



Notes on *The Lucky Ones* by Tohby Riddle

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Many ideas and themes are raised by The Lucky Ones, but the prevailing ones relate to change, identity and belonging.

Change

The two main protagonists, first-person narrator Tom and his best friend, Cain, are experiencing a major change in their lives: leaving school for the world beyond. They've just left the ordered, structured world of school – the only world they've really known – for the wider more complex world that is the destination of all school leavers. Excited, disoriented, confused and sometimes outright lost, they're like new arrivals in this world. Especially Tom, who goes forth with less know-how and bravado than the mercurial, ever-confident Cain.

And change begets change. The life-changing rite of passage that is leaving school heralds waves of further changes in the lives of the two school leavers. Especially for Tom, who's struggling to keep up with all the changes, and begins to feel threatened by the uncertainty and loss all this change seems to be bringing. Tom and Cain are brought together and torn apart; Tom's mother leaves, and other people come or go – the future is pounding on Tom's door!

Identity

While Cain keenly seeks out experiences, Tom struggles to work out how to proceed in the post-school world. Who is he? Where does he belong? He has no ready-made path laid out for him - he has to discover it. And given his youth and inexperience, finding his way involves trial and error – with people and places – some of it humorous some of it painfully sad.

Knowing where you belong in the world is a product of self-knowledge: you need to know *who* you are, to know *where* you belong. It takes time for Tom to realise that so many of his wants and desires are founded on infatuations and illusions. They are not really *him*, so to speak. As such he is prone to disillusionments and dead ends in his search for his place in the world. It can take teenagers some time to work out who they are – if they ever do. By book's end Tom has made progress – but, truer to life, there's no Hollywood-style character transformation here, just the reality that the process of becoming yourself is a work in progress – and that it takes time.

Like many teenagers, Tom also seeks a sense of identity through his friendships – because one's identity is also defined through association with others, either personally

or in more formal cultural ways. In particular, Tom defines himself through his friendship with Cain and the world view he thinks he shares with Cain. Yet, all this unravels as Cain's identity shifts and changes throughout the novel, and Cain starts acting in ways Tom doesn't understand.

Belonging

Leaving school often means greater freedom to explore the world, and Tom and Cain waste little time exploring their city and its society. This is part pure curiosity, part seeking out where they might belong, or want to belong (although, it's flagged early on in the novel, when they're refused entry to a New Year's Eve party and have nowhere else to go, that they're somehow outsiders).

Unlike pro-active Cain, Tom is more of an observer of the world he finds himself in. He's not sure he belongs anywhere, except perhaps in a more stable past he can't return to. He feels shut out or alien to the adult world of clubs, fancy restaurants, and buildings full of people in suits; art school appears hostile and elitist; and home a bleak husk of what it had once been when his mother and siblings still lived there.

Maybe this is a male trait, or just a trait of Tom's, but in the end it's as if Tom needs to gain a *physical* perspective of his world in order to gain insight into it and a sense of his place in it. And it's the harbour bridge that offers this.

When he sees, in the serene deep of night, his world laid out as twinkling lights in the landscape, some kind of new awareness awakens in him. As he links particular lights in the landscape to the people in his life, instinctively mapping his personal world, he feels as if he is reconciling these parts of his life and a newfound peace comes over him. He's in the moment. He realises he belongs to the present – no longer the past (because belonging can be about *time* as well as *place*). A chapter of his life has come to an end. And a new chapter can begin.

Motifs and metaphors and imagery

The *Lucky Ones* *abounds with motifs, metaphors and imagery. The following is a selection of the more prominent ones.*

Night

Night itself is a motif in *The Lucky Ones*. Much of the story unfolds in the midnight hours. Perhaps because so much seems possible at night – and perhaps because the mysteriousness and darkness of night could also be a metaphor for the world Tom is blindly groping his way through and struggling to understand. Night is, however, definitely Tom's medium: "When things are just feelings – no harsh light of day to tell you otherwise, to tell you about facts." [p.1]

Lights

As a result of the regular night settings, lights, like mysterious luminous deep sea creatures proliferate in the novel: the lights of the stars, the lights of the city, traffic lights, the headlights and tail-lights of cars, the lights of industrial complexes, a sweeping lighthouse light, navigation lights on the harbour, the soft light of a phone booth ... the dreamy, ethereal imagery of these lights contributes to a particular atmosphere in the novel.

The harbour bridge

The harbour bridge also acts as a motif and metaphor. It is a benign city giant that bridges a divide between south and north (note how the important females to Tom and Cain come from the north, across the bridge); it is Tom's Everest; and it is ultimately the vantage point that allows him to see (literally) his life in some perspective.

The moon

The moon appears in various guises, from the visual paradox of the front cover (an image, *right*, that simultaneously shows the beauty and romance of the moon and the seediness of a beer-stained drink coaster); to the moon suffering the indignity of having three golf balls left on it by astronauts; to the moon whose two faces are metaphors for different states of being – one face, smooth and peaceful, facing ever-inwards on the Earth the other facing ever-outwards into the universe – “cratered with the hurt of seeing.” [p.198] (The latter a metaphor perhaps for the pain and burden of acute sensitivity; note that elsewhere on the question of what happiness is, Cain quotes, “Insensitivity, I guess”. [p.165])



Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan represents a prophetic saviour – an impossible hero – to Tom and Cain, who later turns out to be a tired middle-aged man when they encounter him in real life. An echo of the Wizard of Oz; and a measure of Tom and Cain's all-too-hopeful and unrealistic expectations of another human being.

Literary approaches and devices

The Lucky Ones demonstrates a number of literary approaches and devices that contribute to the novel's particular structure, character and style.

Voice

Voice is all-important to *The Lucky Ones*. It drives the novel and strives to offer true and engaging companionship to a reader – so that it matters less what happens but how it is described and the feeling engendered. From the first page, Tom the narrator makes it clear that he is more interested in feeling than facts: “Facts come from factories.” In part, this approach recalls a letter Neal Cassady famously wrote to his friend Jack Kerouac, about a writer (or narrator) “humbly and sincerely putting on paper that which

he saw and experienced and loved and lost; what his passing thoughts were and his sorrows and desires”.

Cinematic structure

The novel’s structure bears some similarity to the way stories are often told in cinema (though not necessarily conventional Hollywood-style cinema). There is minimal exposition; there’s an overall continuity and direction to the story, but scenes are also assembled according to their capacity to build on themes and moods and how they might reveal character. Chapters are mostly short (as are paragraphs) as the scenes cut between one another; and “cutaways” to salient dialogue or action are used within scenes.

Use of randomness

Reality itself is random – it often bears little resemblance to tightly plotted narratives. So, for the reality of *The Lucky Ones* to work – to feel *real* – randomness is embraced. Its presence increases the dimensionality of the novel’s reality and amplifies its atmosphere. As in real life, there’s a feeling that anything could happen in the story, and this also serves to deepen Tom’s own sense of uncertainty about the world. Examples of randomness in the novel are the middle-of-the-night phone call from a stranger in Utah, and the red-eyed man who interrupts a late-night conversation of Tom and Cain’s to point out a burning car across the street.

Character profiles

Tom

A maverick in his humorous and sometimes perceptive views on the world, but disoriented by all the change going on around him, and uncertain how to proceed. Seeks to learn about the world through observation and reflection – sometimes at the expense of taking necessary action.

Cain

Shares many of Tom’s views of the world, especially as expressed through music, poetry and art. But contrasts with Tom in that he is bold and impulsive and needs to learn about the world through a wide range of direct and potentially destructive experiences. In some ways, especially writing, Cain is a mentor to Tom.

Kara

A kind of mansion-on-the-hill girl to Tom. Wealthy, elegant, socially at ease with the adult world, and somehow unattainable to Tom (who in his greatest moments of self-doubt recalls Oscar Wilde’s dwarf from “The Birthday of the Infanta” [p.41] when he considers his relationship to her). Kara is an infatuation of Tom’s; much of his angst and fretting about her is due to the fact that his energies are being misdirected.

Nathan

In pure contrast to Tom, Nathan is an uncomplicated, unhesitating man of action. He

has a completely different attitude to change, revelling in the present and getting on with the future. He already has a career and is becoming very successful. It is with Nathan that Tom makes attempts to climb the harbour bridge.

Audrey Heath

Enigmatic girl from art school with serene smile and hypnotic “tombstone angel” gaze. Cain’s unexpected, impulsive late-night trysts with her at her house by the sea, is a turning point in the novel.

Tom’s mother

Still a child at heart, when Tom leaves school she leaves home. Both are seeking a new place in the world – Tom’s mother in esoteric and new-age ideas and in starting a new life away from home. Absorbed in her own issues, she appears somewhat absent-minded and not necessarily able to offer Tom the support or guidance he might be seeking.

Tom’s Father

In contrast to Tom’s mother, Tom’s father is of an earlier generation; a reticent, old-school kind of grown up, he bears the burdens of life heavily and is completely dependable. But although he is physically present he seems unable to offer the emotional support or guidance Tom needs at this time.

Further explorations

1. Tom gains perspective on his life when he sees his world physically laid out before him. Imagine seeing your life “mapped” out in this way, and making links between the people and their places that are important to you. What perspective would it offer you? How would it make you feel?
2. As Tom struggles to feel a sense of belonging in his unpredictable and confusing post-school world, he sometimes retreats (in reveries) to the past. How important is it to live in the present in order to feel a sense of belonging in the world?
3. The relationships between Tom and Kara and Cain and Audrey differ greatly. What do they reveal about character?
4. It seems Tom is something of an outsider in his post-school world. Where does Tom most belong? Art school? Kara’s world? Cain’s world? His home? Does he belong anywhere?
5. Tom could be considered a sensitive person; he sees a lot and therefore feels a lot. Can too much sensitivity be debilitating or a burden (as suggested by the metaphor of the side of the moon that faces ever-outwards into the universe being “cratered with the hurt of seeing” [p.198])? Is the quote Cain offers: happiness is “insensitivity, I guess” [p.165], a valid one?
6. Attempting to climb the bridge is an uncomplicated physical challenge with a clear goal – unlike other challenges Tom is faced with, such as what to do about Kara? Is this why Tom is attracted to doing it?