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## 1. AT A GLANCE

This study guide to Tom Franklin's *Crooked Letter*, *Crooked Letter* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview of the structure, context, themes and characters of the novel. Here is a quick rundown of the most important points.

Part 2 takes a brief look at Tom Franklin and his career.

- ⇒ S. 9 → Franklin was born in Alabama in 1963. His career as a writer has been defined by the region of the country in which he was born and has always lived.
- ⇒ S. 10 → *Crooked Letter* is a crime thriller about two boyhood friends who are in fact half-brothers. Franklin is closely associated with the American South.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of the novel.

### *Crooked Letter* – Origins and sources

- ⇒ S. 16 Franklin is a Southern writer: all his published works have been concerned with the history and culture of the American South. *Crooked Letter* was published in 2010 and was his third and to date most successful novel.

### Summaries

- ⇒ S. 18 Two young boys, Larry and Silas, become friends despite social and family pressure (Larry is white, Silas black) in rural Mississippi in the late 1970s. A girl they are both connected to, Cindy Walker, disappears, feared dead, and suspicion falls on Larry. Twenty-five years later, Larry is an outcast in the area, and Silas is now a police officer, investigating the disappearance of a lo-

## 2.1 Biography

## 2. TOM FRANKLIN: LIFE &amp; WORKS

## 2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1963	Dickinson, Alabama	Born on 7th of July in the tiny community (400–500 citizens), Franklin grew up as a huge fan of comic books and pulp fiction (science fiction, horror, fantasy, Tarzan stories, etc.) and was not a good student at school.	Up to age 18
1981	Mobile, Alabama	The family moved, and Franklin attended the University of South Alabama, where he worked many menial jobs and took nine years to graduate.	18
1994	Selma, Alabama	Taught for a year at the famous all-black Selma University.	31
1998	Fayetteville, Arkansas	He graduated from the University of Arkansas with an M.F.A. after four years which he really enjoyed, during which he also met his future wife Beth Ann.	35
1999		First work published, the story collection <i>Poachers</i>	36
2003		First novel published, <i>Hell at the Breech</i>	40
2006		<i>Smonk</i> is published, cementing his reputation as a regional writer	43
2010		<i>Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter</i> is published to widespread acclaim and great commercial success	47
2013		<i>The Titled World</i> is published, a novel Franklin co-wrote with his wife	50
2017		Tom Franklin is currently an associate professor at the University of Mississippi.	54



Thomas Gerald Franklin (\* 1963)  
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## 2.2 Contemporary Background

## 2.2 Contemporary Background

## SUMMARY

Whether he is writing crime fiction or historical novels, Tom Franklin is a regional writer who is closely associated with the American South, specifically the states Alabama and Mississippi. The traditions, lifestyles and landscapes of the South feature prominently in his writing.

## The South

The southern states of the USA are very different from the North. Traditional ways of life which were associated for generations with natural factors like different kind of agriculture (the plantations, for example) and the very different climate are combined with historical, political and social factors including slavery, segregation, the American Civil War, widespread religious intensity and a lot of rural poverty. Industrialisation and urbanisation had been northern phenomena long before they began affecting the South.

Southern identity

Franklin addresses many issues of Southern identity and life in *Crooked Letter*, including **racial dynamics**, the coherence and claustrophobia of small rural communities, and **social problems** like drugs, alcoholism and poverty. He also makes efforts to **portray the languid atmosphere** of the hot and humid climate, and there is a strong awareness of beauty in his descriptions of the landscapes of the South.

## Chicago

North America,  
Illinois

Chicago has many nicknames, including the “Windy City” – referring to its chilly and raw climate – and the “City of the Big Shoulders”, which is a line taken from Carl Sandburg’s poem *Chicago* (1916)



## 2.2 Contemporary Background



Grave of 14-year-old Emmett Till, lynched by a white man.

© picture alliance/  
AP Photo

been responsible for countless murders, lynchings and assaults on African-Americans and civil rights activists.

Silas had virtually no contact with white people when he was growing up in a peaceful all-black neighbourhood in Chicago (131.8–21). It was only when he came to Mississippi that he encountered white people who would openly call blacks the N-word. As an adult, Silas sees the effects of structural racism, for example when he looks at the courthouse and sees exclusively white lawyers and exclusively black defendants (174.4–6).

### Class and social status

“White trash”

The South maintained an almost feudal social system far into the modern era, with powerful, dynastic landowners who ran their vast estates like medieval aristocratic properties, complete with succes-

## 3.4 Characters: Constellations &amp; Characteristics

## 3.4 Characters: Constellations &amp; Characteristics

## SUMMARY

The main characters in the novel are Larry Ott and Silas Jones. They are connected by their friendship as boys and by Carl Ott. Their parents are also important in the novel, as are individuals like Cindy Walker and Wallace Stringfellow, but the novel is essentially about these two men and their complicated and unhappy relationship.

**Larry Ott**

Larry is, at the time of the novel, 41 years old. The **only child of Carl and Ina Ott**, Larry was born in Chabot, where he has lived all his life, apart from the time he spent serving in the US military. Larry is average sized and is not particularly athletic. He “had been chubby as a kid” (p. 20.17) and tended towards “pudginess” (p. 61.29), but is now much leaner. He has “olive skin and straight brown hair and brown eyes with long lashes” (p. 62.32–33). As a child he was sickly and asthmatic (p. 61.26).

Disappointment  
to his father

His father **Carl was a domineering** and abusive presence in his life, and Larry was made to understand throughout his life that he was a huge disappointment to his father – “He understood that Carl liked most everyone except him.” (61.25) His mother loved him and prayed together with him as a child.

Ott property:  
cabin

He lives on the Ott family property, a house with a barn and originally over 500 acres of land, including woodland in which the little cabin stands where the Jones family live and where Tina Rutherford’s body is later found. Since returning from the military and the death of his father, Larry has been forced to sell areas of the Ott family property to the Rutherford timber company.



## 3.4 Characters: Constellations &amp; Characteristics

Larry quit high school and volunteered for military service. He afterwards went on to work at **Ottomotive Repair**, the garage set up by his father. Although as a boy he showed no aptitude for cars, mechanics or the business of working in a garage, he learned the trade while he was serving in the military. The notoriety attached to him as “Scary Larry” (pp.43–47) has meant that the garage now has no local customers. The only business he has is from the occasional driver passing through who needs some minor work done on their car. Larry has literally no income other than the money he can get from selling his family’s land. His life is a cycle of routines, (Chapter 1; p. 197) and having no real work and no social interactions, there is nothing to change the course of his days.

Boring routine

Larry is a **voracious reader** (pp. 86.21–29, 124.14–16: “Of course, he thought. Books. They were everywhere”). He is a great fan in particular of the famous horror writer **Stephen King**, some of whose books feature prominently in the novel. He never drinks alcohol (his father died in a drunk driving accident) and doesn’t do drugs.

Horror fiction

As a child, Larry was different from many of his classmates: He was **shy, sensitive and more interested in nature and his books** than in sports, for which he showed no talent. His shyness is very pronounced: When he smiles he automatically covers his mouth with his hand to conceal the expression (p. 264.1–4).

Larry is terrified of black kids, but when a reorganisation of the local school districts means that he has to change schools, leaving the Fulsom school for the school in Chabot, where the student population is roughly 80% black, we see that he is more likely to feel empathy than the other white children around him. When pressured into conforming to prevalent **racist behaviour**, Larry is deeply uncomfortable and feels guilty.

Empathic

## 3.4 Characters: Constellations &amp; Characteristics

the hospital to check on Larry (pp. 232.1–233.3). He is also the one to call Silas to tell him when Larry wakes from the coma (p. 251). He also calls Silas to inform him that Larry has left the hospital (p. 318.8–27).

**Sheriff Jack Lolly**

Investigating the Rutherford disappearance together with Roy French. Lolly is mentioned by French early on, when he and Silas are investigating Larry's house (p. 90.18–20), and he appears in the novel towards the end, when he and French interview Larry. They try to persuade Larry to confess to having murdered Tina Rutherford and then attempted suicide. Lolly had taken Larry's guns away from him after his father's death – it is implied that this was done with no legal authority (“Took em away how?” – “Just did it.”).

**Devoid Chapman**

A black man who features in various anecdotes told by Carl Ott (pp. 64–67).

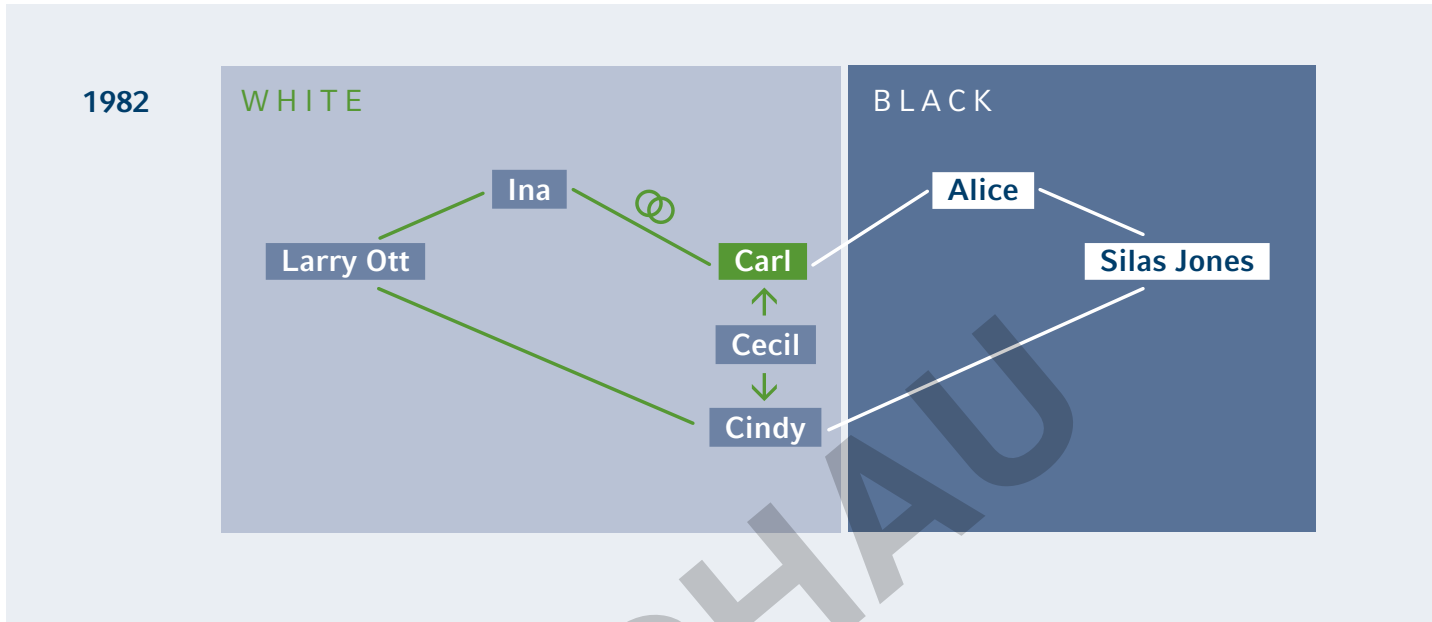
**Ken and David**

Two white boys at school who manipulate Larry into being rude to a black girl, Jackie Simmons (pp. 69–75). They figure in minor roles in Larry's history, typically as unwelcome troublemakers.

**Constellations**

**Larry is the focus** of the novel – the central character and the person around whom the plot revolves, in the past as well as in the present. Larry is an extremely **isolated figure**, yet everyone in the novel is to some degree or another connected to him. His status as main suspect in the disappearances of both Cindy Walker and Tina Rutherford means that everyone has an opinion about him or is actively involved

## 3.4 Characters: Constellations &amp; Characteristics



the major aspects of the book: black/white, then/now, Cindy/Tina, Walker/Rutherfords.

The novel contains a **triangle of brothers**, both real and symbolic: Larry, Silas and Wallace. Larry and Silas are half-brothers and Wallace is a kind of shadowy, twisted symbolic brother to Larry. Wallace shoots Larry and Wallace and Silas almost kill one another as Silas – in addition to doing his job – is in a way trying to avenge Larry.

Larry, Silas and Wallace

## 3.5 Themes

## 3.5 Themes

## SUMMARY

The major themes in the novel revolve around memory and the past, guilt and responsibility and the broad idea of “belonging”. Belonging is an umbrella theme, which covers many other areas: loneliness and friendship, community and race, social status and ostracism. Specific minor themes include power, horror, kindness and cruelty. And as is the case with most fiction involving crime, friendships and secrets from the past, the theme of redemption plays an important role in *Crooked Letter*.

These themes are entwined in complex ways: many of the examples from the text discussed below are relevant to more than one of the thematic areas identified.

**The themes at a glance:**

- Memory, the past and secrets
- Guilt, responsibility and betrayal
- Power
- Belonging
- Horror and monsters
- Redemption

**Memory, the past and secrets**

The story of *Crooked Letter*, *Crooked Letter* unfolds in **two different time periods**. In the past (1979–1982), we have secrets (Silas’ parentage, what happened the night Cindy disappeared), a crime (the disappearance of Cindy Walker) and a betrayal (Larry and Silas –

Childhood and  
adulthood

## 3.5 Themes

the fight, the insult, and Silas' silence), and in the present day we have a second, similar crime – the disappearance and murder of Tina Rutherford – and the overcoming of the old betrayal through the revelation of the secrets.

The two time frames are very significant for the development of the characters. Both Silas and Larry (and other characters around them) have been **frozen in time** by what happened in 1982, unable to escape the crimes and betrayals. For as long as there are secrets and unacknowledged guilt, there can be no confession, forgiveness or resolution of the events of that time.

No resolution

**Prisoners of the past, frozen in time:**

TEXT	PP.	ANALYSIS
"I believe our victim here's the last resident in Mississippi without a remote control. [...] Unusual fellow. A frozen in the 1960s kind of character. [...] My guess is he ain't touched this particular room since his mamma went to the home."	90–95	Silas and Roy French investigate Larry's house. The past is of central importance in the novel. Larry has been frozen in time by the events of 1982. He lives where he was born and has been unable to leave. He goes through the motions of continuing his father's work at the repair shop (without having updated his tools or methods, as French notes – see 91.25–31) and maintains his mother's routines for caring for her chickens.
Shelves full of the books Larry had read as a kid. [...] ... rows of suits and shirts, clothes of a boy on one end and growing longer down the rod, a man on the other.	86.22–87.1	Larry surrounds himself with the books he read as a child and his wardrobe still contains the clothes he has worn through his life from boyhood to manhood (86.29–87.2).