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Inherent Vice is Vintage Pynchon

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Bloom: Inherent Vice is Vintage Pynchon

INHERENT VICE IS VINTAGE PYNCHON

Andrew Bloom

Thomas Pynchon, for all we know, could be any of us. A paradox himself, the famously reclusive author of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* has been the de facto godfather of American postmodernism for decades. As of now, even the most passionate of Pynchon investigators have only confidently described his whereabouts as—vaguely—California. Anyone who has ever claimed to spy him publically has done so either unknowingly or in blurry and likely counterfeit Polaroids from the Reagan years, or else in the author's infrequent and disguised guest appearances on *The Simpsons*.

To the lineage of his notoriously dense and convoluted opuses, Pynchon now deposits *Inherent Vice* with a mission imperative not just to satirize but positively drown in postmodern revenge our intellectually nauseating honeymoon with beach reads, Stephen King, and *Twilight*. The reason this strange and lively farce on retro *noir* and detective fiction is giving heart attacks to Pynchon scholars worldwide, however, is that it is decidedly his most accessible novel to date. But devoted Pynchon readers need not chafe at the author's restraining his habit of dosing us with LSD before the end of chapter one. While this adventure's narrative might be marginally less schizophrenic than the bizarre *Mason and Dixon* and contain less than the five hundred significant paranoiacs that populated *Gravity's Rainbow*, the litany of *Vice's* subtleties copulate with the whimsically goofy atmosphere of 1970 Los Angeles in a way that is vintage Pynchon.

The first hit off *Inherent Vice's* bong is the last head-rush of certain reality you'll get before embarking into its bizarre mixture of California beach fog and righteous pot smoke alongside one Doc Sportello, certified positive thinker and licensed P.I. Once

Moebius 151

Doc's ex-girlfriend reappears after a long and smoky hiatus with a plot to kidnap a repenting real estate billionaire—with whom she's also inconveniently in love—before he can succumb to a bout of charity and donate his fortune to acres of bubble-housing for low-income minorities displaced by his bulldozers in L.A. suburbs, the feeling of inevitable complication and furtive, calculating dangers seems to move into everyone's attic for around four hundred pages. (Again, Pynchon newcomers be advised that sentences as grand as the one before abound in all his works, and *Inherent Vice* is not much of an exception.) Sportello is before long a hero of our supressed desire to see what a class clown like ourselves would resemble if we had never sold out, trimmed our hair, and grown up as the sixties stumbled back home and crawled into bed after the last party for a long, long time.

Throughout the course of *Inherent Vice*, Doc will deal with jazz musicians who've faked their own deaths to become undercover spies, smoke weed laced with insidious PCP, explore all corners of Los Angeles for signs that an enigmatic organization known as the Golden Fang is more than just a tax dodge crafted by some dentists, investigate leads that come to his mind from Ouija boards and inadvertent acid trips, represent himself in a court of law, surf the Internet, reform a neo-Nazi, double-park, babysit, and finagle his way out of incarceration while pulled over by police and consummately baked out of his mind. There are dozens, perhaps even more than a hundred, of isolatable shenanigans at work in *Inherent Vice*, and collating them through a Tom Clancy plot generator in random order would perhaps even spawn a decent novel, but there is something primal and compassionate and terrifyingly intelligent in the grand plot Pynchon has constructed for them all. The intimidating, twenty-one chapter doobie of raw plot *Vice* has rolled up catapults us far above the reach of the character-driven claws modernism has wielded against mainstream literature for nearly a century and soars to a height that is exclusively Pynchon's.

Coming down from this height, we must ask ourselves: what is Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr. really up to in *Inherent Vice*? After reading a book released in 2009, but set in 1970, with all its eccentric story arcs, cops and hippies, and drugs and freeways, what is it we are supposed to write on the bottom line of our trip journals? It is the opinion of this humble literature investigator that Pynchon intends to expose us to a world contaminated with such a pervasive *it's us against them* mentality that we cannot fail to feel a tad conspiratorial even after we set the book down. The foggy California coast before long becomes transformed into a kind of proving ground for an empathetic connection between the old and the new, the rich and the poor, order and chaos, paranoia and responsibility. The collision of ideas all at once defamiliarzies our assumptions for describing people unlike ourselves. As Sportello resists the tightening grasp of authority,

152 Campus Controversy

Bloom: Inherent Vice is Vintage Pynchon

the quest to solve the case fast resembles our own mission to reconcile the individual's identity with society's governence, a puzzle that continues to challenge thinkers of all creeds and hair lengths today.

If you can figure out the answer on your own, as Pynchon seems to be saying from his hideout, then you just haven't got the answer. Out there in the fog, who knows if there's an answer? Perhaps the best you can ever do is to get someplace comfortable, light up a fresh joint, and read another book. $^{\textcircled{3}}$