, the narrative suggests, feel a responsibility for contributing to the despair that led him to try to kill himself. This, in turn, seems clearly to lead them to a powerful feeling of guilt that drives Sean’s father to doing things that, physically and emotionally, he has no business doing (i.e. carrying Sean to and from the bathroom) and Sean’s mother into a deep, wounded, troubled silence. It could be argued, in fact, that while Sean is denying his responsibility, his parents are taking on TOO MUCH responsibility, which for them seems to have turned into intense, troubling guilt.

The third way in which the guilt and responsibility theme plays out in the narrative is perhaps its most obvious: the attempt by Carrie’s parents to place responsibility for her death on Sean, and presumably to make him feel guilty for it. Interestingly, there are only glimpses of what might or might not be guilt in Sean: he sees the game as being partially responsible for what happened, sees the troubled lives of Lance and Carrie (which he really knows little about) as being primarily responsible, but sees himself as being almost entirely free of PERSONAL responsibility. The judge in the initiated court case seems to agree, and while Carrie’s parents are sad, they seem to accept the fact that Sean is neither guilty nor responsible for what happened to their daughter.



## The Unknowability / Unpredictability of Outcomes

This theme manifests in two key ways that thread their way throughout the entire narrative. The first, and perhaps most apparent, relates to the Trace Italian, and how it's played: players receive a list of possible alternative actions from game master Sean, and make choices without knowing what their outcomes will be. These choices take their game lives in unpredictable directions, routes of imaginary travel that lead to further choices and consequences that, in their turn, lead to similar choices that result in similar unknowable outcomes.

This aspect of the game, and of the narrative, can be seen as mirroring the more significant, but less apparent manifestation of this theme in the novel: the experience of protagonist Sean, as he experiences a chain of unforeseen outcomes, or consequences, to his suicide attempt. The first link in that chain is the development of Trace Italian: there is the clear sense in the narrative that while he was intrigued by, and developed, the idea before his suicide attempt, it only became the dominant and success-triggering part of his life that it did because he had the time, during his recovery, to focus on it. In other words, its success, its becoming a way of earning a living, became the silver lining to the otherwise horrifically dark cloud of his suicide attempt. But then, almost in turn, that silver lining revealed its dark side, again in a chain of events that Sean could not possibly have foreseen (or could he?): the deep entry into the game by Lance and Carrie, and Carrie's eventual death. The third link in this chain of unknowable, or unpredictable, events is the lawsuit attempt put in motion by Carrie's parents, again which Sean could not have foreseen; the fourth and final link is the outcome of the initial court presentation, which also could not be foreseen. Thus the narrative is driven, in many places and on a couple of key levels, by sets of circumstances, outcomes, and consequences that characters cannot possibly know or see coming.



# Styles

## Point of View

For the most part, the story is told from the first person, past tense point of view – specifically, that of protagonist and narrator Sean Phillips. The narrative focuses on his experiences, his perspectives, his choices, thoughts, actions, and reactions. There are a few points to note about how the author shapes this point of view: the first is how fragmented narration is, with Sean’s thoughts and memories flipping back and forth in a way that is so stream-of-conscious (i.e. thoughts being presented on the page in the same way as they seem to occur in the human mind, often without obvious connection) that it sometimes comes across as incoherent and difficult to follow. The second point to note about this particular variation on first person point of view has a thematic element – elements of several themes, in fact, having to do with perceptions of reality and the unreliability of memory. The third way in which these variations on point of view are significant is perhaps the most significant: the fact that Sean’s troubled thought / memory processes render him an unreliable narrator – one whose commentary, analysis, and/or insights cannot necessarily be trusted because his thought processes are clearly so damaged. Ultimately, this means that what Sean, in his narration, suggests is the truth might not in fact BE the truth – as he himself seems to be aware, particularly when it comes to the many references to the unreliability of his memory.

The exceptions to the overall first person point of view come in the form of the occasional interjections of a kind of omniscient third person point taken from Sean’s Trace Italian game. These inserts are written in the style, and from the point of view, of an instruction manual: impersonal, instructive, leading. There is an interesting contrast here between the two different points of view: the game instructions, ostensibly written and prepared by Sean, seem to have a confidence in expression and in tone that his own, more personal and intimate narration seems to lack. This reinforces the sense, throughout the novel, that for him, the life he lives within and/or about Trace Italian is the aspect of his life where he feels most confident, most sure, and most himself.

## Language and Meaning

Throughout the novel, language tends to reflect the state of mind of protagonist and narrator. Sean can be seen by the reader as a very troubled man. He is clearly struggling with a severely damaged sense of self both physically and mentally; with a flawed, unpredictable experience of memory; and, perhaps most significantly, he is struggling to hold on to a flawed sense of reality which he seems to be doing in order to protect himself from significant pain (the nature of which is ultimately revealed in the novel’s final moments). The language of the novel reflects all these aspects of his personality, his situation, and his struggles. Ideas and insights are presented in a way that evoke his fractured perceptions and thoughts: the language he uses about himself, and in particular about his physical appearance, suggest that on some significant level



he finds himself as unusual (at best) or as repulsive (at worst) as the rest of the world tends to find him. There is also an undertone of self-uncertainty throughout the book that emerges as a result of the language used and draws the reader in to the mystery not only of what happened to Lance and Carrie (the book's primary mystery), but also the mystery of what really, truly happened to Sean to make him the way he is.

All that said, there are occasional shifts in how language is used. As noted above, there is a stylistic and tonal shift when the narration interjects excerpts from the Trace Italian gameplay: there is a terseness, a focus, a tightness to the language there that is a significant, effective contrast to the language used in the rest of the novel. But perhaps the most interesting alteration in how language is used occurs in the final chapter, in which Sean narrates the sequence of events that led to his suicide attempt. There is a clarity to the language used here, and therefore to the narrative of events, that is very different to the somewhat unfocused language used in the rest of the piece, a clarity that suggests Sean is finally letting go of the perhaps deliberate, denial-fueled haze of memory that has kept him from seeing, facing, and communicating the truth of what happened on the night of his injury. In this way, then, language can be seen as having thematic resonance as well as stylistic impact, cluing the reader in to the thematically central idea that Sean, finally, is facing reality.

## Structure

The overall structure of the book is, in many ways, as fractured, as unpredictable, and at times as confusing as the state of mind of its protagonist and narrator. As noted throughout this examination of style elements, Sean suffers from physical and emotional trauma; is troubled by the unreliability of his memory; and has had his mental / psychological self shaken up by the suicide attempt that caused his injury, by the difficulties associated with his recovery, and the difficulties of adjusting to how his new self is seen, and/or reacted to, by the world. All these aspects of his personality and identity manifest in all three of these stylistic elements – point of view, language, and structure.

This is not to say that there are no linear elements at all in the piece. There is a through-line of movement through the story that is essentially traditionally structured: Event A leads to Event B leads to Event C; action leads to reaction leads to action; choice leads to consequence leads to choice, and so on and so on. In this case, that line of movement is the fragile, often obscured movement from before, through during, and into after of the lawsuit set in motion by the parents of the young woman who lost her life as the result of getting too involved in Sean's imaginary role playing game. Events in this forward-moving plot tend to trigger somewhat rambling narratives about the past or about the present, narratives that, again as noted above, are presented in such a fragmented way that they clearly and vividly reflect Sean's state of mind. Structure in that sense becomes much more of a collage than a linear plot: the meaning of what Sean is saying, of the story he's telling and of his situation within /reactions to that story, emerges as the result of events, commentary, and insight being JUXTAPOSED with one another, placed next to one another, in the same way that meaning emerges from the



juxtapositions of objects and photographs in a visual collage. In general, this book is primarily a linguistic collage, in which incidents, images, and memories of the characters are juxtaposed one with the other in order to trigger insight for both the protagonist and the reader.



## Quotes

When I became Conan things were different; his new birth had left scars. I ruled a smoking, wrecked kingdom with a hard and deadly hand. It was dark and gory. No one liked living there, not even its king. It had a soundtrack. All screams.”

-- Narrator (Sean) (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** In this quote, the narrator portrays the imaginary world in which he takes refuge, a world that seems to externalize the inner sense of feeling wrecked and/or destroyed as a result of the accident that left him so severely burned.

As a child I wanted everything to be in some way concerned with endings. The end of the world. The last Neanderthal. The final victim. The stroke of midnight. So children playing a game called Stay Alive on a beach with nobody else around, that spoke to something in me, something I'd maybe been born with.

-- Narrator (Sean) (Chapter 3)

**Importance:** In this quote, part of his explanation of how or why he invented the game Trace Italian, Sean reveals a key aspect of his character and sense of self.

If, for a few seconds, I entertain the idea that this scene takes place much earlier than it actually must have, something happens to me: I picture myself young and free, whole, getting gently warned off the property by the palmist's husband for no real reason. And then some secret forms in a distant nebula somewhere, and somehow I get news of it, and I close my eyes and fall weightless through inner space for as long as I can stand it.

-- Narrator (Sean) (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** In this quote, which appears in another manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the blurry nature of memory, the implication is clear: if the encounter takes place before the accident, there is the looming sense of the accident being avoided, with all that implies (i.e. Sean's life would not have become what it did).

Who doesn't want to rise above the obstacles in his pathway? Who wouldn't want to go down in flames? And for those of us who can't or won't rise above, who doesn't at least want to hear stories about how it might be possible for some triumph to eventually happen, given enough luck?

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 5)

**Importance:** On one level, this quote refers to the hopeful, carefully crafted covers of a particular type of action / fantasy novel, different from the sort that Sean was both fascinated and troubled by (“shameful ... garish ... near-pornographic”). On another level, this quote can be seen as referring to / describing an inner truth that Sean, for some reason at this point in the story, seems reluctant to acknowledge: that he himself has a deep-down desire to triumph over his life.



Their lawyer stated what their case essentially amounted to – that I'd contributed to the endangerment of a minor both directly and indirectly, and that this had resulted in the death of one and the grave injury of another: manslaughter and attempted manslaughter – and mine tried politely to say that you'd have to be crazy to blame anybody besides Lance and Carrie for what they'd done.”

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** This quote essentially sums up the court case in which Sean finds himself as a result of Carrie's death.

Trace Italian had existed long enough to have earned self-determination. I didn't feel like I had the right to revise it. That right belonged to the younger man who'd written the game, and that younger man was dead. Besides, there were people playing toward the latter moves; the moves had to remain the way they were in case anyone ever got there. It seemed almost a moral question.”

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** This quote reveals a great deal about Sean's attitude toward the game he invented: how he treated it as something with a life of its own.

Children. Children in the grip of a vision whose origins lay down within my own young dreams, in the wild freedom those dreams had represented for me, in my desperation: to build and destroy and rebuild, to create mazes on blank pages.

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** In this quote, following his reference to the youth of Lance and Carrie, Sean draws a clear connection between the development of Trace Italian and his state of mind during that part of his life.

I could imagine myself in his position, out there on the other side of me, confronted with the scars and the shapes ... What are we frightened of? Things that can't hurt us at all.”

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 7)

**Importance:** Here Sean puts himself in the mindset and experience of Steve and Kevin, a pair of teens interested, without agenda, in looking at his damaged face.

Maybe he's in the far back, pacing back and forth, circling, the pads of his huge paws raw and cracking, his thick sharp claws dully clicking against the raised rusty steel track ridges on the floor. Maybe he's sound asleep, or maybe he's just pretending ... maybe whoever's kept him wears a mechanic's jumpsuit and some sunglasses, and he hasn't fed the great wolf for weeks ... and the wolf's crazy with hunger now; he can't even think. Maybe he's not locked up in the back at all: he could be riding in the passenger seat, like a dog ... maybe he's over in the other seat behind the steering wheel. Maybe he's DRIVING.

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 10)

**Importance:** This quote metaphorically portrays the raw, animal, instinctive,



unknowable side of Sean's character, identity, and personal truth that he hasn't yet explored. It marks the emotional climax of the book to this point in the story, and foreshadows (again metaphorically) the eventual, perhaps inevitable confrontation he has with that truth in the book's overall climax at its conclusion.

I did hope that at some point I'd be able to explain my recent theory that it isn't really possible to kill yourself, that everybody goes on forever in multiple dimensions, which was less a theory than an attempt to do exactly what Ray'd been doing since he started talking: to draw some lesson from a place where no lessons were."

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 11)

**Importance:** In this quote, Sean reveals two things about himself: a kind of desperate hope that somewhere in the universe, his life has turned out differently; and, on another level, the novel's thematically central contention that no-one can ever really know the full implications and effects of an incident or circumstance.

The first two turns led directly to a fork in the road, and that branched out onto three or four different paths. Three or four in my first, crudest pass: then six paths, then eight. As many as I could stand. The hub of the third turn would be an immense wheel, and you'd pick a spoke that would determine the course of the rest of your life. I saw stars when I thought about it. Usually when people stand at an intersection like the third turn hob they're not conscious of their position: they don't know where, in the course of their lives, they stand. In the Trace you know.

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 12)

**Importance:** In addition to adding detailed information about Trace Italian, this quote is a manifestation of the novel's thematic exploration of the nature and inescapability of unpredictable outcomes.

[Kimmy] strained to make out the constituent parts of the words I'd try to form and she'd help me arrange them into thoughts; she helped me find the path back to my self. This was why, later on, I enshrined her in a special place no one will ever see, which is kind of a shame, except that I did it on purpose, so it's only a shame if you limit yourself to the smaller picture."

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 13)

**Importance:** In this quote, Sean defines the reason Kimmy has such an important place in his life.

... I thought about what it meant to still be alive, and then huge walls of earth began rising in formation inside me, spewing clouds of dust as they rose, right angles like dominoes leaning against one another but refusing to fall, six or seven layers of ground beneath each rail buckling until they hit bedrock ... a chain reaction rippling out with great percussive power, the mud walls banding together for miles into a structure gigantic enough to be seen from space, a star-shaped beacon in the gray distance."

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 13)



**Importance:** This description seems to describe the emergence of the Star Italian complex from the desert, but in the text, there is no indication that it is actually from the text of the game (that is: in the text, excerpts from Trace Italian are usually italicized - this excerpt is not). While it has clear echoes of the description, earlier in the chapter, of the emergence of a structure that the text of the game clearly states is NOT the complex, the more relevant point is that it is juxtaposed, here, with Sean's post-accident contemplation of what it means to be alive.

There are only two stories: either you go forward or you die. But it's very hard to die, because all the turns pointing that way open up onto new ones, and you have to make the wrong choice enough times to really mean it. You have to stay focused.

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 14)

**Importance:** Given its juxtaposition with other game references in this chapter, this quote seems to clearly refer to the game. It also works on a metaphoric level, suggesting that for Sean, life outside the game is much the same – he has done, in his life, exactly what he says here that players do in the game.

When I remember this day and most things before it ... I can see it, and I know it happened, and I have enough information about it to reconstruct the whole scene to my own satisfaction, but the person to whom it happened is somewhere so far off that I only know it's me because I can see his face, and because I'm the one remembering."

-- Narration (Sean) (Chapter 17)

**Importance:** Once again, and as it approaches the novel's climax, Sean's narration evokes the novel's thematic interest in the unpredictability of memory.