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READING GUIDE:

Paddy Scott's *The Union of Smokers*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for risking whatever takeaways you could have gleaned on your own while reading *The Union of Smokers* for the chance to stroll down the few paths I've cleared for you here. I'm not saying you'll find the book any easier for it—why kill a discussion with an answer key?—but you might enjoy the experience a little more when you dive in.

Because this is a novel, it's worth remembering that there are signs in everything. Some—like the hand-painted one—will be easy to read. Those of the fine-feathered, death-prone, and hen-pecked varieties may require more deliberate consideration. Fortunately, the book provides an experienced theme essayist to help point out the more difficult or (wilfully?) obscure signs. Consider this book a tool to improve your sign-noticing skills. What signs have you noticed recently—and what signs have you missed?

Transition is a theme us novelists like to use. Is “transition” a central theme in this book? I'm not saying. I will note, though, that the late-1960s—the time in which this novel is set—served as a bridge into several societal upheavals: for soldiers returning from war, who had yet to hear of post-traumatic stress disorder; for the voices of protest, who would begin to roll over and play dead at the feet of big business in exchange for a slice of the dream; for an embryonic environmental movement that, having peeked out of its den, would slip back into hibernation for several decades. In other words, no one is spared the decisions of their forefathers. How that cost is metaphorically reflected in the Kaspar Pine's short, sharp world might be worth a spare thought.

The journey motif is another popular element in fiction. The protagonist, with their story-igniting task, hopefully heads off toward some form of moral discovery and, ultimately, personal growth. In *The Union of Smokers*, Kaspar goes on several journeys, or “humps.” In that light, it could be argued that the theme essay he wants to write is simply another kind of journey, in which the writer harvests, and then interprets, the fruits of his labours, of what he has learned along the way—in this case, about abuse, loss, caring, love. He then shares his lessons in matter-of-fact accounts in service of the greater good he knows exists, all wrapped up with a tidy conclusion so there will be no misunderstanding his assignment's main point. After all, a happy ending is a happy ending, despite all appearances to the contrary; is happiness in the eye of the protagonist, or the reader, do you think?

A big thank you for reading!

Cheers,
Paddy Scott

