

All Loves Excelling Study Guide

All Loves Excelling by Josiah Bunting III

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Plot Summary

Amanda Bahringer has graduated high school but has not been accepted to the school of her mother's choice, Dartmouth. Her mother, Tess, in an effort to help Amanda reach the goal of acceptance at Dartmouth or some other exclusive, prestigious school, enrolls Amanda in St. Matthew's, a preparatory boarding school with a focus on preparing students for the best colleges. Though Amanda would have been happy with other colleges, Tess holds to the idea that Amanda has to attend Dartmouth and pushes Amanda to excel in all areas. Amanda participates in cross-country track and frantically trains in an effort to run the 5K with a time that will attract the attention of Dartmouth coaches. She plays piano and cello and spends hours at the keyboard in the hope that an outstanding music performance, sent to Dartmouth on tape, will earn her a spot. She takes advanced courses and studies hours every day, hoping that the transcript from the year at St. Matthew's will help her get in. She also participates in a class specifically designed to help her increase her college entrance exam scores.

Amanda puts everything she has into her work at St. Matthews but fails an algebra exam though her final grade in the class is a "C." Each of her actions is viewed by her mother as a failure and Tess berates Amanda, saying that she had obviously failed to focus on her academics in favor of other activities. As Amanda struggles with her mother's disappointment, she believes Tess to be right and sees each failure as a direct result of her own inability to succeed.

The pressure of the hours spent at study, running and piano practice prompts Amanda to begin "self-medicating." By hoarding pills prescribed by her own doctors and combining those with pills taken from her mother's medicine cabinet, Amanda has an impressive supply. She takes several daily, battling anxiety and the need for sleep. Meanwhile, Amanda comes to believe that shaving a few pounds off her weight will increase her running time. The dieting is initially under control if a bit excessive but turns into an eating disorder that has Amanda exercising to extremes of endurance, eating little, binging and purging. Her battle ends when she learns that her newest application to Dartmouth has been "wait listed." She's told that her parents will get the news in a few days and Amanda sits down to write them a letter. The letter is brief, reports the news about Dartmouth and indicates that she's aware her parents have done all they could for her, ending with the idea that it wasn't enough. Amanda then walks to the river, fills her pockets with rocks and walks out until she falls through the ice. Her parents attend the memorial service at St. Matthew's and then return home where the letter from Dartmouth awaits.



Chapters 1 through 9

Chapters 1 through 9 Summary

Amanda Bahringer arrives at the gates of St. Matthew's School with her parents, Tess and Joey. A student named Toby helps Amanda with her bags. Amanda's room is in the "Post Graduate" dormitory, P.G. Morison Dormitory. Joey, Amanda and Tess go to Amanda's room. She is in a "single," and will not be sharing with anyone else. Amanda's room is small and Joey is disappointed, saying that it seems out of keeping with the amount of money they're paying in tuition. Tess and Joey have enrolled Amanda in St. Matthew's in the hope that she'll be able to recover from a "disappointing senior year" at the public high school where Amanda attended, Lawrence High School.

After Amanda is settled in, she and her parents go for welcoming ceremonies at the St. Matthew's Chapel. Tess is pleased with the comments from the school's headmaster, Dr. Passmore. Passmore offers a "homily" to welcome the students and their parents to St. Matthew's. Later, a young man who is obviously a school official talks with a smaller group of students and parents. He says that the post graduate students, like Amanda, have only a few months to make excellent grades and improve their SAT scores in order to gain the attention of the colleges of choice. He points out that anyone with the price of tuition can get into some colleges but that the St. Matthew's students aren't interested in those colleges. They complete the opening day events and Tess notes that Amanda looks frail and frightened. Tess's final actions before leaving Amanda at St. Matthew's are to reassure herself that it's for Amanda's "own good," give Amanda fifty dollars and to say, "Don't let us down."

In chapter two, Amanda's room is on the third floor of Morison and her hall master is Miss Rodman. When Amanda returns to her room after her parents' departure, she finds a note instructing her to contact Miss Dorothea Rodman. Amanda goes to Miss Rodman's apartment and hears the hall master fussing at a girl for her appearance, including torn jeans. Amanda talks briefly to a girl in the hallway before being summoned into Miss Rodman's apartment. Miss Rodman tells Amanda that it would be easy to isolate herself from other students because her first year at St. Matthew's will also be her last, but warns against that tendency. She asks Amanda where she wants to attend college and during the conversation Amanda says that she was rejected by every school to which she applied. Amanda reveals that she's a cross-country runner, that she has no siblings, that her mother works for the Warfield Steadman public relations firm in New York and that her father is in commercial real estate in the Lawrence community in Long Island. After Amanda leaves, Miss Rodman reads the essay Amanda wrote with her application for admission to St. Matthew's. The essay indicates that she hasn't won many academic awards but that she's spent a great deal of time trying.

In chapter three, Amanda's parents, Joey and Tess, are driving home and Joey asks if they've done the right thing by enrolling Amanda in St. Matthew's. He points out that she could be turned down for the prestigious colleges even after a year at St. Matthew's and



Tess says, "I know that," but then adds that Joey isn't to worry about it. Joey also expresses concern that Amanda has been prescribed Paxil. Tess says that the doctor has taken her off the medication and that Joey should understand "drug protocols." In chapter four, Amanda has trouble sleeping her first night and though the doctor has prescribed Halcion to help her sleep, she doesn't take it. She says that she didn't trust the side effects, which include a "fogginess" and nausea.

In chapter five, Amanda goes to Savernake, the dining hall in Penrith Refectory Building. After the meal, Amanda is to go to her first class, advanced placement history with Mr. Roderick Steele. Toby also has that class and walks with her. There are many requirements, including two three-hour study halls each night though students in Amanda's class are allowed to complete those in their dorm rooms.

In chapter six, Mr. Steele quizzes the class on various historic topics and asks Amanda to identify a picture of a man. She guesses Buchanan but learns that it's actually Andrew Jackson. To Mr. Steele's questions, she provides additional information and he tells her that she didn't get "full marks" but "answered bravely," obviously aware that everyone is nervous when he questions them in front of the class. Mr. Steele announces that he gives only an occasional "A" and then only to a "brilliant student who works very hard." Toby tells Amanda that she's smart.

In chapter seven, Tess calls Amanda and Amanda takes the call on the phone in the hallway. Tess tells Amanda that the program will raise her college entrance exam scores "if you let it," then clarifies that Amanda has to work at it. She reminds Amanda about some recent advice about carbohydrates, says she loves her and that she'll be to St. Matthew's for a visit on Parents Weekend. Tess immediately calls Miss Rodman and inquires about Amanda. The result is that Miss Rodman goes to check on Amanda, just as Tess had intended. When Miss Rodman walks in, Amanda is at her desk, studying.

In chapter eight, Amanda is struggling with an algebra problem. She absolutely doesn't understand and knows that two hours with the problems in front of her will accomplish nothing. Amanda loves to be alone and says that solitude is a calming influence, especially after a particularly stressful situation. She also craves order and her room is a reflection of that. Amanda has everything arranged to suit this need, including an array of drugs. There are pain medications for times she needs to "run through the pain," and those include Vioxx, Voltaren and Motrin. She also has antibiotics, Keflex and Amoxicillin, as well as Tylenol PM, Aleve, Caffalert, and some herbal "potions" for weight loss, complexion and energy. In addition to these, the medications taken from Tess's medicine cabinet are there and Amanda has hidden many of them in over-the-counter bottles.

In chapter nine, St. Matthew's college counselor is Robert Arnett. Amanda meets with him and can tell that Robert is stressed. He's actually dealing with demanding parents and is talking to one on the phone, trying to convince a father to consider some different college options. Robert outlines the grades Amanda will have to achieve if she expects Dartmouth to consider her, and they include nothing lower than a "B" in any of her classes as well as an increase in her SAT scores. While Robert says that he'll help her



in her quest for admission to Dartmouth, he suggests that she decide on some alternatives. As Amanda is leaving, Toby arrives. Robert introduces Toby as "a double legacy" who is "just glidin' on through St. Matthew's."

Chapters 1 through 9 Analysis

Amanda is soothed by the ceremony but Joey is obviously uncomfortable during the chapel exercises soon after their arrival at St. Matthew's. It's noted that Joey fears school officials will "ask everyone to give the peace sign to each other." It's not clear why he thinks this, but it is clear that it's a negative point in his mind. While Joey is uncomfortable, Tess is elated and in her element. As she plans for the opening day events, she carefully considers her wardrobe and that of Joey and Amanda. Tess knows that there's to be a "tea," but doesn't know whether students will be invited. She notes that she hopes students aren't included because Amanda "did not do well in such settings." It's typical of Tess that something this important in Amanda's life doesn't really concern Amanda. In fact, Tess has such an overbearing, dominant personality that Amanda's desires are totally ignored in favor of Tess's. But the reader soon realizes that Amanda's personality is also important because she is willing to give over to Tess's dreams without giving any thought to whether those are shared dreams or Tess's alone. An interesting aspect of the situation is that Tess fully expects to stand out during the event. She believes the "tea" will be an extravagant, elegant event and is disappointed that the tea is served in paper cups. She also thinks that she'll "captivate" Passmore but what actually happens is that she's just one mom out of lots of moms, all from wealthy families.

Miss Rodman's assessment of Amanda is very astute. After talking to Amanda only a short time, Miss Rodman realizes that Amanda has the "triple burden" of being an only child in that she has to live up to the dreams of both her parents. She also makes note of several habits, such as the fact that Amanda never looks her directly in the eye and seldom makes a statement without the inflection of a question at the end.

Tess's attitudes about medications seem to be at least reasonably sound in that she knows anti-depressants shouldn't be taken "like a tranquilizer" when stressful situations occur. She mentions "drug protocol" and says that the doctor has taken Amanda off Paxil, but she doesn't mention a new drug Amanda was prescribed to help her sleep. Tess has apparently had an array of drugs in recent years and Amanda actually has several of those with her at school. The "self-medication" Amanda is practicing is soon out of control.

On the first morning Amanda wakes at St. Matthew's, she finds herself sitting on the edge of the bed and notes that she's seen her father in that exact same position. When she's seen him sitting like that, she's assumed that he dreads the day ahead because it is the same as every other and that there's nothing to look forward to. It's interesting that Amanda compares her current situation with that of her father. Unlike him, she is in a new place facing her first day of the new classes and supposedly has an incredible opportunity ahead of her. This attitude seems to indicate that Amanda has

subconsciously accepted the fact that a different school isn't going to make a difference. She's studious and dedicated and has simply made the best grades she can accomplish prior to attending St. Matthew's.



Chapters 10 through 19

Chapters 10 through 19 Summary

Amanda runs along the Seneca River and watches as the rowing teams practice along that river. Toby is on the rowing team. Amanda runs regularly but isn't particularly talented. She took up running when a new policy at Lawrence High School required that all sophomores participate in a sport. She initially enjoys the sport and finds herself with a sense of freedom when she runs. By the time she's enrolled in St. Matthew's, she has been made to understand that if she is an excellent runner, the coaches at Dartmouth might recognize her abilities and request that she be allowed in. Toward that goal, running has become a mission and she no longer enjoys it. Coach Kellam oversees the girls running team at St. Matthew's and he explains that they have to spend time practicing and have to pay attention to nutrition. He cites the fact that a girl in California had recently set a time of 16.23 on the 5K course and says that it was because of practice and nutrition. Kellam, a St. Matthew's graduate himself, continues talking to the girls as Dr. Passmore walks up to watch.

In chapter eleven, Amanda goes for her first class with Dr. Carlisle Passmore. It's a poetry class that's held at Dr. Passmore's house on campus, Ravenspurgh. Dr. Passmore welcomes them to the informal setting. Among the students are Amanda, Toby and a young girl with an obvious Indian heritage named Daniella Ben who is also a runner. Passmore accepts that the course to help students increase SAT grades is necessary because parents demand it but isn't certain it's a good thing for the students. He sits in on one of those classes and looks over the material being handed out. He notes that the instructor says there's always one answer that is "obviously" wrong but Passmore admits to himself that he can't pick out the obvious answer on the material being handed to the students.

In chapter twelve, Amanda is at evening chapel. She listens as the assistant headmaster, Dr. Carrick, talks about self-discipline. Amanda knows that she has to find a way to get her running time down or it's not going to help her get into Dartmouth. She is also practicing a piece to be videoed and sent to Dartmouth but knows that unless the piece is "exquisite," there's no need to send it. In the months between her previous rejection from Dartmouth and this October day at St. Matthew's, Tess has convinced Amanda that "she had to remove what was really a stain on her reputation, on her honor." Tess has impressed upon Amanda that this will be with her for the rest of her life unless she can rectify the situation by being accepted into Dartmouth. Her piano teacher, Mrs. Thompson, is fair but demanding in Amanda's eyes. Mrs. Thompson suggests that Amanda could, by sheer force of will, stop biting her nails. As Amanda listens to Dr. Carrick, she pledges that she will stop.

In chapter thirteen, Amanda recalls the physical that she'd been subjected to prior to her admission to St. Matthew's. She sees Dr. Maine and expects a thorough examination but finds that it's not at all what she'd expected. He cites her obvious talent, her overall



health and encourages her to stay off the anxiety medication, Inderal. He tells her that she has to make time for herself to ease the pressures rather than depending on medications. After the appointment, Tess and Amanda go shopping and Amanda gets new slacks that she wears on her arrival at St. Matthew's at Tess's insistence. One day Amanda goes out for a practice run and encounters Daniella. Daniella notes that Amanda's door is always closed as if she's studying and Amanda says she has to spend that time working. Daniella says she's been at St. Matthew's for four years and that by Thanksgiving the snow will put an end to the running. As they part, Daniella predicts that they'll "be friends."

In chapter fourteen, Parents Weekend includes a concert and Amanda is among the students required to play for that event. Mrs. Thompson says that it's the easiest performance she'll do because parents won't notice whether she plays perfectly. Mrs. Thompson watches Amanda's hands and notes that her wrists are tiny. She knows that Amanda is diligent and that she plays beautifully. As they end a practice session, Mrs. Thompson says that Amanda seems to be "worn away by obligations and ambitions. And fears." She advises Amanda to rest and to dream about playing.

In chapter fifteen, Joey calls Amanda and Joey, sensing the stress in Amanda's life, says Tess shouldn't have sent Amanda to St. Matthew's. Amanda has a supply of medications and keeps many of them in over-the-counter bottles. She has Xanax in an Excedrin bottle and Inderal in an herbal bottle that once contained Milk Thistle. She plans to leave the medications alone but can't bring herself to throw them away. She depends on the Inderal to get her through situations in which she has to be in front of people. She returns to her room to discover a package from her mother, who has begun referring to herself as "Mummy." The boxes contain brilliantly-colored sheets and pillowcases, a notebook and a clock. She notices that the clock has already been set to the correct time and that she has less than an hour to prepare for an interview with a Dartmouth representative. She takes an Inderal and considers what might be asked of her as well as advice she's been given on how to respond. The Dartmouth representative is named Miss Amanda Cha. She laughs at the fact that their first names are the same. She says the running coach will be anxious to let Amanda into Dartmouth. Miss Cha asks Amanda why she wants to attend Dartmouth and Amanda says it's "a great match" and that she believes in the abilities of the faculty. When the question turns to grades, Amanda says she realizes her previous SAT scores were lower than Dartmouth accepts. Miss Cha then says that the coach will have the option to choose only a few runners and that many runners also have high grades. She says that Dartmouth is "a reach" for Amanda. Amanda leaves the interview and encounters Toby who suggests that she apply at some schools in the south but Amanda says that Tess would never allow it.

In chapter sixteen, Joey and Tess have been married twenty years and Amanda is their only child. Joey doesn't believe getting into Dartmouth is a necessity though when he says this aloud, Tess is angry. When Tess talks to Amanda on the phone and Amanda says the workload is "diabolical," Tess is impressed that Amanda has used that word. Back at St. Matthew's, Miss Rodman and Dr. Passmore are talking about Amanda and Miss Rodman says that Amanda looks too thin. She tells Amanda to take it easy on the



exercise. Amanda notes that she weighs slightly more than one hundred, five. That night she takes a Xanax, the first she's taken since she arrived, and says it's to help her sleep. Tess calls one day and she and Amanda argue. Amanda hangs up on her and a few days later she receives a letter from Tess saying the argument is "regrettable" and that they have to move past it.

In chapter seventeen, Dr. Passmore prepares to deal with the day ahead, including a few students who will be sent to him for disciplinary action. In chapter eighteen, Joey and Tess are on hand for a race and they wait by the starting point for Amanda. Joey shouts out to her and Tess hushes him, saying he'll embarrass Amanda. She seems happy to see them and waves. Tess talks to some other parents but the conversations are brief and the end result is that Tess feels outclassed. They talk to Dr. Passmore who says that Amanda is "industrious." When Amanda makes the finish line Joey is worried about her, saying her color looks unhealthy, but Amanda says she simply "went out too fast." Amanda falls into her father's arms for a hug which Tess joins. In chapter nineteen, Amanda performs well and as Tess prepares to leave, she warns Amanda to leave off some of the piano practice time in favor of study time for algebra. And she warns Amanda not to become too thin.

Chapters 10 through 19 Analysis

Dr. Passmore is the official head of St. Matthew's but it's believed by some students that he's little more than an official figurehead. Passmore teaches poetry and realizes that students who don't always do well on tests are usually bright in other areas. He soon recognizes Amanda's abilities in poetry and literature and believes she is brilliant in those areas. He will note that she instinctively understands things that he struggles to comprehend. He has reluctantly agreed that the school should have a course designed to increase SAT scores though he does it because he knows the school has to be competitive and that parents will choose a school with this option over one without. He fully realizes that times are changing and that he has to change with them, but he is somewhat reluctant and he isn't sure that all the changes are for the better. He seems to recognize the incredible pressure the students are under and the negative effect it has on many of them.

Amanda has been prepared for her interview with the Dartmouth representative. As they talk, she considers pieces of advice, such as the fact that she should never give in-depth answers when something superficial will suffice. From her father, she's learned that when giving a person information he doesn't want to hear, it's best to avoid the question entirely. When Miss Cha brings up grades and SAT scores, Amanda looks down and simply doesn't answer. Miss Cha seems not to mind, saying that she has information from the counselor, Mr. Arnette, and that with him as her advocate, the scores are almost secondary. It seems that Amanda is in control during the interview and that she isn't overly nervous, but that she could have made a better impression had she ignored all the tips she'd been given.



The argument Tess and Amanda have is interesting because it's one of the few times Amanda stands up to her mother. Tess says that everyone has Amanda's best interests at heart, a statement that angers Amanda at least partly because she's being driven so hard to succeed. Amanda has already come to realize that she can't accomplish all that Tess wants of her but she continues to doggedly work, apparently believing that if she works hard enough she can somehow achieve more. The argument is ended when Amanda hangs up on her mother - an action that seems incredibly out of character. Neither calls back and it's several days before Tess writes Amanda. In the letter, she says only that the argument is "regrettable," but doesn't seem to at all realize that the pressure is taking an enormous toll on Amanda. For the person looking in on this relationship, it seems obvious that Tess should realize that Amanda is a time bomb and that she's in trouble. For Amanda, it probably seems only a tiny act of rebellion that can't be tolerated.

Tess's attitudes are snobbish but she hates it when she encounters someone who is snobbish to her. When Tess is at St. Matthew's waiting for Amanda to make it to the finish line during the race, she talks to another mother. In an effort to start a conversation, she asks the mother what she "does," indicating her career. The woman is immediately haughty and her manner and words indicate that she doesn't have a job and that she doesn't have to have a job. She is obviously making fun of Tess because Tess has to work. Tess pays careful attention to her attire and to Joey's. She buys him a new suit for the Parents Weekend events. She chooses but even then isn't happy with how he looks.



Chapters 20 through 25

Chapters 20 through 25 Summary

In chapter twenty, Amanda is at Savernake when she hears the daily announcements including that a particular student has been admitted to Oxford for the fall of 2001. The way Amanda becomes a student at St. Matthew's is not direct. When she is nine, Tess's public relations company of Warfield Stedman opens a branch in Garden City, near their home in Lawrence. Tess no longer makes the lengthy daily commutes and has time to focus on Amanda. Tess creates a daily calendar of Amanda's activities, including piano and cello lessons, classes and appointments, right down to what time is free for Amanda to do what she wants. Amanda participates in the creation of these calendars and it becomes ingrained in her to live according to the times set down on paper by Tess. Then Tess begins focusing on nutrition. Amanda isn't allowed diet drinks or gum and all junk food is eliminated from her diet. White bread and sugared cereal is also on the list which is soon very long. Evenings are spent quizzing Amanda, a ritual Tess finds dissatisfying because neither she nor Joey can answer some of the questions, such as "What is an ayatollah."

In chapter twenty-one, Tess talks constantly about Amanda's accomplishments at St. Matthew's. She has a chance encounter with a man connected with her boss and envisions being able to drop names in other situations. Tess recalls that one day she and Joey had still been in bed when Amanda, then nine, had begun playing piano. The playing was tentative, but accurate and Tess immediately offered to sign Amanda up for lessons. In chapter twenty-two, Amanda at seven had written an essay about "prairie schooners" and Joey is impressed with the thoughts put into it. But the essay had earned Amanda a "C," and Tess, citing the mistakes, sought out a tutor. Other students make higher grades but Amanda works hard for hers. Joey disagrees with Tess's attitudes and believes that Amanda should be "loved and sustained" rather than "driven." By Amanda's senior year at Lawrence High School, she's spending hours a day at study and using a caffeine drug to help her stay awake. She contracts mono and loses a great deal of the momentum.

In chapter twenty-three, Tess meets a man named Coggin Lindsay through her work and learns that he attended Dartmouth. She says that her daughter is "just starting to look around" for a college and asks if Dartmouth's entrance requirements are difficult. Lindsay asks if her SAT scores and grades are good, but doesn't wait for Tess's reply, responding that all students at St. Matthew's have high marks. He then says that if Amanda decides to apply to Dartmouth he'll write a letter of recommendation. Tess calls Amanda that evening with the information about Lindsay. She tells Amanda to write to Lindsay with information about herself and Amanda says she will. Tess says that Amanda doesn't seem pleased but Amanda says that it seems "fakey." Tess gets an email from Lindsay later with a promise that he has contacts in the admissions office and that he believes he can help smooth the process for Amanda.



In chapter twenty-four, Amanda considers an essay question that's among the requirements for college admission. She notes that high SAT scores and grades simply aren't enough. In chapter twenty-five, Amanda is preparing for the SAT tests, which she notes as her final opportunity to impress Dartmouth admissions counselors. She'd taken Vivarin the previous night and can still taste it after having stayed up most of the night going over word lists and studying fractions, metaphors and more. She takes Xanax and Inderal and goes to Gibbon Gymnasium for the test. Amanda takes a seat well away from the doorway and notes that everyone else in the room looks as worried as miserable as she. She is fully aware that there's a great deal riding on the scores and that her mother is expecting her scores to increase by at least two hundred points over her previous scores.

Chapters 20 through 25 Analysis

Tess works diligently at her own goals and wants that same zeal for Amanda. What's interesting is that Tess has a need for accomplishment. She wants Amanda to accomplish specific dreams and goals but even when Amanda's goals aren't getting any nearer, Tess can sometimes replace those with her own accomplishments. For example, it seems that Tess works very hard at staying in shape as if by doing so, Amanda will also be accomplishing something. Tess says that she is focused on Amanda's dreams but in reality, she's just driven.

Though Amanda works hard, Tess realizes that Amanda sometimes just doesn't "get" the importance of a particular lesson. Through her dedication, she makes mostly A's, but there are always some lower grades and her grade point averages range in the low threes. This dedication continues to come to her aid as she makes higher than average grades at St. Matthew's. The recurring problem is that Tess isn't satisfied with anything less than perfection and Dartmouth and her refusal to consider anything else results in constant disappointment.

Tess is annoyed with Amanda when Amanda isn't overly excited about Coggin Lindsay's offer to write to the president of Dartmouth. Amanda seems to immediately suspect that Lindsay, like many people, is exaggerating his relationship and his ability to help Amanda. That doesn't seem to have occurred to Tess but once Amanda expresses some doubts, Tess seems to feel differently as well. Tess admits to some nagging doubts about the lengths to which she's willing to go to help Amanda get into Dartmouth but tries to ignore them.



Chapters 26 through 28

Chapters 26 through 28 Summary

In chapter twenty-six, Amanda is in the dining hall and Toby notes that she doesn't seem to eat much. The daily announcements include students who have been dismissed for various causes and Toby says that one had "huffed" chemicals and another had been medicine that wasn't his own. He says that it happens routinely and that's why students like Amanda have the opportunity to step in to St. Matthew's for a year to prepare for an exclusive college. Toby tells Amanda that he sometimes watches her run while he's rowing on the Seneca River and that her expression is not happy. Amanda is worried about her math grade but hopes that Dartmouth will be willing to take a well-rounded student who has only an average grade in math. Later that day, she sees Robert Arnette who tells her that he expects emails from her regarding entrance exams to Trinity and Hamilton immediately. He tells her to focus on her running on the applications.

In chapter twenty-seven, Amanda has a note from her mother urging that she try a particular herbal supplement and Robert Arnette says she has to focus soon on a piano video. Amanda comes to believe that if she loses three or four pounds, she'll be able to take some time off her total running time for the 5K. The next morning she is tired and realizes the full day ahead of her, including the massive study time. She takes an Inderal to help her face it and renews her decision to lower her weight but decides that getting the weight under one hundred pounds would help "in so many ways."

In chapter twenty-eight, Amanda asks Dr. Passmore to write a recommendation for her to Dartmouth and he has her write a list of points to focus on. He fears that anything he writes truthfully will sound patronizing. The next morning's announcements include two being expelled. Those leaving the school are labeled "systemic departures." In chapter twenty-nine, the girls are headed back from a track meet. Amanda had finished second, coming in less than a half minute behind Daniella which is typical of their race times. The coach talks to Amanda about her times and how that could help with her admission to Dartmouth.

In chapter thirty, Amanda begins to wear baggy clothes in an effort to ensure that no one can tell that she's lost weight. Everyone has met Tess and knows that she's small as well. They all believe that Amanda is fully in control of all aspects of her life and no one suspects an eating disorder. By now, Amanda can hardly stand meats at all. Every morning she butters two pieces of toast then nibbles a piece of dry toast so that everyone assumes she's eating the two she buttered. She requests condiments at mealtimes so that people remember that she asked for the salt, but seldom eats anything more than tiny amounts of fruit, lettuce, tomato or a cooked vegetable.

In chapter thirty-one, Amanda is called to Miss Rodman's apartment for her semester grades. Miss Rodman notes that Amanda has worked very hard all semester and that she doesn't know of anyone who has worked harder. She notes that Amanda has a C in



algebra and that the professor acknowledges that Amanda doesn't grasp the concepts. He also says that she works hard and that she won't fail if she keeps working this diligently but isn't likely to miraculously achieve an A either. She has an A in Passmore's poetry class but Amanda knows that it's not an advanced placement class and that it won't matter on her Dartmouth application. Robert Arnette writes to Joey and Tess and tell them that they should be proud of Amanda's diligence, but he urges them to call on any personal "ins" they have at Dartmouth to help Amanda's application process.

In chapter thirty-two, Tess is on an airplane using the airplane phone to contact Amanda's algebra teacher. She is dressed up and feels "pretty," noting that it's become "fashionable" to dress casually for flights but that she doesn't adhere to that rule. When she finally reaches the teacher, she yells at him, attracting the attention of all the other passengers. He initially doesn't seem to know who Tess is which makes her even angrier. She tells him that she's going to call Passmore to relate the "kind of trash" the teacher wrote about Amanda, that she has other connections she'll be contacting as well, and that she wants him to "think hard about that grade." There's applause from the other passengers when she finishes the call.

In chapter thirty-three, Amanda goes to the infirmary complaining of flu symptoms. The doctor tells her she needs several days away from the running and that she has to take some time off for leisure time. She encounters Daniella and notes that they haven't become close friends because there simply isn't time. When Amanda takes the starting line for the first race after Thanksgiving, she's certain she's going to have an excellent time. She is thinking about her life as she runs and imagining what would happen if her SAT scores reached 1730 when Daniella falls. Amanda, seeing that Daniella is really injured, stops and helps her pull back from the river though the other runners continue without looking back. At Daniella's urging, Amanda takes off again and doesn't finish last but has a time of just more than eighteen minutes. Passmore completes his letter to Dartmouth and talks about Amanda's "beauty of character" among other things.

In chapter thirty-four, Amanda is in Passmore's class reading about Virginia Woolfe when she learns that the poet had committed suicide by filling her pockets with rocks and jumping into a river. When Amanda is back at the dorm she watches a student loading her possessions into her car while her mother stands by. Amanda, knowing the girl has been sent home for good, can't imagine what it would be like to deal with her own mother after that particular failure. In chapter thirty-five, Amanda gets her SAT scores - a 1340. She's pleased. In chapter thirty-six, Amanda goes home for Christmas. In chapter thirty-seven, Amanda and Tess argue constantly over the break. As they are returning to campus, they argue over whether Amanda should apply to other colleges. At one point the conversation turns to medicines and Tess wants to press Amanda about what she's taking but knowing that Amanda is aware that Tess has taken Paxil makes Tess uncomfortable and she doesn't. Tess also mentions that Joey had heard Amanda throwing up but Amanda says it was nothing. Tess talks to Miss Rodman who says she's worried that Amanda doesn't interact with other students and has few friends. Tess leaves with the admonition that Amanda has to study at the algebra, even when she doesn't want to. Joey calls after Tess leaves and Amanda quotes a poem for him, saying that it means beauty is wasted unless someone realizes the beauty. Joey



tells her he's proud of her. Amanda begins writing in a journal Tess gave her and the first entry is about the various medications she's taking.

In chapter thirty-eight, Amanda knows she has to write a "brilliant" essay for her history test and feels incapable. She dreads the algebra class and notes that walking by the classroom is scary. She plans for the piano video and knows she has to practice at least twelve hours a week for more than a month to accomplish that. She is prescribed an anti-anxiety medicine but told that she has to want to ease the anxiety rather than depend on a drug. She notes that her thighs are bulging, that there have been several "systemic departures" and cites a saying that requires anyone who has an ability use that to its fullest.

Chapters 26 through 28 Analysis

Amanda continues to work on a routine just as she did when her mother was controlling all her time with a daily calendar. Though Amanda apparently doesn't keep a calendar now, she has allotted time for study in particular courses, running, piano practice and everything else necessary on her weekly routine. She is taking advanced placement Latin and notes that a person doesn't have to be particularly bright in the subject but does have to keep working through the process in order to get good grades. She wishes that were also the case with algebra and spends hours in study for that class but can't seem to grasp the concepts being taught.

Amanda's thoughts on the morning she takes an Inderal to help face the day are the first time it's evident that she's become obsessed about her weight. Up to this point, she's simply watched her weight closely or thought that if she could lose three or four pounds it would help her run time. But the thoughts suddenly shift at this point. She says that if she were able to get her weight under one hundred pounds, it would help "in so many ways." The first problem is that Amanda isn't a short girl and the weight is obviously not healthy for a girl of her height. But the next problem is that she's now caught up in this idea that by dropping her weight to less than one hundred pounds she'll take control of other aspects of her life. This compulsion will grow over coming weeks so that she is miserably conscious of her body and begins a cycle of binging and purging.

Tess's call to Amanda's math teacher is incredible. She's obviously used this tactic before and has been successful in bullying some teachers into giving Amanda better grades. What's interesting is that Tess talks about the "trash" the teacher wrote about Amanda but she obviously believes it because she buys Amanda a book that's the equivalent of "algebra for dummies."

At one point over the Christmas break, Tess asks Amanda if she's got her other college applications turned in yet. Amanda is incredulous and angry. She tells Tess that she has a single goal - Dartmouth. She goes on to say that she knows Tess has that same singular goal. Tess seems to be indicating her willingness that Amanda attend some school other than Dartmouth but Amanda takes it that Tess has accepted that Amanda



won't be accepted at Dartmouth. The animosity between the two at this point has grown exponentially, at least partly because of shared disappointments and blame. At another point in a particular conversation, Tess says that she is pleased with Amanda's progress and that she believes Robert Arnette can "package" Amanda so that Dartmouth will accept her.



Chapters 29 through Epilogue

Chapters 29 through Epilogue Summary

In chapter thirty-nine, Amanda is in the hall when a group of hockey players push past here, one of them saying, "Amanda, get your fat ass out of the way." She goes immediately to her room, strips and looks at herself in the mirror. She believes that the word "fat" is an accurate description. She decides that she must take control of her body immediately but has a headache and takes a pill from Tess's supply of migraine medications along with a Xanax. In chapter forty, Tess calls and accuses Amanda of being distant. Amanda's response is to say that she has to go, ending the conversation. She goes into town and buys a huge supply of junk food. In chapter forty-one, she prepares for the day ahead, beginning with piano lessons and practice. She weighs just more than ninety-six pounds and notes that the top of her belly is taunt, resistant to her constant efforts at slimming down further. She recalls talking to Toby and his hurt feelings that she is resistant to his efforts at friendship and brushes away his statements of concern for her well-being. She receives an email from her mother containing the letter written to Dartmouth by Coggin Lindsay.

In chapter forty-two, Amanda is working on Latin but thinking about algebra and knowing that sending her piano video to Dartmouth is a waste of time because they receive hundreds. She's in her room one night when her heart begins to flutter and she goes to the infirmary. To the nurse practitioner's questions, she says that she'd taken Vivarin, denies having any other medications but says that she was on Xanax before coming to St. Matthew's. She weighs Amanda who is amazed that the nurse doesn't take into consideration the weight of her heavy clothing, asks about her eating habits then tells Amanda to go back to her dorm and rest. Dr. Passmore and Miss Rodman talk about Amanda later, having heard about her trip to the infirmary, and Miss Rodman is of the opinion that Amanda needs more people praising her. Amanda later feels better, citing the fact that two medications taken together had lessened her fluttery heart and anxiety.

In chapter forty-three, Amanda considers that she needs nothing less than an A-minus in history and that the history teacher is likely to ask about Abraham Lincoln. Amanda takes stock of her medicine supply and believes that she's taking everything within "reason." She is also pleased that her dependence isn't increasing. She overhears Toby and some friends talking about a recent study session, notes that she has "nothing to say to these people," and goes to practice her piano.

In chapter forty-four, Amanda goes on an eating binge and devours several boxes of cookies, but knows that she has to vomit them up within a short time or risk absorbing the calories. After she finishes throwing them all up, she feels relaxed and confident again. In chapter forty-five, Amanda has to go for a check-up at the infirmary. She fills her pockets with quarters and goes at a busy time of day to ensure that the infirmary personnel have little time to deal with her. Her journal entry indicates the number of



medications she's taking, her weight which is now almost down to ninety-two pounds, and some rambling thoughts on various topics.

In chapter forty-six, the students participate in a traditional event during which they receive their grades. Amanda finds that she failed the algebra test but made a C-minus in the class for a total grade point average of three-point-two. She is crying after she sees the grades and Toby points out that about half the class failed the test and that she earned an A in history, one of only two. He goes on to assure her that she'll be admitted to Dartmouth despite the grade and that the entire thing doesn't really matter. She receives an email from Tess which indicates her disappointment with Amanda's grades. She accuses Amanda of spending too much time running and playing the piano while ignoring the time she should have been studying algebra. She says that Amanda had been aware that without the "academic piece," the plan was destined to fail, but had made the decision to ignore algebra. The email ends with the admonition that Amanda think about what should be her priorities and decide what's most important. Tess immediately sends a letter to Coggin Lindsay, saying that "with one not very significant exception," Amanda's grades from her first semester at St. Matthew's were excellent.

In chapter forty-seven, Toby tries to get Amanda to talk to him but she rebuffs his attempts. Amanda is practicing one day when Mrs. Thompson leaves the room. Soon after her departure, Joey walks in. Amanda is happy to see him and they spend some time together. Joey tries in his own way to talk to her about her future, telling her that someday she have someone else at her disposal to do every bit of calculating she needs done, and she understands that he doesn't care about her algebra grade. When Amanda jokes that she probably doesn't have a future as a math teacher at M.I.T., Joey responds that she takes after him in that respect because he can't even calculate commissions. Amanda says that she'd like to spend Easter break on a short vacation with Joey and Tess. Joey learns that there are a lot of kids being sent home and says that the "casualties" are worse than he saw in Vietnam. Joey reminds her that she'll be leaving St. Matthew's in early June, that there are lots of colleges available, and asks if she needs any money before he leaves. Later, Amanda is leaving the gym where she's been routinely working out on the treadmill. She encounters Coach Kellam who tells her that she can't count on the treadmill to determine how many calories she's burning during a typical walk. He says that the counter is set for a man who weighs about one fifty, meaning her actual calorie loss will be less than the machine indicates. A journal entry dated February 20 indicates that Amanda weighs barely more than ninety-two pounds. She has another episode with her fluttering heart and goes again to the infirmary. On February 22 she writes that she is "all alone now." On February 28 she writes that she's taking a caffeinated diet aid.

In chapter forty-eight, Amanda realizes she's in history class but can't remember how she got there and can't stay awake. At the instructor's direction, Toby helps her back to the dorm. Amanda's journal entry on March 3 recounts a letter from her mother in which Tess says that Amanda was sent to St. Matthew's with high hopes but that anything she accomplishes is only going to be done because of Tess's intervention. Amanda notes that she's spending more time on the treadmill to make up for the information from Coach Kellam and that she took six Xanax the previous day. In chapter forty-nine,



Amanda learns she got put on the waiting list at Colgate. Though Robert Arnette tells her that only two were accepted into Colgate, Amanda says that her mother will be furious. He assures her that "it's not that big a thing" and encourages her to stay positive about her other applications. She leaves and receives word from Robert a few days later that he's heard from Dartmouth. In chapter fifty, Robert believes that he has to try to help students get past being rejected by their schools of choice. When Amanda doesn't come directly to him, he goes to her dorm room and delivers the news that an informant from Dartmouth has let him know that Amanda isn't going to be accepted. He says that she knows prior to her parents receiving the news. After talking with Robert, Amanda heads out for a walk. She leaves a letter for her parents that says they'll know soon that she wasn't accepted by Dartmouth. She ends with, "you gave me all you could give me and it wasn't enough."

In chapter fifty-one, Amanda looks at her medications and wonders about the names. She takes note of a video that her mother had sent, titled "If you can do simple arithmetic you can do higher math! Anyone can!" She weighs and finds that she's fallen below ninety pounds. She goes to the river where there is still ice over much of the water. She stands at the bank and fills her pockets with rocks. Then she steps onto the ice and follows it until it thins, far from the bank. She then throws herself into the water.

In the epilogue, Joey and Tess are at the St. Matthew's Chapel for a liturgy for Amanda. Dr. Passmore delivers a message though there is no eulogy, for which Tess is happy. Dr. Passmore says that Amanda's life has to be a model to them that her fate will never befall anyone else. He says that there's consolation available, but that it must be earned. As they leave campus, Toby brings the last box of Amanda's possessions from her room, which includes her journal. In the car, Tess takes it out and begins reading but Joey urges that she put it away but she continues. At home, Tess goes to bed but Joey takes time to read the mail first. Among the letters is one from Dartmouth. Upstairs Tess asks if there was any mail but Joey says there was "nothing important."

Chapters 29 through Epilogue Analysis

In chapter thirty-nine, the reader gets the first real look at the fact that Tess is desperately trying to take control of her life and that her weight becomes the epitome of that effort. She seems to realize that she can't control everything and can barely get a grip on the majority of what's demanded so that she feels that having control of her weight is necessary.

In Tess's email to Amanda about Amanda's grades, Tess writes that, "You are my daughter and I still love you." While she is giving lip service to her love for Amanda, it's obvious that her love is conditional and that her disappointment in Amanda's grades is higher on her mind than her love for Amanda. This has become such a constant mantra between Tess and Amanda that the reader is likely tired to hearing the repetition by this point in the book. It seems obvious that Tess's demands are unreasonable and that she has no faith in Amanda's own abilities. It also seems obvious that Amanda would be destined to fail in her college efforts with Tess's demands weighing on her. It's



interesting that Tess can tell everyone else how proud she is of Amanda's accomplishments. It seems an inevitable part of her personality that Tess would put Amanda in the best light to others while ignoring Amanda's accomplishments herself.

Joey broaches the subject with Amanda about her happiness. He asks what she's gotten out of St. Matthew's and what the St. Matthew's staff expects of her. She says that the ultimate goal is to get an admission letter to Dartmouth, which would make Tess happy. Joey asks Amanda what she plans to do then, obviously pointing out that the admission into Dartmouth has taken over at the ultimate goal for Tess which has been transferred to Amanda. Joey seems to realize that Amanda is not going to be happy at Dartmouth and that she's eventually going to have to make some life decisions for herself. It's all foreign to Amanda though it's obvious that her emotions have been on a roller coaster during her time at St. Matthew's. It's noted that Amanda gave in completely to Tess's plans once Tess had time to devote to Amanda's life but Amanda has balked more recently, snapping at Tess so that the two of them are fighting very regularly. Again, the repetition by this point has become so monotonous that the reader may lose interest.

It's interesting that Joey supports Tess as they are grieving for Amanda. There's no doubt that he loved Amanda as much as Tess. It's also certain that Tess is mostly to blame for Amanda's suicide. However, Joey reassures her that Tess loved Amanda and did everything she could for Amanda. It seems that there would have been recriminations at this point and that Joey would have freely blamed Tess, but he may realize that it's too late for him to intervene. He may also be feeling the guilt of having allowed the situation to go on without stepping in on Amanda's behalf. Tess says that she knows there's no one else to blame other than herself but it's too soon after Amanda's death to see how the suicide will impact Tess for the long term.



Characters

Amanda Bahringer

Amanda is the daughter of Tess and Joey and is greatly influenced by her mother's dreams for her future. It's because her mother hopes Amanda will be accepted to Dartmouth that she is sent to St. Matthew's. The goal is to improve her grades and increase her SAT scores so that she will be accepted to Dartmouth. Amanda isn't a brilliant student but maintains higher-than-average grades in most subjects. She struggles to achieve the grades and some of her professors realize that her work ethic is so strong that she is destined for a successful life. The problem is that Amanda's mother has taken such control of Amanda's life, including her academics and extracurricular activities, that anything Amanda wants for herself is pushed aside in favor of her mother's dreams. Amanda is self-conscious and worries constantly about failures. She seems to completely lose sight of her own hopes in favor of attending Dartmouth. Amanda is dedicated to her mother's dream and doesn't seem to realize that they aren't her own. It seems likely that she is, by nature, anxious to please, and that this tendency impacts her willingness to put her mother's hopes ahead of her own. Amanda's weakness is that she isn't able to achieve these goals though it's not because she isn't trying. She seeks answers in the form of medication and when she is unable to reach those goals, she takes her own life.

Tess Bahringer

Amanda's mother, she is a domineering personality and is a public relations executive. Tess is determined in her own life, reaching for career goals that cost a great deal of time, dedication and energy. But she reaches those and climbs the ladder within her company. The change in the lives of Tess and Amanda comes when Tess is given a job that allows her to work closer to home. Saved the daily commute, she pours her extra time and energy into her daughter's life. Tess is highly organized and instills this in Amanda. Throughout Amanda's childhood, Tess dictates daily activities on note cards, right down to free time. Tess doesn't see her involvement as wrong and says she's pushing Amanda in order to help her make the most of her life, but it seems that Tess does realize that she is overly demanding by her attitude after Amanda's death. She tells her husband, Joey, that she knows she's to blame for Amanda's suicide and it seems likely that she will blame herself, at least to some degree, though her personality is such that she will probably recover. Tess's dedication to Amanda is such that she pulls on every possible contact in an effort to further Amanda's chance of getting into Dartmouth. Tess herself is unsure of herself and works hard at making the right impression in every situation. It seems likely that her uncertainty is at least part of the reason she drives Amanda.



Joey Bahringer

Tess's husband and Amanda's father, he is an unassuming man who is very proud of Amanda's accomplishments. Joey is notably less refined than Tess, a fact that embarrasses her. Joey isn't nearly as pushy as Tess and it seems that if it were up to him, he'd be happy to allow Amanda to choose her own path.

Dr. Carlisle Passmore

The head of St. Matthew's, it's noted that he's really more of a figurehead by the time Amanda attends. He teaches a poetry class and recognizes Amanda's talents. He writes a letter of recommendation for her to Dartmouth and seems genuinely concerned about her health and happiness. He is pleased when she tells him something new and Amanda notes that he "beams" whenever that occurs.

Toby

The student who helps Amanda unload her possessions upon her initial arrival at St. Matthew's. Toby is bright but unwilling to drive himself past a certain point in his quest for good grades. He worries about Amanda and points out that she doesn't seem to have fun running. Toby also senses that Amanda is developing an eating disorder and tries to help her but she shuts him out.

Dorothea Rodman

The hall master for the third floor of Morison, where Amanda's dorm room is located. Miss Rodman approves of Amanda and sees that she is having trouble coping with the schedule at St. Matthew's, and mentions it to Dr. Passmore. Miss Rodman notes that Amanda's demeanor upon her arrival at St. Matthew's indicates that Amanda has been "knocked around pretty well."

Robert Arnette

The college counselor at St. Matthew's, he is dedicated to the students but sometimes exasperated by the demands of their parents. Robert has a network of "moles" who share information about various colleges and their admissions selections. Those people often inform Robert whether a student has been selected long before the formal letter arrives and Robert sometimes uses that information to help the student be prepared for the letdown of a rejection. Robert hopes that telling Amanda that she's been rejected by Dartmouth will help her cope with the rejection but she commits suicide shortly after learning of the decision.



Roderick Steele

The history teacher, he is tough with grades. He declares that he seldom gives an "A" and then only for a brilliant student who studies very hard. His class is known as very tough and Amanda is one of only two to come out of the semester with an "A."

Daniella Ben

The student who is in several of Amanda's classes and is a runner as well. Daniella is exceptionally intelligent and is a gifted runner. She always sets the pace and outruns Amanda in every race. Daniella falls on the final race of the season and Amanda stops to check on her, losing a full minute on her time.

Coach Kellam

He's a St. Matthew's graduate and the coach of the running team. Coach Kellam says there are two things that will make the girls into excellent runners, and those are practice and good nutrition. He encounters Amanda on several occasions after the running season is officially over and always asks if she's alright.



Objects/Places

Lawrence

The name of the community where Amanda and her parents live.

St. Matthew's

The name of the preparatory school where Amanda hopes to prepare for Dartmouth.

P.G. Morison Dormitory

The dorm on St. Matthew's campus where Amanda has a room, the dorm is designated for post graduates.

Lawrence High School

The public high school where Amanda attended prior to enrolling at St. Matthew's.

Dartmouth

The college Amanda is seeking admission to.

Penrith Refectory Building

Where the dining hall is located.

Savernake

The name of the dining hall.

Seneca River

Where the school's rowing team practices.

Ravenspurgh

Dr. Passmore's house and the site of the poetry class Amanda loves.

St. Matthew's Chapel

Where Amanda's funeral is held.



Themes

Living up to expectations

Amada's efforts to live up to her mother's expectations end up costing her life because Tess is overly demanding and simply can't be satisfied. Amanda's early childhood is apparently lived without the constant demands of her mother but then Tess has a job closer to home and literally takes over Amanda's life. Tess comes to have hopes and dreams for Amanda and fosters those onto Amanda's lifestyle and activities. Amanda gives in to those demands and seeks only to please her mother. There's no mention of how Tess becomes fixated on Dartmouth but it becomes the goal and the only goal Tess will accept. What's interesting is that she drills this into Amanda to the point that when Tess asks if Amanda has turned in other college applications, Amanda is angry, pointing out that Dartmouth is the goal. Tess's handling of Amanda has apparently created in Amanda a desire to please everyone, and that means that she wants to live up to the expectations of every teacher and coach as well. When the running coach points out that a girl had recently set a really good time for the 5K run, Amanda pays attention to the fact that the coach says the girl made that accomplishment by working at it and watching her nutrition. As Amanda becomes plagued with an eating disorder, she seeks to hide it because he knows that she's expected to eat at mealtimes. It's noteworthy that Tess's expectations for Amanda are stronger in Amanda's mind than those of anyone else. While Amanda feels bad about a bad grade, her first thought is that her mother is going to be angry.

Self-Discipline

Amanda's self-discipline is incredible, having been ingrained from early childhood. As a youngster, Amanda's life is literally mapped out on a daily calendar. Time set aside for piano practice, appointments, study and even free time is marked on the calendar and Amanda is expected to follow the timeline. From an early age she learns to do so and this stands her in good stead when she takes up her life in a dorm at St. Matthew's. Though Amanda doesn't keep a calendar, she has time set aside for various activities, including running, piano practice and studying for each of her classes. Everyone except Tess notes this diligence and self-discipline in Amanda and comments on it. Amanda has been taught that she can accomplish anything with this self-discipline and she comes to realize that at least in some cases, spending time studying is enough. This is the case in Latin and history, both subjects in which she does well. The exception is algebra and Amanda admits that she doesn't grasp the concepts even though she spends the required hours studying the subject. Tess believes that Amanda's self-discipline has slipped and that she didn't study the algebra as she should have. This self-discipline cracks when Amanda becomes addicted to prescription and herbal drugs and develops an eating disorder. Though she believes she has both under control, it's obvious that she doesn't and that both become crutches as she struggles to meet the expectations of her demanding mother.



Family Dynamics

The family dynamics of the Bahrings is vital to the story because had any one of their personalities been different, there would have been a different outcome to the story. Beginning with Tess, it's noted that she's a demanding wife and mother and that her expectations are incredibly high for herself and everyone around her. While Tess apparently loves Amanda, she has become obsessed with an education from Dartmouth, and makes Amanda accept that this is the only option available for a successful and happy life. Joey disagrees with Tess and believes that Amanda should be loved and nurtured. However, his personality is not nearly so strong as Tess's and he apparently isn't willing to step in with any significant positive force. He remains almost a bystander, telling both Amanda and Tess that it will not be the end of their lives if Amanda doesn't attend Dartmouth. Amanda realizes that her father is proud of her, regardless of her algebra grade, but she seems to count him as secondary to her mother. Amanda herself is willing to allow her mother control, at least to a great degree. The two bicker and argue when the strain on Amanda becomes significant but Tess continues to make demands and Amanda is never willing to fully exert herself against her mother's will.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person from an omniscient perspective. This perspective is appropriate for the story line and point of view. The use of the omniscient perspective is vital because the two main characters - Tess and Amanda - are together only occasionally. Had the author presented from the perspective of Tess, the reader would not have known about Tess's shortcomings. Tess herself is insecure and this is an important aspect of her personality. The same would have been true had the author presented the story from Amanda's perspective. Amanda fully gives over her own dreams and aspirations in favor of Tess's from the time she is a youngster. Amanda cannot see her mother's faults and if the author had presented the story from Amanda's perspective, the reader would not have been aware of Tess's insecurities and shortcomings. The perspective, because it is omniscient, is honest and lacking in prejudice. An interesting aspect of this perspective is that Amanda seldom reveals her own feelings. She doesn't focus on her fears or her dreams. The same is true of Tess. When Tess is talking to another mother at St. Matthew's and asks what the woman "does" for a career, the woman responds that she doesn't work and the implication is that Tess's family is not wealthy therefore she has to work. Tess is conscious of the slight even though she has worked hard on her career and has accomplished a great deal.

Setting

The story is set at the fictional boarding school called St. Matthew's. The setting is adequately described and is believable. For example, several specific buildings within the campus are described in great detail. One of these is Amanda's room. The room is small and is hers alone, "a single," as pointed out by a school official. The room has a window that begins at floor level and looks out over a section of the campus. These details, including that the room is small, lends credence to the setting. The "feel" of the room is also described by Tess, Amanda's mother. While Amanda's father doesn't particularly like the room, Tess believes it to be a place where the dreams she holds for Amanda can come true. Tess cites it as a place Amanda can focus fully on her school work. Other buildings on the campus are also described. The author's background is cited as that of the headmaster of several schools, which likely provided the information for the creation of the setting. The time setting is modern day, as evidenced by the use of mobile phones, air travel, computers and e-mail.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straight-forward style that is easy to understand and to follow. The language is not difficult and most reader will be able to follow the action. The



difficulty with the book is that the action is slow and tedious and the main character, Amanda, faces a series of very similar challenges. Her reactions to these challenges vary only slightly and the similarities make the action drag. By the end of the first section of the book, the outcome seems almost inevitable. The sheer repetition of the problems faced by Amanda is tedious. The fact that Amanda can't face the issues head on may also make her seem somewhat shallow to some readers. The overriding tone of the book is one of despair. Amanda hopes to make a series of improvements during her time at St. Matthew's. Her goals are to increase her SAT scores, lower her running time, improve her piano and music, and make good grades. The ultimate goal is to be accepted into Dartmouth. But Amanda is unable to significantly raise her SAT scores, struggles with several of her classes, has little time for practicing music, and comes to believe that lowering her weight will help her running time which negatively impacts her health. These failures are constant and the reader holds little hope of success for Amanda reaching her ultimate goal.

Structure

The book is divided into four parts and a total of fifty-one chapters plus an epilogue. Chapters and the four parts are identified by number only. Part one consists of chapters one through nineteen. Chapters twenty through twenty-five makes up part two and part three is chapters twenty-six through thirty-eight. Part four includes chapters thirty-nine through fifty-one and the epilogue. Part one focuses on Amanda's arrival at St. Matthew's and the circumstances that led to her being there. Part two begins with a closer look at Tess and chapters in that part examine Tess's motivations and her personality. Part three reverts back to Amanda and opens with concern expressed by a classmate - the first sign that there are emerging problems with Amanda's health. The problems grow throughout the part and by the time part four opens, Amanda is clearly battling both an eating disorder and a drug problem. In part three, Tess gives Amanda a journal and both parts three and four include some of the journal entries. It's easy to see by that point that Amanda is struggling to remain coherent and has become obsessed with her need to "self medicate" and her weight. Chapters vary greatly in length. For example, chapter thirty-six is less than two full pages but chapter thirty-seven is more than ten pages.



Quotes

"So Amanda no longer ran to feel free or feel good: she began to run for a purpose - for success in running, and a year later, success in getting into Dartmouth. By now this had become her mother's goal for her" (Chapter 10, pg. 54.)

"And in the months between the evil April day and this lush night of a warm October, her mother had worked unceasingly to convince Amanda that she had to remove what was really a stain on her reputation, her honor, even, one that 'can follow you all through life, one that you will never forget'" (Chapter 12, pg. 68.)

"Do not let yourself down, don't wind up in some little jerkwater college no one ever heard of, do you know what that means? Amanda hung up on her" (Chapter 16, pg. 96.)

"For Amanda they were grades, and more grades; times and placings in athletic completions; honors; awards; academic recognitions; musical accomplishments. Tess relentlessly calculated advancement and relative standing, assessed and measured the competition that - she was certain - never slept" (Chapter 20, pg. 120.)

"The man she had married and still loved, her industrious, quiet Joey - he absolutely adored Amanda, believed in his bones that a daughter was meant to be loved and sustained, not driven to succeed. Academic recognition - that was fine, if you wanted to be a brain surgeon or a scientist - but beyond that, what was the point?" (Chapter 22, pg. 128.)

"This man a thousand miles away doesn't know me from Hillary Clinton, etcetera, and he'll write a letter full of specifics to someone maybe neither one of us knows, etcetera, and make it sound like he's writing about his own daughters" (Chapter 23, pg. 136.)

"Another, happier voice whispered to her: wouldn't Dartmouth maybe go for a girl who was really brilliant in, like poetry, or philosophy even, if she was terrible at math? All those famous geniuses, they were mainly good at one thing, and awful at everything else" (Chapter 26, pg. 152.)

"Her algebra mid-term grade is unhelpful. You may have an 'in' at the college, use it if you do" (Robert Arnette, Chapter 31, pg. 175.)

"Her beauty of character, her talents in the making of music and in the understanding of poetry, her simplicity, and the goodness which 'puts ambition out of countenance,' these things surely entitle her to a place at your table. Believe me to be, yours most sincerely, Carlisle Passmore" (Writing to Dartmouth, Chapter 33, pg. 188.)

"Everything that's important or beautiful needs someone to see it in that way. Otherwise it's wasted" (Amanda, Chapter 37, pg. 210.)



"She supposed an A was just barely possible from Mr. Steele, in history, but only if she wrote a brilliant exam. In her heart, however, Amanda understood that 'brilliant' was an adjective to be applied to certain pupils, but not to her" (Chapter 38, pg. 215.)

"We sent you there, you know the purpose why, and now if the purpose is attained it will not be through any effort of yours but like everything else attained by you, it will be done by our intervention. Nevertheless, we will support your - Daddy does too" (Chapter 48, pg. 279.)

Topics for Discussion

Describe Amanda Bahringer. How does her mother influence Amanda's life? Is the influence positive? How does that compare with her father's influence? How might Amanda's life have been different if either of her parents had been different?

Describe Amanda's life prior to her arrival at St. Matthew's. How does her life change after her arrival at St. Matthew's? What are the habits she has that make it possible for her to achieve good grades at St. Matthew's? What holds her back?

Describe Amanda's extracurricular activities. How does each impact her life? What does she like about each? How does she hope to use them to achieve her ultimate goal? What does her mother think about these activities?

What are Amanda's greatest strengths as a student? What are her weaknesses? How do the two impact her chances to achieve admission to Dartmouth? Predict what Amanda's life at Dartmouth might have been like. Support your predictions with examples of Amanda's personal habits, strengths, and weaknesses.

What do you consider to be the most important theme of the book? What aspects of this theme make it so important? Give at least two examples of situations in which the theme is important. List at least one other theme and tell why this theme is less important to the story.

Describe Amanda's use of medications. Is this an addiction? Why or why not? Describe her eating disorder. How does it begin? Why is her weight so important to her? How does it become a matter of life and death? Is it an addiction? Why or why not?

Who are Dr. Passmore, Dorothea Rodman, Mrs. Thompson, Daneilla, Toby, and Coach Kellam? How does each impact Amanda's life? Which have a positive influence? Why?