

# **Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist Study Guide**

**Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist by Sunil Yapa**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Yapa, Sunil. *Your Heart Is A Muscle The Size Of A Fist*. 2016. Kindle edition. Due to a Kindle version of this book with out page numbers being used, page numbers are not cited with quotes throughout this study guide.

Victor, a young homeless man, is lighting a joint camped out in an underpass when he hears the voices of a protest in the distance. He goes to join in so that he can sell some weed and buy a plane ticket to somewhere else. He asks random people and they all reject his offer, and one girl tells him that this is not a protest but a "direct action" (location 490). John Henry surveys the crowd, a former preacher he sees the whole thing in religious terms, the chanting being like prayer and the protest being a "new American religion" (location 220). Officers Park and Ju have a woman approach them offering coffee and Park acts in a hostile manner, threatening her with a baton. Chief Bishop starts to wonder about his son, Victor, who ran away three years ago, but is soon distracted when he is ordered to clear the intersection. Victor starts to reminisce about his time spent traveling and keeps trying to sell weed until he is reported to a cop, who tries to seize his bag. A girl called King, a seasoned protester, sees this and decides to intervene in a friendly and non-confrontational way. Ju remembers being deployed during the LA riots of '92 and concludes that sometimes looking away is part of the job too.

King reminisces about her own life story, having gotten hooked on protesting at 19 and being in love with a boy, then drifting around the country attending more protests and growing more militant and angry. It all culminated in a dramatic event after which she pledged to be nonviolent from now on and she de-escalates the situation with Victor and the cop, but is told by Bishop to start clearing the intersection. John Henry remembers the lone protester who did not last long at a protest and remembers the importance of always protesting as part of a community. King invites Victor to meet the other protesters and to participate in lock-down but he is reluctant to do so. Then he remembers his father burning all his books when he was 16, prompting him to run away, which makes him change his mind and volunteer for lock-down. Victor goes into lock-down but soon grows afraid as the police start threatening to deploy tear gas and then do so. Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe is a Sri Lankan delegate traveling by plane from Sri Lanka to America to attend the WTO meeting, and he meets an actress on board and they share perspectives, realizing that they might not be so different after all.

The Mayor issues an order to Bishop to start clearing the intersection in any way necessary, and Bishop recalls the shock of discovering his son was living homeless in an underpass. Park starts warning Ju about the possibility of cop casualties and Park remembers his upbringing by a racist father, then pepper-sprays two men who are filming the events from a car who refuse to stop filming. Ju reprimands Park for using pepper-spray and he maintains he was right to do so, but she still calls it in. Victor recalls playing a game with his mother in which they would pretend to be exotic fruit growing on a plantation far away. Victor sees the cops start to launch the tear gas



canisters but is still too embarrassed to chant, and he remembers seeing a homeless American girl in Bolivia begging for change. He no longer knows what to believe in.

Charles tries to make his way to the convention center but is told that the meetings are cancelled. He is met with hostility by protesters until he tells them he is Sri Lankan, and he wonders why so many of them see third world countries as being in need of saving. Victor continues to feel more afraid and alone. King witnesses the tear gas launching and recalls her time spent living with John Henry, and hopes that reporters will record everything that is happening here. Bishop starts pepper-spraying and kicking people, but also apologizing at the same time, and wishes he could take back his orders for the cops to fire on the people.

King starts to regret allowing Victor to volunteer for lock-down and she remembers shooting a man when she was in Mexico. Park and Ju are approached by Charles who says he is a delegate and they arrest him. Charles cannot understand why the most important meetings of the decade are being shut down. Victor starts to think about the extent of personal responsibility in times of war and conflict, and concludes that not everyone can be constantly aware of their true impact on the world. He sees police applying chemical irritants to a woman and this prompts him to start chanting. Henry grows very proud of Victor but King expresses concern that she does not think they are winning anymore. Victor tries to reassure her but she gets angry at the idea of him telling her how she should be feeling. Victor tries to defend a medic from his father Bishop but he sprays Victor, all the while it is unsure whether he recognizes him as his own son. King helps an injured Henry to the Sheraton while remembering shooting the man at the border, she cannot help Victor or Henry so she decides to leave. Charles is put on a bus serving as a makeshift jail where he is met with hostility until he invites the others to share their stories. He is soon finally released and allowed into the building. Bishop remembers a conversation with his father then develops a new resolve to clear the intersection. His thoughts are interrupted by a canister landing near him and Park starts firing into the crowd. Victor recalls countries he has visited where citizens have been abducted and never seen again, but also remembers places where he found a real sense of community. He wishes his father could understand his experiences, and he sets out to find him and stage a reunion.

King becomes so overwhelmed by her memories of what she did at the Mexican border that she starts smashing a window. Park reveals that he was involved in policing the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing, and now he is preparing to shoot Victor who is making his way towards Bishop. Bishop remembers spoiling Victor after his mother died and then Victor started to rebel. Park shoots Victor and then Bishop realizes where his true allegiances lie. King witnesses Victor being beaten severely by the police and forces herself to bear witness. She moves to help and ends up climbing onto the Peace-Keeper vehicle and ends up face-to-face with Ju. Victor starts to rediscover his will to live as he is being beaten and has another memory of his mother serving food to homeless people and he is happy. He realizes that this is probably the end for him. Ju has to make a rapid decision while fending off protesters and ends up shooting King.



Charles finally makes it into the meeting where he meets his old friends, the director of the WTO and a fellow scholarship recipient from a developing country. The director ends up laughing at Charles for thinking he had a chance of gaining entry into the WTO and tells him he must cut education funding in order to get in. The scholarship friend offers to help Charles but now Charles has started to lose hope of ever gaining entry. There is a description of the few things shown on TV regarding the protest, but does not show things like Charles being able to re-negotiate the terms of his entry, or Bishop and Ju intervening in Victor's beating, and King being taken away in an ambulance. The TV shows the president's plane Air Force One landing and a single headline, "VIOLENT PROTESTERS CLASH WITH POLICE" (location 3377). Ju has been arrested for trying to intervene and Bishop tends to his son Victor on the intersection. Victor has a sense of peace come over him, believing that everything will end up being fine and then feels the presence of his mother once again.



# 1 - 7

## Summary

1) The first scene opens upon Victor, a young 19-year-old boy, trying to light a joint. He is described in detail, as having “two thick braids,” (location 82) a bandana, dark eyes and “cafecito con leche” (location 83) skin. It transpires that he has just spent another day, awoken to another morning, having slept on the streets, being homeless and feeling like an old man. He hears the traffic going across the overpass above him and then he hears a chanting crowd in the distance. He has heard about this event for some time but now it is happening and he feels compelled to go and join in. It turns out that he has been camped out in that spot for three months and he realizes that he still has a lot of marijuana on him and that he can use this as a great opportunity to sell some and then to buy a plane ticket out of there.

Victor starts to pack up his things, taking particular care with his shoes which he cleans with a toothbrush kept for that purpose, as they were a gift from his father. He makes an effort to tidy and keep everything clean despite his current living situation. Victor, despite describing how distant he feels from everything and being “too tired to hate or care or rage,” (location 133) becomes encouraged by the sound of the voices in the distance and is motivated to pack up and go. He marches up the hill with all his stuff and then encounters the crowd, amazed at how many and how varied they are. He tries to “catch the rhythm” (location 144) and join in. He hears the chant – WHAT DO WE WANT??? JUSTICE! WHEN DO WE WANT IT??? NOW!!! (location 152) - and begins to ponder what exactly they mean by justice. By observing everyone through his detached perspective, Victor can see not only them but where everything they are wearing and carrying came from originally. He takes advantage of his detached nature and tries to offer a random guy weed, only to be laughed at and told to go away. The time and location of the novel is finally revealed: 1999 in America.

2) The perspective changes to that of a man called John Henry, who is observing the crowd and feeling at one with them all as they chant and sing. He is described as being 44 in “a handwoven cowboy hat and chunky Medicare glasses,” (location 181) with a beard and with an air of someone who has been around for a long time. He has been a churchman but has seemingly not lost faith, and he sees the delegates of the conference in the Sheraton building looking down on the protesters “like kids at the aquarium watching the sharks” (location 202). Henry notices that their chanting is like prayer, where they seem to hope that the right combination of words will result in them succeeding. He sees them as being like people departing church, away from his pulpit, and breaking away, preparing to demand for themselves a new world they do not yet know.

3) Officer Timothy Park is introduced, who takes a far more contemptuous view of the people. He cannot understand how they are able to be so affectionate with those they do not know. He is waiting with his “sometime riding buddy” (location 245) Julia by the



police car which they call the Peace-Keeper, and he spends the time observing Julia and her body, even re-naming her “Miss July” (location 250). He reveals that he has developed a crush on Julia and that he has been trying to ask her out for a while, and also that plenty of other cops feel the same. He witnesses a group of protesters march ahead of the crowd and then lock themselves together with chains and PVC pipe. A woman approaches Park and Julia (Ju) offering coffee but Park warns her against getting too close to the vehicle, eventually threatening her with the baton when she does not listen, and Ju has to intervene.

4) Chief Bishop is introduced, who is more contemplative and affectionate towards the people and the city. He receives a radio notification of a “black hooded youth” (location 333) and then he starts to think about his own son – Victor - who has been missing for three years, since he was 16. He remembers a conversation during which Victor ponders where electricity and water come from, and why they come so easily. He left home shortly after his mother’s death, and it transpires that Victor is his adopted, rather than biological, son. He ponders what the world will be like for his son, a young black man, and remembers warning him against caring too much otherwise he will be hurt by the world. Bishop becomes aware that there are 50,000 protesters on the streets and nowhere near enough cops, and concludes that there will be no easy way to get the delegates through to the meeting. Bishop is instructed to clear the street immediately.

5) Victor begins to do his own reminiscing, about when he traveled the world, particularly when he witnessed the beginning of a protest in Bolivia, a line of women holding stones waiting for the police. He thinks of communications between countries in the world being like radio signals that never seem to reach their intended destination. He keeps trying to sell his weed to people and being told to go away, and he acknowledges that he is being seen as contradictory because he is wearing Nike shoes in mint condition. He attempts to sell weed to a couple with a young child, who initially seem friendly to him but then turn hostile when he tries to make the sale. He begins to wonder what the whole point of the protest march is when the people presumably do not have any connection to the countries for whom they are protesting. He gets talking to a girl who offers him her bandana and appears to be open to a friendship until Victor tries to sell her weed then she instantly moves away. She tells him that he cannot smoke here because it is not a protest but a “direct action” (location 490). She throws his joint away and rejoins the crowd, then Victor is ambushed by a cop who has been tipped off about his attempts to sell marijuana.

6) The focus moves to a girl called Kingfisher – or King – who is described as a 27-year-old woman who is “muscled, thin and tough” (location 508) and potentially Mediterranean-looking. She once operated an illegal animal shelter and got here using eco-friendly transport, and is now wearing a gas mask. She observes with amusement that the cops are on the wrong side, as if she has done this all before. She notices that the police are being impossibly still in the face of the anger of the protesters, and wonders if that is to do with the fact that they do not know how to respond in this situation. She sees the cop on the horse bearing down on Victor and his burned appearance reminds her of her stepfather who had a similar facial marking caused by an injury when King was 13.



King approaches the cop in a friendly manner suggesting he not be aggressive and he points his baton at her telling her to go away. King thrives on the adrenaline rush and continues to dismantle the situation calmly and without violence, remembering how she used to tame the anger of prisoners when she worked with them long ago. She knows that she must de-escalate the situation but realizes she does not want to and deliberately antagonizes the cop all of a sudden.

7) Julia is focused on by the narrative now, and her background of being “Guatemalan... by way of L.A., city of angels” (location 607) whose observation of Park intimidating Victor reminds her of her troubled former neighborhood where crime was rife, fueled by the Rodney King case in '92. She recalls how she was forced to arrest a woman who was looting as a last resort but front-cuffed her so that she could continue to drink her soda. She regards Park, describing him as “nuclear” (location 629) meaning volatile. Remembering how he kept trying to ask her out, she assesses his character as unpredictable as he mounts his horse and goes after Victor. Despite recalling the trauma of another riot she had tried to control years ago she knew that she was “police for life” (location 673). She remembers an incident when a man witnesses an attack on another man and raced down on his bike to save him, and wonders what type of courage or urge that would take. Ju sees Park bearing down on the protesters and makes the decision to look away.

## Analysis

The overwhelming sense, from the first chapter, is that Victor, the young homeless man, is at odds with the world he is supposed to live in. In addition to being literally all alone, he only hears the growing collective voice of the demonstration in the city from a distance. The only presence accompanying Victor in the beginning, ironically, is the narrative voice, which prompts the reader to “look at him bowing his head to this fragile light... listen to the quiet rhythm of his breath” (location 89) which suggests already that Victor is not as alone as he feels himself to be.

In addition to being alone, Victor also seems to be cut adrift, as enough time spent on the outskirts of society may do to a person. He describes this feeling; “he felt distracted, a kind of tectonic drift of soul, as if something fundamental were loose inside” (location 322) and that “He saw the secret and not-so-secret threads that connected his body in the here and now to worlds three continents away” (location 415). Despite feeling detached from everything, he is clearly, in some sense, looking for something to latch onto, and the voices in the distance provide an opportunity, at least simply to see what is happening. Even then, he is only motivated by an opportunity to sell marijuana, and is knocked back repeatedly by protesters who want nothing to do with what he is selling. Immediately he does not recognize this new world, where people are actually focused on attaining a goal other than drifting aimlessly.

The people may be focused and disciplined, but there is a notable air of peaceful camaraderie at the beginning of the day, where people from all walks of life acknowledge that everyone else is coming out from wherever they came from for the





same reason; to protest for a better world and to exercise their rights as citizens of a democracy. They all realize that they share one world, and that others in that world do not share the same privileges and rights as they do, so they are using the one tool they have - their voice - to bring about change.

The setting is eventually revealed: America, 1999. This was a time when America was still prospering as a nation, but was at risk of making trade deals that would sabotage the lives of those in less prosperous nations, and some of the poorer and less advantaged members of this nation. The sense of altruism that permeates the crowd is almost religious, and there are various references to this similarity between a religious community and a secular society. This is mostly symbolized in the language used by the observing characters/narrators, and in the actions of some. One notable example is when King intervenes, completely nonviolently, when she sees Victor being antagonized by a cop, using nothing but her words and a pleasant demeanor in order to compel the cop to step down. But of course, she is only human, and a flash of rebellion begins to show through before long.

Despite the increasingly secular, even godless, setting of turn-of-the-century America, where some are indeed "allergic to belief" (location 179) there is a distinct element of religion that emerges in the first section, partly through the introduction of John Henry, a former preacher who still retains much of his faith and who observes the people, saying "This was the new American religion" (location 220). With the prayer-like chanting, and the welcoming of people who subscribe to the same faith of a greater good, the elements of religion, or at least an atmosphere of collective faith, is very strong.

## Discussion Question 1

What prompts Victor to join in the protest? Given his current circumstances, could there more than one reason?

## Discussion Question 2

John Henry used to be a preacher and thinks of the chanting as being like prayer. In what other ways do the protests take on aspects that share parallels with religion?

## Discussion Question 3

What difference has it made to the situation where the cop intimidates Victor, that King made a choice to be completely nonviolent and non-confrontational?

## Vocabulary

Peace-Keeper, rookie, looting, bandana



## 8 - 17

### Summary

8) King reveals some of her backstory: that it all started as a “simple infatuation” (location 693). She was from Brooklyn and became interested in government cover-ups and assassinations and attended her first protest at 19. She met a few people with whom she also became infatuated, a boy she met at her first protest, before becoming more skilled at resistance and sabotage, including burning down a ski resort. She moved west and became infatuated with a girl, with whom she started a 'zine. Then she moved on to Portland where she fell in love with a Greenpeace guy who ended up trying to rape her, but she managed to defend herself and get away. When she found a quiet place in the wilderness in which to stage a sit-in, she realized that she was less inclined towards violence and more towards peaceful protest and resistance. Now, when confronting the police officer who was threatening violence, King realizes that she is not actually de-escalating the situation. But while King is berating herself for messing up the situation, the Chief intervenes, telling Park not to resort to violence against citizens and to go be useful elsewhere – and to leave the horse that he is on behind. People burst into applause when they see this situation unfold but the moment is deflated when the Chief tells King to start clearing the intersection. She moves away, dispirited, and trips over Victor’s backpack on her way.

9) John Henry dwells upon a rumor about a time – which he witnessed first hand and knows to be true – about a lone protester who tried to chain himself to a door and ended up being forced to give up because he made the mistake of acting alone. The real way to do it, thinks Henry, is to work as a community and to practice protesting. The approach is to form a lock-down, then to have protectors, and then some more people just to confuse the police, and he realizes that Seattle is the perfect city, in terms of layout, to carry out the demonstration.

10) Victor watches King re-motivate the protesters in lock-down, explaining how King had approached him and invited him to take part in the “backstage” area of the protest. He remembers how the Chief intervened and reveals that the Chief is his estranged father and that the interaction they just had there was the first time in years he had heard his voice. Victor is briefed on the situation, that they need one more protester to join the lock-down and he is incredulous and cynical about doing so.

11) King suspects that the one chosen to fill the circle might be one they call the Doctor, a permanently barefoot 19-year-old who had once scaled the Golden Gate Bridge, or Edie, an experienced and dedicated protester, who first taught her nonviolence and “the necessity of patience and struggle” (location 907). They debate for a while how they should approach this particular struggle, and who is the right person to go into lock-down.



12) Victor is reminded, by the Doctor's speech, of his own particular safe place, the basement back home that housed his mother's books. She had died when he was young and she had also been an activist and a hippie. He remembers how she used to make endless charcoal paintings depicting grim scenes and how he used to watch her, then when she died he tried to get close to her again by reading her books and then later traveling. His father eventually caught him reading and smoking weed and reacted by burning all the books in a bonfire. This memory prompts Victor to be the one to volunteer for lock-down.

13) Bishop starts to brief the other cops as they begin putting on their riot gear and preparing to tackle the demonstrators, and he is adamant that they all behave appropriately. He becomes aware that they are afraid and he tries to motivate them to do their job. He is reminded of the idea that his son may be among those they are about to ambush and recalls that he has had no contact with his son besides postcards since he left three years ago. One in particular stands out in memory - that of a black man on a hunger strike. Bishop instructs the cops to throw in the tear gas canisters if the crowd does not move.

14) Victor is situated between the protesters and his father – Chief Bishop – warning them, addressing them as “citizens” (location 1036) to clear the streets or they would deliver “pain and chemical compliance” (location 3477). The crowd responds by chanting. Victor is chained along with several others with PVC piping and wishes he could start chanting too. John Henry starts trying to reassure Victor and advises him to start chanting, telling him that it will calm him and also connect him to history. Victor refuses and King comes over to check on them and apply vinegar soaked bandanas to their faces, and Henry expresses concern that Victor will not be fine. Victor keeps trying to will his father not to launch the attack as the crowd now starts chanting “COURAGE” (location 1105). He sees the tear gas canisters being launched and start to head straight towards him and everyone in the circle.

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission I) Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe is boarding a plane, and he is feeling the strain of years worth of traveling on diplomatic missions in order to get permission for Sri Lanka to join the World Trade Organization. He notices that the same actress he is reading about in his magazine is sitting right next to him. She wakes up and helps him recline his seat, and they are each brought a glass of champagne. They begin talking and he starts making comparisons between Sri Lanka and the western world, and how little people seem to know about the war in Sri Lanka. He tells her that Sri Lanka is not the paradise everyone seems to think it is, and he is reminded of his school days being taught by English nuns. The actress begins to reveal how much she makes for a movie, compared with how little much of the world makes in a day, and that adopting a child was the real reason she had been visiting Sri Lanka.

15) Bishop informs the Mayor again of the current situation on the streets, and from his vantage point he is able to make more observations of the city. He already starts daydreaming about retirement and whether he would be reunited with his son again. He recalls the shock with which he found out his son was homeless and sleeping in the underpass, having made a home of the tent his father brought him years ago.



16) Ju is riding along in the Peace-Keeper with the other cops, kitted out and ready for combat but still feeling calm, despite knowing she will have to fire a tear canister gun. She knows that someone must be prepared to use whatever weapons they carry and she appears to be ready for violence. Park starts trying to warn her about the possibility that cops will constitute the likely casualties of the upcoming combat, and Ju already senses the same.

17) Park remembers the racist slurs his father used to make, brought on by his two years as a prisoner of war. In the present he sees people who he thinks might be filming them and ignores Ju when she tells him to take it easy. He acknowledges that how much respect an offender shows a cop makes all the difference to how they will be treated. He approaches the car where two men are preparing to film something and orders them not to. The men refuse to back down.

## Analysis

This section provides a deep insight into the various motivations of the main characters, and why they do what they do. The prevailing motivation is, in short, love, but of course other elements inevitably factor in.

King is most clearly motivated in her actions by love, but it was not always this way. In the beginning, she simply took a liking to a boy and that led to her first protest before long. She would move onto other people, and other parts of the country, going in no particular direction, but carrying a growing sense of anger and injustice inside. This would simply continue to escalate until she began to see the more peaceful side of protesting - simply sitting up in, and protecting, a tree - and later, an event which would shift everything more suddenly. Basically, between her early days of protesting, to the seasoned pro she has become, a shift has taken place within her that has made her more inclined towards "militant nonviolence" (location 719) as a practice and a way of life. When not driven by anger, she is driven by a passion for justice and what is right, which can be taken to be love, for her planet and her people.

Chief Bishop, on the "other side" of the protests as a cop tasked with controlling and quelling them, is driven by love for his missing son, and a sense of loss. Having lost his wife (Victor's mother) a few years ago, shortly before his son ran away, he is clearly still carrying that around and he frequently thinks about his son, wondering what he is like now, as he attempts to focus on the job. This makes the revelation that his own son was one of the people in lock-down in the intersection all the more shocking, and creates a major conflict of interest. Meanwhile, his son, having been motivated by essentially nothing in the beginning, other than a need to keep moving for its own sake, slowly becomes interested in, and eventually passionate about, the cause. His inner rebel begins to emerge once again, and this time it is for something greater than himself, connecting him to the larger world and its people.

Meanwhile, on the same "side" of the conflict as Bishop, are Park and Ju. Park is a volatile and easily provoked cop who turns out to have had a racist father who spent



time as a prisoner of war, and in addition to the facial burn suffered by Park, his lack of sympathies for the world are clearly rooted in attitudes developed a long time ago. Ju comes from Guatemala, a nation rife with conflict and crime, and she has seemingly developed a tough exterior, and an unfaltering work ethic, as a result of simply feeling like there are some things that need to be done. There is no room for nonsense in her world and so she applies this attitude to her task today.

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe is seemingly disconnected from the "action" being simply a delegate on a plane in his first scene, but it emerges that he is in the process of collecting signatures that will allow his home country of Sri Lanka to join the World Trade Organization. The country has suffered an ongoing civil war for the past 16 years and Charles wishes for it all to come to an end sooner rather than later. His hope is that by being recognized internationally, and particularly by America, as a nation with the potential to become modern, that the country will fulfil that potential and gain independence. Having had a colonized upbringing, and trained to be English - like he is from a country that he had never seen - Charles wishes for his people to start becoming proud, rather than ashamed, of who they are.

## Discussion Question 1

What difference has it made to organize a protest as a community, as opposed to doing so alone, according to the Henry's story of the lone protester?

## Discussion Question 2

Victor has seen and recognized his father, but his father has not recognized him. What difference would this have made to the power dynamic between cop and protester?

## Discussion Question 3

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe has to tell someone that Sri Lanka is not the paradise that everyone seems to think it is. What other cultural misinterpretations are prevalent?

## Vocabulary

revolution, nonviolence, intersection, delegate



## 18 -23

### Summary

18) Ju witnesses Park pepper-spray the men in the car when the man refuses to stop filming, and lectures him for taking such an extreme measure. Park seems confident that he did exactly the right thing and that Ju has no authority over him, but she still calls it in.

19) Victor remembers a game he used to play with his mother, in which they would tell each other what they were and they would give statements describing that thing. He has fond memories of digging in the dirt with his mother at the co-op where they used to live. Victor describes more vividly his imagined origins, where he would be growing if he were a banana, and as more details unfold what is described is the reality of working on a banana plantation, especially an increasingly mechanized one where the workers are in more danger from the chemicals they use.

20) Victor witnesses the first tear canisters starting to land near them and the smoke starts to rise and envelope them. The cops start attacking people with their batons, and all the while Victor remembers his father reminding him that monks still build their monasteries very high up and out of reach despite claiming to love everyone. He already starts to feel time compress from the anticipation of the pain which is to come. He hears his father's voice warning him against the foolishness of believing in a cause, although he desperately wants to believe in it now and to start chanting. He is prevented from doing so because "it was embarrassing to chant. It was embarrassing to believe" (location 1539). He has a memory of when he saw a shabby-looking American girl with a dog who was begging in a bus station in Bolivia, asking him for spare change, and how that made him very angry because she most likely enjoyed a fair amount of privilege. The sign she was holding read "TENGO HAMBRE" (location 1555) and something made him still give the girl all the money he had left before leaving. He is no longer sure what he needs now in order to survive, or what he was supposed to believe in.

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission II) Charles starts to remember the civil war in his home country of Sri Lanka. He describes how a group of Tamil rebels killing some policemen prompted a previously peaceful community to start attacking innocent Tamil people. He regrets that he could not have spent more time during his travels talking to the real people on the street, but he believes that his role is to do the work behind the scenes and more remotely. He sees the comparatively peaceful demonstration, where the police are not yet attacking people, at least from his vantage point, and he comes to admire America. He starts to move through the crowd and grows angry at the division of his own society, between the rich and the poor and, specifically, those affected by the war just outside, but realizes that the rich are most likely suffering simply from ignorance. He finally sees the convention center but soon notices the reason why it is currently inaccessible, but he is determined, after five years of constant travel and



signature-collecting, to get the last one. He tries to placate the crowd by announcing that he is an international delegate but then they grow hostile when they hear this and someone spits in his face. He is told that his meetings have been cancelled and he does not believe them at first. They are more sympathetic when they learn he has come from Sri Lanka. He is baffled as to why they think Sri Lanka is so much worse off than the First World and he concludes that the difference is that Americans feel the power to do something. He remembers seeing images of London and the royal family in newspapers growing up and was struck by the “unfathomable distance between himself and civilization” (location 1678). He sees the tear canister smoke blowing towards the convention center instead of away from it and he tries to tell one of the police that he needs to go into the meeting and is told to return to his hotel, punctuated by a jab to his chest with a baton. One of the protesters helps him and they run from the scene.

21) Victor continues to grow more afraid of the coming attack and his thoughts return to his time spent traveling, yearning to do it again. He remembers each place vividly, all the interactions he had and the experience of seeing the world in his own way and from his own perspective. He realizes that he cannot go through with this protest and witnesses the Doctor being subjected to police brutality. Victor feels, ironically, more alone than ever before, despite being surrounded by people.

22) King witnesses the continuation of police attacks on nonviolent protesters and reconsiders the notion of being nonviolent in the face of extreme violence, then thinks back to her time in Mexico. She remembers having once lived with John Henry but feeling the need to move on down south, but eventually returned facing more difficulties on the way out than on the way in. Reporters have shown up on the scene and started talking to protesters, and King really hopes that the world will see what the ultimate price is to be paid for world trade to continue the way it is now.

23) Bishop starts physically ambushing the protesters by spraying tear gas directly onto them and kicking them, apologizing all the while to them, and does not understand why they will not give up and disperse. He is desperate for the whole thing to be over but really needs to regain control of the situation, wishing already that he could take back his orders for the cops to fire on the people.

## Analysis

In this section there is a marked shift in the attitudes of both Victor and King. Victor begins to feel alone once again, having volunteered for more than he was ultimately capable of, and bearing witness - untrained and for the first time - to acts of police brutality. This shock to his system has actually compressed his sense of time:

“Victor had discovered the threat of imminent pain had a way of focusing your attention. A week, a day, an hour – these were units of time no longer within Victor’s ability to contemplate or feel. The day had shrunk to a morning. Then an hour of street battle. Then fifteen minutes of withering brutality. Noon was like a foreign country” (location 1535).



Further contributing to this effect is Victor's mind's escape to his time spent traveling, when he first felt a sense of community, and the imminent danger in the current situation is making him feel detached all over again. Another way in which he escapes is through reminiscences of his mother, who used to play games with him to fuel his imagination. Through placing himself, mentally, in the role of something like a banana, he was already practicing exercising the empathy that would start to guide him later in life. However idyllic a life spent growing in a tropical country would seem, his mother was clearly skilled at implementing a sense of reality and worldly context, through reminding him that the growers of these bananas would have suffered poor working conditions, being sprayed with pesticides, and generally suffering in order to export goods to places like America.

King also starts to re-evaluate her current stance on nonviolence. Because of the sheer amount of unprecedented force being used by the police on completely nonviolent and unarmed citizens, simply sitting in the intersection, she wonders how anyone could not at least practice self-defense. The sheer will of the people would have to hold strong against an unknown level of potential violence and damage upon their bodies and King begins to question the true limits of even those most committed to the cause. She also starts to escape mentally by remembering what brought her here in the first place. It was through her relationship with John Henry - before moving on to Mexico - that she first heard about the protests taking place today. She has had her fill of violence and wants today to be a peaceful day, but it is turning out to be the complete opposite.

Both Victor and King experience a revelation of consciousness of social and personal responsibility, but these shifts take them in opposite directions; Victor towards the cause and King further away.

## Discussion Question 1

Victor lost his mother a few years ago, and frequently reminisces about spending time with her. In which ways are his actions in the present day influenced by memories of his mother?

## Discussion Question 2

Charles is surprised at how many people think of him as an ally once he tells them that he is Sri Lankan. In what ways does he use his status as an ambassador for Sri Lanka to gain leverage both with the common people and with the authorities?

## Discussion Question 3

Bishop attempts to compensate for his actions by apologizing while spraying and kicking people. What does this say about the attempts of the cops to justify their actions?



## Vocabulary

percolation, pesticides



## 24 - 33

### Summary

24) King goes around trying to help those who have been attacked with pepper spray, and is already feeling like the events unfolding are her fault, despite falling in love with the idea of pure democracy, and allowing Victor to be the one to volunteer for sitting in the circle. She remembers how people started to be arrested for the fire she started at the ski resort in Colorado and how that prompted her to go down to Mexico. John Henry had lured her back up with the promise of making a real change with the sabotage of the WTO meetings and King had realized how vulnerable she was, so she bought a gun. She then admits to shooting a man at the border because something “went wrong” (location 1984).

25) Park and Ju crack a joke while waiting by the Peace-Keeper. They are approached by Charles who insists that he is a delegate and tries to show him his papers as proof, but they arrest him anyway.

Dr. Wickramsinghe: Intermission III) Charles cannot understand how a group of randomly assembled people can shut down what he sees as being the most important meetings of the decade.

26) Victor begins to think about who really has ultimate responsibility for the effects of war, he doubts that it is the academic who produces the blueprints for the devices or even those who fly the planes or operate the machinery. In his mind it must be the politicians who have to find a way to justify doing so. He thinks about the Vietnam War from the perspective of the Vietnamese, who have no control over the situation and yet their world is turned upside down, and the remote yet irrefutable connection between the war on the other side of the world and the one right here. He witnesses the cops forcibly applying an irritant chemical all over a woman while the crowd starts chanting “WE ARE WINNING” (location 2098) and he wonders how she has the inner reserve to stay silent and not start screaming. Victor finally starts joining in the chanting.

27) Henry starts to feel extremely proud of Victor, who is finally coming around to the ways of protesting, but then King approaches him and insists that it is not working and that they have to leave because she does not feel like they are winning.

28) Victor is now the one who is trying to reassure her that it will all be fine, but she gets angry when he tries to tell her how she should be feeling.

29) Bishop continues to survey the scene and remembers a time when he and his wife were united as one, despite being surrounded by other people, that they were one force. He realizes that he simply wants to be somewhere else, and to be only an American, on its own, instead of whatever he is right now. He begins to suspect that much of the violence today is simply people being violent for its own sake, all the while



wishing he could explain to Victor that it was fear and loss rather than anger that prompted the book burning years ago. Park shows up and fires a rubber bullet into a boy burning things nearby.

30) Victor tries to defend the medic from his father but Bishop ends up spraying him instead, all the while it is unsure whether he recognizes him as his son.

31) King remembers her journey back from Mexico to America again, while she helps Henry bring an injured Victor to the Sheraton. She remembers shooting the man with whom she walked to the border and feels unable to tell Henry. She describes in more detail about how they managed to cross the border, but for some reason, on an impulse, she felt the need to shoot the man and that the mark of the violence has remained with her ever since and is affecting her now. She cannot help Victor and Henry so she leaves the scene.

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission IV) Charles is put onto a bus that is serving as a makeshift jail with several other protesters. He is afraid of them but tries to remind himself that he has a natural gift for being able to talk to, and appease, anyone. He is initially met with hostility but then he invites them to tell their side of the story and they start to inundate him with information, and the various facts that have led them to want to take action. He remembers an interview he gave to a magazine once, which asked him why he wanted Sri Lanka to be a part of the WTO. Essentially it is for the same reasons as all the other countries but he felt at the time that he had to give a more complicated answer. He talked then about how backward the country still was compared to the rest of the world and that they needed to catch up in order to compete. He believed that what the country needed now was someone capable of negotiation and not just resistance. He is finally allowed by a police officer to get off the bus and go into the building.

32) While Bishop is remembering a conversation with his father at a younger age, he hears explosions near the building. He develops a new resolve to clear the streets at last, with the radio constantly trying to contact him, and he sees smoke coming out of the building. He lets on that he has been more deeply affected by the disappearance of his son than he previously seemed to be, that he has been basically aimless this whole time. His thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a canister being thrown at him, and Park beside him starts firing at the crowd.

33) Victor thinks on some of the countries he has visited, and the terror some of them waged on their citizens, including being abducted in the middle of the night and then never seen again. He also managed to find signs of community in certain places, particularly while working on a farm in California, where he felt at home with other people for the first time. He wills his father, remotely, to consider what his experiences would have been like, and that he would have had to experience the things he did first hand in order to understand his life and his new perspective. He decides to go speak to his father, who he recognizes as the Chief of Police.



## Analysis

Charles maintains a distance from the other characters, in every sense, amplified by his having his own "intermission" chapters, and this is emphasized by his maintenance of good hope, for the future of his country, when he arrives in America, thus far unaware of the scale of the protests taking place. He is shocked to see such chaos and unease in what he has thought of as a peaceful country, and does not believe the first people who tell him that the meetings have been cancelled. He simply cannot afford to lose at this stage in the game and uses the full power of his position as a delegate to push through and onto the convention center, the Sheraton.

When Charles finally meets resistance, and is put into the makeshift jail with other (hostile) protesters, he is equally unprepared for the sheer passion and knowledge of the people who tell him their stories of disadvantage. Although he still believes them to be misinformed, he is equally disbelieving that America can be in such trouble and also that America will still see other countries, such as Sri Lanka, as backwards nations that need saving. He concludes that many of them will know far less about the rest of the world outside of America, than other countries know about America, through exposure to its media and influence, thinking "What a violence of the spirit to not know the world" (location 1671). He appears to see ignorance and indifference as its own kind of violence, and that America is not the beacon of perfection that so many think of it as being.

While Charles tries to close the gap between himself and the people he still does not quite understand, Victor and Bishop are finally reunited as father and son, under the most unfortunate circumstances. When Bishop takes physical action against Victor, he does not even recognize him. However, the things Victor witnesses cause him to grow closer to the cause. His thoughts about social responsibility, and the level of responsibility of those who participate in the "machine" of construction and engineering for what these things will be employed to do, lead him to conclude that not everyone can know the full impact of their actions, yet he starts to believe more in direct action. "Direct action" (location 490) is exactly what the unnamed girl earlier in the novel told him this protest would be, and when he sees direct violence being applied to innocent people, he feels connected enough, and responsible enough, for the outcome of the day that he begins chanting, marking the beginning of his full participation.

## Discussion Question 1

Given King's tendency to drift from place to place, to what extent is her participation in this protest purely down to chance?



## Discussion Question 2

Victor starts to think about personal responsibility and how accountable people are for their actions. How much accountability does each character seem to take for their own actions throughout the event?

## Discussion Question 3

How has the knowledge that Victor may be present at the protest affected or tempered Bishop's actions?

## Vocabulary

pharmaceutical, liberalization, modernizing, grenades



## 34 - Epilogue

### Summary

34) King continues to be haunted by her shooting of an old man, and she sees two groups of people clash over an attempt to rob a bank. She remembers training several people in the desert and her thoughts return to trying to justify why she shot the man, that it was more important to save millions than only one. She picks up a crow bar and, realizing she cannot be who she once was, decides to do what she can and take action. The memories start to flood back and she is working herself up to deal with them physically, by smashing in the window. A girl nearby begs her for help from the police but she is in no position to do so, so she simply tells them to move.

35) Park gives some insight into his nightly routine, and he has a memory of seeing the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing on TV. Now he is trying to fend off more protesters and Victor is making his way towards the Chief, who is also on the Peace-Keeper right now, and takes aim preparing to shoot him.

36) Bishop remembers how he raised Victor, his mother never spoiled him or gave him too much, but after she died, Bishop started to spoil Victor more. Victor then started to rebel, running away for periods of time. Bishop begins to realize how much he has been missing Victor when Park shoots Victor suddenly, and Bishop realizes then where his allegiances lie.

37) King witnesses Victor being shot, and then being ambushed and beaten by several cops, and realizes that she will remember this for the rest of her life. Still she forces herself to bear witness to the event. She assumes blame for allowing him to volunteer for the lock-down in the first place. She starts running towards Victor and the cops while the chanting continues in the background, "WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY LOOK LIKE??? THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!" (location 2982) and climbs onto the Peace-Keeper only to find herself facing Ju.

38) Victor starts to become increasingly aware of his own body as the cops continue beating him. A cop stomps on his hand breaking several bones. He realizes that he does not want to die and that there are many beautiful things that he wants to live to experience again. He has a memory of being with his mother when she was serving hot food to unemployed men and he felt more at home in their company than at any other time. Still, he becomes sure that this is the end for him and that he is going to let go.

39) Ju is busy trying to fend off the protesters and knows that she does not have the luxury of stopping to think too much about what she is doing. She sees King coming rapidly towards her and she fires a bullet at her, stopping her immediately.

Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission V) Charles ascends to the top of the convention center, seeing the city and its destruction unfolding before him, and he walks



into the meeting. There, he sees several delegates conversing like no interruptions had taken place the whole day, and he also sees two of his old friends who happen to retain high positions now. Teddy tells Charles that the meetings were not cancelled but merely delayed, but also that President Clinton would no longer be attending. Charles begins to remember, over the course of the meal and conversation, what happened to the dog he adopted at college, Tennyson. He had been told that he would not be allowed to keep the dog and he did not know anyone else who could take him in so he had to take the dog to be put down. He begins to feel like a coward and that he must compensate by asserting his reason for being there. Teddy starts to explain to Charles how the corporate meetings really work, that he was never in with a chance to meet Clinton because Sri Lanka was not worth bothering about for many people. He tells Charles that there is still a chance for Sri Lanka to gain entry into the WTO but only if they cut the budget for its education. Martin tries to reassure Charles, but he cannot be reassured now.

40) There is a description of what is being broadcast on TV. Scenes from a hurricane, the fall of the Berlin wall and the '91/'92 Gulf War flash across the screens, with the reporter in front stating the events. Then on a loop looters start smashing in the window of a Starbucks café.

41) There is a description of what is not being broadcast on TV, including sending for more troops as reinforcements, importing more tear gas from the other side of the country, and Park being hailed as a hero for rescuing people during the Oklahoma bombing. Also not seen is Charles and Martin developing a plan for Charles to re-negotiate the terms of the agreement for Sri Lanka to join the WTO. Henry witnesses King being shot and remembers the time they chained themselves to a factory for five days and a janitor took pity on them, bringing them water, and then vowing never to work there again. The TV does not show Bishop trying to pull the cops off of his son, or Ju having a change of heart about what she expected of herself as a cop, and that she was going to intervene for once. The TV does not show King being taken to the hospital, while handcuffed, and reassured by a stranger that everything was going to be fine, and her wondering if it really would be.

42) The TV does show an airplane, turning out to be Air Force One, carrying the President in safety to the meeting. The only reference to the entire events of the day are in one caption, "VIOLENT PROTESTERS CLASH WITH POLICE" (location 3377).

Epilogue) Night-time begins to fall on the city, Ju has been arrested for trying to intervene on police violence, and Bishop is holding his son Victor and trying to tell him he will be fine. Victor feels a sense of peace coming over him, and that he is one with everyone in the crowd today, and that they are taking up residence in his body as if they now live there. He sees his mother in one of those residences and feels her presence once more.



## Analysis

In the closing chapters of the novel, everyone makes one last desperate bid for what they feel is right, each enduring a different fate.

King, having undergone a crisis of conscience due to an event in her past, and a revival of her anger at seeing the injustices committed by the police against innocent people, gathers one last burst of resolve when seeing Victor endure a severe beating by the police. It is now that King realizes the full extent of the breakdown of law and order:

“The force behind their blows, the desperation of their fury, the angry and frightened look in their eyes – it was the ancient terror of a police whose mission it was to control people who were unafraid of their violence” (location 2946).

Connections grow stronger in this section, between people and their consciences, and people and other people. It is now that King does a U-turn deep inside, realizing that she must take the law back into her own hands and intervene, no matter what the cost to herself. She is no longer afraid for herself and her life, because she believes in something higher once again. She too ends up being gravely injured by the police, having been shot by Ju, but this then triggers a domino effect in Ju who has her own crisis of conscience. She is the one who, in turn, intervenes in Victor's beating. Connections begin to be made, all the main characters having some link to events in the past that resonated with the world; Ju played a role in moderating the LA riots, and this section reveals Park's involvement in the aftermath operation of the Oklahoma bombing, which it is hinted was the cause of his facial burning.

Charles, despite being disconnected from many of the main characters in the novel the entire time, has connections of his own. At the Sheraton he tries to take advantage of his old friendships with the director of the WTO, "Teddy" (location 3127) and fellow immigrant scholar Martin, who all hold positions of some authority and could make all the difference for Charles' mission. Charles, however, suffers from impending defeat, and a retrospective pointlessness to his several years spent gathering signatures, and gathering hope for his country's future, through Teddy's dismissal of his bid to join the WTO. Charles exhausts all possibilities, but still he wonders, “Was there not a single word he could say that had not been emptied of value?” (location 2688) and doubts the extent of his skills in diplomacy at this last hurdle. With Martin agreeing to try to help him, Charles tries to have hope, but in the face of such adversity there is a sense that he has pushed himself as far as he can go.

Conversely, Victor, while enduring extreme physical trauma, begins to feel increasingly connected to the world, to its people and its nature, and out of this comes a strong and clear desire to continue living:

“He did not want to leave this place yet, this planet of mountains and seas, the human body, the blood-heat of a hand pressed against your own” (location 3014).





This revelation coincides with his father, Bishop, finally recognizing his son for who he is, stopping the beating, and holding him in his arms on the intersection, being father and son once more. That it takes a major life or death situation in order for people to discover themselves, their family ties, and their ties to their country and the rest of the world - their true place - shows how ordinarily disconnected people tend to be in the modern age. This is portrayed in microcosmic form in the penultimate chapter, showing the extent of the TV coverage of the protest in its entirety. "VIOLENT PROTESTERS CLASH WITH POLICE" (location 3377) is all that is reported of the events of the day, showing that what is portrayed in the media can never be taken at face value, and is certainly never the full story. More investigation always needs to be done in order to discover the truth, and the whole truth, of what is really happening.

## Discussion Question 1

As the police increasingly resort to violence, how does this affect the demeanor of the protesters?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Charles' memories of his college dog, Tennyson, in the current situation with regards to the meeting?

## Discussion Question 3

There is a description of what the TVs show, and all the things that they do not show. How might an investigative reporter portray the event if they were to take random interviews with both some protesters in the background and with some of the main characters in the story?

## Vocabulary

hitchhiking, combustible



# Characters

## Victor

Victor is a 19-year-old homeless boy who has been traveling, or rather drifting, around the world for the past three years. He hears about the protest - literally - from a distance and is compelled to join in.

He is initially portrayed as a shallow stoner, constantly lighting up joints and trying to sell marijuana at the protest, but slowly he becomes indoctrinated into the "cause" through being influenced by the other characters there. He also realizes that his estranged father - Chief Bishop - is in charge of the police force and that he will not only be clashing with the police, but with his own father. They are both linked by their shared past, and their grief at losing his mother, but they reconnect in this strangest of circumstances.

The character development of Victor is profound and it is his memory of his father burning all his books when he was 16 - prompting his running away - that prompts him to volunteer for lock-down. As the day goes on, Victor becomes more and more fully committed to the cause of justice.

## John Henry

John Henry is a veteran protester who is described as having an exoticism about him, like someone one might meet in the Himalayas but who is actually from Detroit, Michigan. He is a former preacher who became disillusioned with the state of the world but, somehow, without losing his faith in - and fear of - people.

John Henry is at the forefront of the protests today, well-versed in the ways of nonviolent resistance and pivotal in keeping Victor grounded and sane when the protests start to intensify.

## Officer Park

A far more cynical and less personable character, Officer Park is a cop assigned to control the crowd but seems to hold them in great contempt. He is physically described as "early thirties with the long lean muscle of the compulsive triathlete" (location 628).

Park is quick to resort to physical police authority, and the baton, when he feels like he is being disrespected. He is the one who flaunts his authority in a confrontation with Victor, but he is soon put in his place by a senior officer.



Park also has a prominent facial scar as the result of a burn, and it is vaguely implied that this might have something to do with his hostile attitude, along with his upbringing by a racist father. However, this is not gone into in much detail in the novel.

## Chief Bishop

Chief Bishop seems to have a real concern for the people. He faces one of the biggest revelations of all the characters as he realizes that it is son, Victor, is at the protest and is, therefore, someone he must suppress as part of his duty as an officer.

Partly due to reeling from the loss of his wife, Victor's mother, a few years ago, Bishop's attempts to quell Victor's rebellion by burning his books, and warning him to never start caring about others, result in him losing his son, too, as Victor runs away.

Bishop is also the one who issues the orders to start using tear gas as a means of physically controlling the crowd, and even starts to physically beat people, albeit apologizing the whole time. But it is only when the cops start beating up his own son that he has a change of heart and realizes his love for his son.

## The Mayor

The mayor is a disembodied voice who only manifests through the police radio when talking to Bishop. Despite not appearing in person in the novel, the mayor's orders to deal with the situation with whatever means necessary is the very order that is most unfortunately interpreted by the police.

## Unnamed girl

An unnamed young girl at the protest begins to befriend Victor until he tries to offer her weed. She then tells him off for doing so and moves away.

The unnamed girl only appears briefly but reveals to Victor that the tone of the protest is much different from what he initially thought. She explains that it is no mere protest but a "direct action" (location 490) or one that does not involve merely getting high.

Victor observes that she is "a radical, a revolutionary, and he suddenly wanted to be as far away from her as humanly possible" (location 494).

## King

King (or Kingfisher as is her real name) is a seasoned young protester who has already seen enough in her time to know how everything is done, all the while not losing any of her passion for justice.



She is shown to have been idealistic and easily impressionable from an early age, quick to fall in love and as a result, ending up in the world of protesting mostly by chance. Her need to change the world begins to grow and she travels to many places to sabotage environmentally destructive projects, but one dark event in her past changes her. For reasons which are never really revealed, King shoots an innocent man at the U.S./Mexican border and from that moment on she commits herself to nonviolence.

King is also the character most explicitly driven by the force of love, and a testament to her complex character can be seen in the seeming contradiction of anger and love residing so closely within her personality.

## **Officer Julia**

Officer Julia is a cop of Guatemalan origin who has a strong sense of work ethic, and a seemingly troubled past which is only hinted at fleetingly.

Julia, or Ju, is an outwardly tough and no-nonsense character who has to doubly prove herself as a female cop, but with a sense of compassion. When arresting a looter years ago, she allows the woman to continue drinking her stolen soda because she felt that it was the least she could do. However, Ju also says that turning the other way is part of the job too as much as everything else.

Ju seems able to compartmentalize her emotions and her duty, setting the former aside in order to carry out the latter. However, when she shoots King something shifts within her and she can no longer participate in the violence, being the one who ends up suffering the consequences of intervening when Victor becomes the victim of police violence.

## **Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe**

A strongly principled yet mild-mannered Sri Lankan diplomat, Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe, or Charles, has spent the past five years traveling to collecting signatures from world leaders which would allow Sri Lanka to join the WTO. Only one signature remains, that of President Clinton, which is why he has traveled to America today.

It is the very meeting that Charles is attending, or attempting to do so, at the convention center, that is being sabotaged by the protests. Through revealing the troubled history of his conflicted nation, he also reveals his motivation for wanting to bring his country into the modern world, that it will benefit his people. Although not a person inclined towards conflict, he claims that it is not passive resistance that is required today so much as firm diplomacy, and a desire to get things done.



## Unnamed actress

Charles meets an unnamed actress on his flight from Sri Lanka to America. She is simply referred to as a famous actress, highlighted by the attention she receives while on the plane. She is revealed to be coping with the fallout of a failed marriage by attempting to adopt a child from Sri Lanka.

## Sir Edward Bancroft

An old friend of Charles', Sir Edward Bancroft, or Teddy, is the director of the WTO. Bound to a wheelchair, he is shown to be a powerful yet amiable character, at least up to a point.

Despite pertaining to have respect for his old friend Charles, Teddy harshly deflates his expectations of Sri Lanka joining the WTO by saying that it is a backwards nation that stands no chance of being accepted unanimously by all the member countries, and is thus shown to be capable of great condescension.

## Martin Oswego

Martin is another old friend of Charles', from the Ivory Coast. He is "a scholarship boy from a former colony" (location 3130). He is in a far less powerful position but it is he who assists Charles in getting the ball rolling for Sri Lanka's prospective entry into the WTO.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The color gray

The color gray symbolizes the colorless and uncertain new world that many of the characters feel they are facing.

There is a constant presence of the color gray - the buildings being painted "gray-gold" (location 137) by the sun, the gray buildings and towers and sky setting the scene at the beginning of the novel, and later the gray of the tear gas and smoke.

Gray is also used as a foreshadowing technique, with Victor's mother using solely gray charcoal to make art with, using it to portray destroyed buildings, and also animals and people.

The infamous gray sky - and skyline - of Seattle makes the city a fitting one in which to set the story.

## Smoke

Smoke symbolizes both the ending of old ways of life and the beginning of new ways of life in the city of Seattle.

From the moment Victor lights up his joint in the first chapter, where he "exhaled sweet smoke that zipped across the heads of the crowd like a little runaway train careening off a bridge" (location 486) in a bid to escape reality, to the smoke which arises as a result of pollution and, later, of the tear gas thrown by the police, smoke plays a pervasive role throughout the novel. It symbolizes enlightenment, escape, destruction and rebellion in all its various uses and guises employed by the author.

There is a moment in which smoke is shown to be coming from Bishop's helmet, "which reflected the passing clouds, white streams of smoke growing long and then disappearing over the curve" (location 1033).

## Crowds of people

Crowds of people are, inevitably, a recurrent symbol throughout the novel, both in the literal sense of great numbers coming together, and the metaphorical connotations of one becoming many.

Crowds of total strangers assemble from all walks of life at the very beginning, coming together for a single cause. It is implied by the author that this is made easier by a new collective wish to connect: "This desire leapt continents. The longing of the heart to embrace a stranger and be unashamed" (location 221).



There is also an implication of "safety in numbers" with the cautionary tale/memory of the lone protester who made the mistake of acting alone and having his protest be cut short prematurely, whereas if he had joined forces with a like-minded crowd the outcome would have been more positive.

King speaks admiringly of the "collective of the people all coming together, full of the energy of community and purpose" (location 812).

## Electricity

Electricity symbolizes the sudden galvanization of the previously apathetic people into taking action in order to save the world they live in, and it is a force used for both good and bad in the novel.

The interaction between Park and the woman bringing the cops coffee is an early indicator, the former of whose hostile reaction provokes a reaction in the latter as if a light had failed to switch off due to the shock of the interaction. When Victor tries to sell people weed they turn from friendly to unfriendly "as if a switch had been flipped" (location 482). Later, Chief Bishop remembers an incident when his son Victor talks about electricity and where it comes from, which appears to be symbolic of his increasing desire to know how things work and of the cause and effect nature of everything. King would also describe the "electric buzz and rattle" (location 590) when entering prisons in order to mentor prisoners, which would prepare her for days like today.

These examples show that the concept of electricity can be used to fuel all kinds of emotions, from inspiration (Victor) to fear (King) to hostility (Park) and references to electricity throughout the novel reveal the constant undercurrent of strong emotion running throughout the story.

## Radio

Radio symbolizes the potential for connection between people from all over the world, and how this can be used for both good and bad purposes.

Radio signals are employed by the author in a metaphorical sense, addressing the idea that technology can be used to reach the people living in first world countries to inform them of the plight of those in third world countries, and to implore them to take action.

However, radio is also used by the police to communicate back and forth with the mayor of the city, who is the one who issues the orders to control the crowds however they deem necessary. Therefore radio can be used to promote both messages of enlightenment and of oppression.



## Nike shoes

The Nike shoes, which Victor prizes so highly, symbolize the conflict within him to both preserve a link to his past and also to make changes for the future.

Victor takes great care of his shoes, maintaining them in pristine white condition. In the beginning he uses an old toothbrush to carefully clean them and keeps them in a box, but later he would wear these same shoes to merge with the masses and to engage in a protest with police, which often got dirty in every sense.

They are also a symbol of privilege, and the resultant exploitation of third world people involved in making the shoes, but as Victor acknowledges, it is something that everyone seems to be guilty of to some degree.

## Bodies, especially Victor's body

Bodies symbolize both a literal and a metaphorical battle site throughout the novel, and it is manifested most clearly in the "journey" of Victor's body.

Victor's body is initially "curled into himself like a question mark" (location 82) and he also "made his body a cave" (location 484) which are all things which he does when he is lighting a joint - a form of rebellion - but it also shows the subordination which he is forced to undergo when he later becomes the victim of police violence.

The bodies of the people are referred to constantly, in a more detached manner, as if they are mere tools to achieve an end: "look at them. Attempting to take a city with nothing more than their bodies and whatever currents might lie inside" (location 2961). This may show that, when push comes to shove, bodies are something which every person has, regardless of how much or little they have, and therefore it is sometimes the only thing they can use in order to protest against the status quo.

## The baton

The baton symbolizes the physical manifestation of oppression and silencing of the people.

The baton takes on an unfortunately prominent role in this novel, as it is a literal tool used by the police against the people. Visceral images of their use become more frequent as the police resort to violence when the protesters refuse to give up and disperse.

Nonviolence comes up against violence in the most literal sense.





## The convention center

The convention center symbolizes the literal center of the protest.

The building is where delegates attempt to access in order to have the meetings to which the protesters are so opposed, with the belief that whatever happens in there will destroy the world they live in. Conversely, it is a symbol of hope for Charles, the Sri Lankan delegate, who describes the building as "black and lovely" and the "object of his desire" (location 1619).

The fact that the inside of the convention center is only shown very late in the novel can be seen as a testament to the effectiveness and dedication of the protest, which does everything in its power to obstruct the meeting.

## Geometric shapes

Geometric shapes symbolize the detachment from human shapes, and human interests, as shown by the meetings which are going ahead in the first place.

This manifests throughout the novel in various ways, through the rectangular length of the convention center, the triangular route around the center and the circles that people form in order to connect. In lock-down the protesters chain themselves into a circle and, even while rehearsing, they naturally gravitate towards forming that shape, "sitting and laughing in a small circle that contained all the love you could ever hope to contain among four people sitting cross-legged at the corner of an intersection of a dying city" (location 884).

This shows that the natural tendency to form a circle shows that the circle is the most "democratic" and inclusive shape of them all, one that allows all people to join in and to form a connection with the rest of the world where everyone is equal to everyone else.



# Settings

## The underpass

The underpass is the first location shown in the novel, and where Victor has been camping for the past few months. This the location where Victor first hears the voices of the people protesting, from a distance, and is compelled to join in. Chief Bishop visits the scene later on, dismayed at the notion that his son has been living homeless in his dismal place.

## The Peace-Keeper

The Peace-Keeper is a vehicle rather than a location. It serves as a makeshift gathering site for the police. It is named rather ironically because, although the intention of the vehicle is to keep the peace, it also serves as the meeting point where Bishop issues the orders to start using tear gas and batons on the people.

## The intersection

The intersection is the main setting for the protest, and the site for the day of conflict and violence. It is here that Victor meets King and John Henry, becomes inspired to join the cause, and where Victor sees his father - who does not see him at first - for the first time in three years. It becomes the scene of unprecedented police brutality, but also a scene of hope because of the lock-down, where the sheer will of the people, and desire for justice, will ultimately win.

## The plane

The flight from Sri Lanka to America serves as the introductory setting for Charles, an introduction to his motivation for dedicating his life to trying to get his country accepted into the WTO, and the exchange he shares with the unnamed actress where it is revealed that they are not as different as they seem on the surface.

## The convention center (Sheraton)

The convention center in the Sheraton is the setting for the proposed meetings, which are the main point of contention for the protesters and which they are trying to shut down. It is described as being a gray and imposing building that otherwise blends into the city-scape, but is clearly an important place because it is where world leaders ultimately decide the fate of millions of people worldwide.



# Themes and Motifs

## Comparisons between people, animals and inanimate objects

The line between objects, animals and people is blurred, perhaps intentionally, by the author throughout the novel, in order to show the potential for anthropomorphization of the inanimate and animals, and also, subsequently, the potential for the dehumanization of people.

The scene is initially set when the crowd which Victor overhears, before joining, the "thick- throated rumble of the daily commute" (location 126) and, then, the protest starting. It is compared to thousands of flies knocking against thousands of windows, and how he wants nothing more than to fly away and "watch the border recede below him like a line of marching ants following a trail of sugar to its source" (location 108). The author appears to use this imagery in order to place humans within the context of their natural setting, highlighting how ultimately detached people have become from nature, and how they are now expressing the desire to reconnect with, and respect, the planet they live on.

People are likened to machines: John Henry is described as having a heart like a "broken clockspring in his chest" (location 195) while chanting, and the chanting itself is described in a very mechanical way. Yet it is this same chanting that is meant to reconnect people to their past, and to their nature, so the contrast is continually being made between mechanization and nature.

## Justice

As an integral theme in the novel, justice is the very focus and motivation for the mass protest, and the code by which people, at their core, desire to live by. But early on the question is posed, "What did that mean? Justice?" (location 152) and so the very notion of how different people can interpret justice is brought up for potential discussion.

The people in the novel clearly believe that injustice has been done, not only against themselves but against other people in the world who are more exploited than they are, so they take to the streets to make their objections heard the old fashioned way in a modern society. The fact that people from all walks of life are coming together shows that the idea of justice is one of the great unifying forces in the world, and that ultimately, people seemingly only want to do right by themselves and each other.

However what they are protesting against are, ironically, forces which also pertain to uphold justice: the police, in a more immediate sense, and ultimately the World Trade Organization which pertains to promote freedom of trade between developed and developing countries. In theory these forces should all work together to eradicate



injustice in the world but, as seen in the novel, grave injustices are often committed against the poorest people in order to meet their ends, such as exploiting cheap labor in developing countries in order to import to developed ones, something which Victor claims to have seen first hand while traveling.

Furthermore, Charles who is on the "opposite" side of the people, as a delegate, shows himself to care deeply about the justice of his own people and country, to be able to trade freely with the rest of the world as a modern country, but he initially meets fierce resistance from the protesters who object, also on the grounds of justice. It is only when he offers to listen to their side of the story that they begin to trust him and allow him to progress onto the meeting.

The drastically different concepts of justice provide much of the conflict throughout the novel, and show how differently various people can interpret the idea of justice.

## Connection

Connection is a crucial invisible force throughout the novel, because it is through connection that people who would never know each other otherwise bring about drastic change. It is manifested most literally in the crowds of people who come together and stand en masse against the police, but there are various metaphors for connection that pervade the novel and reinforce the idea.

In the beginning, Victor, from his relative distance, is increasingly drawn to the crowds by listening to their chanting, showing that connections can be formed simply by listening. He has been feeling an increasing connection with the world throughout his three years of traveling and as a result, "He saw the secret and not-so-secret threads that connected his body in the here and now to worlds three continents away" (location 415).

The continual references to radio - for example, of getting the developed countries of the world to tune in to the message to "give China back her sun" (location 419) show that connection is more and more important in order to get back in touch with what others need in order to live in harmony.

However, connection is also shown to be a negative force, with the same idea of radio being used when the mayor orders the police, via radio, to do what is necessary in order to control the crowd. The particular interpretation the police make of this order shows that, despite connectivity, it is highly dependent on the other person/people how the message is interpreted. In this case, the police, with an unfortunate irony, only physically connect with the crowd when they impose violence by using batons to drive them into submission.

Connection is shown, ultimately, to be an inevitable human tendency, and the desire for connection emerges in all manner of ways within both the local and the global community.



## Anger/rage/violence

Anger and rage are essential components for driving the narrative in the novel, and fuels every main character to some extent, in addition to the people en masse.

People such as King, Henry and Victor are driven by anger as a result of a sense of injustice and a desire to correct the balance. King has been motivated by anger for a long time and only recently took to the idea of nonviolence, employing this tactic when Park tries to arrest Victor, but his own anger at being disrespected is only incited when she maintains her non-angry demeanor, showing that she is winning. King said that she was once into the idea of "violent revolution" (location 690) and that "Lord knows she had felt it often enough - that sad frustrated rage lighting up her brain for years now" (location 725). It is only when she starts practicing nonviolence that the police force starts to employ it in order to subdue the people.

Chief Bishop feels a different kind of anger for different and more personal reasons. When he loses his wife and, later, his son, he is overcome by "the fever of grief. It was a broken-hearted rage that he, too, felt slamming around his chest" (location 367). Likewise, Victor starts to feel anger increasingly often, claiming that it has come about from witnessing the injustices in the world but, when examining his childhood, his status as a young black man in an often racist society, his losses in life and inability to find his place, this anger most likely has more than one source.

Anger and rage are pitted against each other most clearly in the clash between protesters and the police. They are shown to have very different sources and reasons - protesters at the lack of justice, police at the lack of respect - but in this case, only one of those types of anger, the latter, results in violence.

## Love

Love, much like anger and rage, is showing to be a driving force in the novel for many people. However love is more easily obscured and does not seem to emerge as a force of its own until much later on.

Again, King seems to be the most directly motivated in her actions by the power of love. It assumes many forms throughout her life, through being shown to become easily infatuated with people. She said that her entire initiation into the world of protesting started out as a "simple infatuation" (location 693) which led onto several love affairs with both people and the idea of working towards a greater cause. "Love was the animating force that filled her body" (location 918) and she is continuing to use that force as the primary fuel behind her nonviolent method of resistance. It is also her love and respect for her "colleague" John Henry which keeps her on track on this particular day.

Bishop is also shown to be motivated by love to find his son, Victor, although his love has not manifested in the most straightforward way. Alienating his son by burning all his



books, he only realized the extent of his love when Victor went missing, and ironically does not even recognize him when they both end up clashing at the protest. It is only at the very end, when Bishop tends to his wounded son, that the most basic love begins to show.

Love may seem like a very wide concept, but as a counter to anger and violence, it seems to be the far more pervasive element, underneath everything.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is told from alternating points of view, from the perspectives of certain key characters.

The same event happens to all the characters - the mass protest in the center of Seattle within one day - but all of them see things in a different way due to their circumstances. Victor is the most distant from everything, at least in the beginning, being a homeless drifter who only hears about the protest by chance. However this is clearly an organized event and certain protesters, such as John Henry and King, have been preparing for the event for some time. While Victor, an inexperienced protester, sees nothing but chaos and masses of unrelated people, the more experienced protesters see people just like them coming together for a single cause.

What makes the novel particularly unique is that it is also told from the perspective of the police officers who are tasked with controlling the protest, and even resorting to violence in order to do so. Bishop only realizes much later on that one of the protesters is his estranged son, Victor, which causes a huge internal conflict, and other police officers carry out their assigned duties with varying degrees of relish or reluctance, depending on their personality. Even one of the delegates who is trying to attend the meeting is given a "voice" in the form of Charles, the Sri Lankan representative, who is trying to secure a more advantaged position for his country within the international community.

All of these perspectives, some far less sympathetic or relatable than others, contrive to collectively portray the most subjective picture of the event possible.

## Language and Meaning

Language plays a crucial role in the novel, because it is the use of language that forms a part of the democracy for which the protesters are fighting.

The most obvious use of language as a tool is through chanting. Various chants and slogans are shouted throughout the event, designed to be brief, catchy and attention-seeking. These chants state, in a few words, the protesters' demands and expectations, and also their hopes and objectives. Because their voices were bypassed when making decisions with powerful leaders which would inevitably affect them, they take back this control by simply shouting as loud as they can as one voice.

## Structure

The structure is closely tied in with the alternating points of view. The current events in the novel take place within a single day but due to the characters' personal thoughts, memories tangents, the narrative ends up encompassing a far greater length of time.

Memories and flashbacks which go back several years suggest that more time has passed than it has in reality however they always "return" to the present moment within the same chapter. Furthermore, the same events are often told from more than one point of view so this serves to prolong time.

There is a further division of linear time through the particular technique of assigning Charles not numbered chapters, as with the other characters, but chapter titles, "Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission I/II/III/IV/V" - it is not entirely clear why Charles' "chapters" are separated in such a particular way but it serves to add the illusion of yet more layers to the story.





## Quotes

He moved like an old man, grumbling like the world was out to get him, had in fact perhaps already gotten him, struck him down without mercy or care or intent as if it hadn't even seen him standing there, he had just been in the way.

-- Victor (chapter 1)

**Importance:** This quote shows how a young and promising life can be reduced to a mere struggle to survive simply because of circumstances, and kept there due to the world's indifference.

The sound of the crowd was a distant buzzing – fifty thousand desperate flies knocking against fifty thousand closed windows.

-- Victor (chapter 1)

**Importance:** Victor can already hear the growing strength of the crowd from his relative distance. The idea of so many flies (people) up against large (and personal) obstacles is an evocative image.

The American Dream was dead. All those promises now just cold ashes between his people's chanting teeth, sitting heavy on their tongues. Instead they said 'Sustainable agriculture.' They said 'Global solidarity.' They said, 'How beautiful is a seed, a tender green stalk of life.'

-- John Henry (chapter 2)

**Importance:** The extent to which the American Dream has failed so many is described viscerally here. There is now nothing left for these people than to create their own version of a dream, one which actually holds hope for the future.

Victor pierced by clues and impressions gathered from the wind like pollen. It was like a radio dial between stations, the way they chanted and cried. The overlapping voices like whispers of other realms – come in, London, come in, New York, come in, Paris, France. Yes? Give China back her sun.

-- Victor (chapter 5)

**Importance:** This mixing of metaphors - pollen and radio - shows the disjointedness and confusion many would have been feeling. The idea of using such a ubiquitous tool as radio to convey a crucial message to the world is an appealing one.

Imagine that man seeing something on his TV and standing from his couch to go down there to stop them from beating that truck driver as if what happened on the TV and what happened in the world were somehow related, as if he believed them to be the same.

-- Ju(lia) (chapter 7)

**Importance:** The idea that someone could be in any way connected to things



happening on TV in this day and age is an increasingly alien one, and the man instantly acting upon what he sees is presumably the exception.

Yes, there had been a time when it could be said that King felt the burning glow of violence, but no longer. Now she believed in the transformative power of militant nonviolence. Now she suffered to see so many thrown into the fire.

-- King (chapter 8)

**Importance:** The metaphor of fire/burning is maintained in this quote even as King switches from one personality type to the opposite. She was once the fire and now she wants to save people from that fire.

His son lived down here? In the darkness beneath however many tons of unstable concrete and rebar? He did not want this new knowledge of the world. He would stop at the first lighted corner and drop it in the nearest trash can.

-- Chief Bishop (chapter 15)

**Importance:** Chief Bishop reveals the tendency for many to, at least metaphorically, throw things away and forget about their existence. Ignorance is bliss to the majority because the truth is often something they do not want to know.

That's what he wanted. To be in a place where he was just an American – even if he was hated, or an invading force, or an expatriate, or a coward, he didn't care.

-- Chief Bishop (chapter 29)

**Importance:** This shows a level of patriotism, or commitment to country, or at least the idea of country. The idea of "being an American" is such a prominent part of the identity of so many that they do not care, or pay attention, as to how the country acts on the world stage.

What was needed was a duty-bound minister capable of compromise. Gandhi would not compromise.

-- Charles (Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission IV)

**Importance:** In contrast to the passive "hippie" stereotype of many protesters, Charles realized that the type of personality required to bring about real change was considerably different, and played a far more active role.

No, revolution was not glamorous. Revolution was a sacrifice. A desperation. The last insane leap to some future where you might have the room to breathe.

-- King (chapter 37)

**Importance:** For many people, despite living in a relatively privileged country, they truly felt their lives were at stake. Those in foreign countries were in more immediate danger but eventually everyone else would be.



Front-cuffed her on account of the soda because sometimes you had to break the rules to hold true to a higher law. Even if it was just a woman's need to drink a stolen Pepsi on the way to jail. Because, in Julia's opinion, then and now, that was the job, too.

-- Ju(lia) (chapter 7)

**Importance:** This shows that even cops who must rigidly uphold the law sometimes don't do their "full" job in order to maintain a bit of decency. It also foreshadows the mass civil disobedience of the people.

As if every soul that had ever breathed the air of Sri Lanka – the Third World – had lived a miserable ill- begotten life. Died a nameless unremarked death. Charles looked around. It was a strange idea. Did these people imagine America to be a place lacking in sorrow? Suffering?

-- Charles (Dr. Charles Wickramasinghe: Intermission II)

**Importance:** Charles reveals, in this single quote, the difference between America and Third World countries. America takes on the role of "savior" despite many of these countries being just as advanced and capable of building their own society as America.