

Along for the Ride Study Guide

Along for the Ride by Sarah Dessen

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Plot Summary

Sarah Dessen's novel *Along for the Ride* follows Auden West through the summer before she begins college. Auden has agreed to spend the summer at her father's beachfront home in the tiny town of Colby. Auden is hesitant at first because the extended visit means sharing a living space with her father's young wife, Heidi and the couple's newborn daughter, Thisbe. Auden's parents divorced several years ago and she is still smarting from it. Victoria West, Auden's mother, is a beautiful, successful woman with a sharp tongue and an intellect to match. Her father, Robert West, is a rather nondescript man who is unable to set aside his own needs to help his wife care for a newborn. Auden's younger brother Hollis is her complete opposite. Hollis is something of a charming slacker and the apple of Victoria's eye. When the novel opens, Hollis is backpacking across Europe, mooching money from his mother from thousands of miles away. Meanwhile, Auden gives in to her insomnia. Neither of her parents seem to notice that their daughter sleeps through the day and spends her nights reading and studying in local all-night coffee shops. Auden considers herself to be unusual until she meets someone with the same problem.

Auden is educated at a private school and highly motivated to achieve. She admits to being smarter than the average 18-year-old but her trip to Colby opens the character's eyes about who she has become. Auden does not have much experience socializing with other young people. This is a direct result of Auden's obsession with grades and school and her innate awkwardness. Through a series of experiential hiccups, Auden comes face to face with her fears and failings. First, she has an uncomfortable encounter with someone else's boyfriend shortly after arriving in Colby. Then, when she gets a glimpse of what her father's new life is really like, Auden is more than happy to take a job at a small boutique. Her father's wife, Heidi, happens to be the owner of Clementine's. Her small victory is short-lived, however, when Auden finds out that she is working with the young man's girlfriend. Things eventually turn around for Auden. She subsequently wins the day and the night.

Auden's summer in Colby is spent working in the boutique and learning about life and its inconsistencies. Auden narrates her own story of self-discovery and resolution of things past. Life can be complicated no matter what age you are. The characters in *Along for the Ride* represent distinct stages of life and ways of being. Auden navigates friendships and family as best she can. By the end of her summer in Colby, Auden learns that sometimes being totally in control is not necessarily a good way to be.



Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 1 - 89)

Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 1 - 89) Summary

Auden West is a highly intelligent over-achiever who has trouble falling asleep. Along for the Ride chronicles the summer before Auden goes away to college. Suddenly, everything Auden thought she knew comes under scrutiny. She forms an unlikely friendship with a moody young man named Eli and the summer unfolds in interesting ways.

In Chapter 1, Auden West receives an invitation to spend the summer with her father, his second wife Heidi, and their newborn baby girl. Heidi annoys Auden for some reason. Heidi is significantly younger than Auden's mother. Auden accepts the invitation and then wonders why she would do such a thing.

Auden thinks back on the disintegration of her parents' marriage. Her father became successful first in academia. When his publisher drops him, Auden's mother (after having two children) rises to the top of her profession after earning a doctorate. Before her parents' divorce becomes final, though, Auden develops insomnia. She spends most of her nights at Ray's all-night diner, where she drinks coffee while she reads and studies. Auden's parents are unaware of her insomnia.

Auden has difficulty relating to other teenagers because of her upbringing and intellect. Since the divorce, Victoria West has become fond of hosting parties for her graduate students. In addition, Victoria has been known to have brief affairs with lovesick male graduate students as well.

In Chapter 2, Auden arrives at her father's home on the beach in Colby. Auden is shocked at Heidi's appearance when the young woman opens the door. Heidi is disheveled and red-eyed; nothing like her usual picture-perfect self. Heidi introduces Auden to her new baby sister. Thisbe Caroline West cries all the time. It is obvious to Auden that Heidi is near her breaking point. Robert seems to be oblivious to what is going on with his wife. Robert justifies his lack of attention, telling Auden that Heidi does not want any help with the new baby. This also gives her father an excuse to devote himself full-time to his new writing project. A very good-looking boy invites Auden to hang out at the Tip later on. Auden decides to go after witnessing the situation at her father's house.

In Chapter 3, Auden arrives at the Tip and once again sees the good-looking boy from that afternoon. Around the bonfire, lots of people are laughing and talking, drinking beer from red plastic cups. The boy who invited Auden to the Tip introduces himself as Jake. The evening ends with Auden breaking away from Jake, buttoning her blouse and running home. Auden creeps into the house and after a quick shower, looks in on her new baby sister who is crying at the top of her lungs. Heidi looks drained and powerless. Auden can see that the young woman is at her wit's end. To give Heidi some



relief, Auden takes Thisbe for a walk on the boardwalk at around 5am. Once Thisbe is out in the open air, she falls asleep right away. Auden runs into one of the young men from the Tip and they exchange a few words before the stranger rides away on his bicycle.

In Chapter 4, Auden volunteers to take something to Heidi's shop the next morning. Soon after entering Clementine's, Auden overhears Maggie talking to Leah and Esther. The girls claim to have seen Maggie's boyfriend (Jake) at the Tip with another girl. Once the other girls figure out who Auden is, Maggie asks Auden if Auden really has feelings for Jake. Auden tells Maggie that Jake means nothing to her.

Auden's mother, Victoria, calls to interrogate Auden about her father and how he is coping with Heidi and Thisbe. Auden can tell that her mother is gloating since it seems that Robert West has not changed since the two of them were married. Auden realizes that Heidi is extremely lonely. Victoria tells Auden that her brother Hollis might have a job lined up with an internet company.

Later, Auden goes to dinner at the Last Chance Café with Robert, Heidi and the baby. Auden meets Eli formally for the first time. Auden is annoyed with Heidi's lack of assertiveness where Robert is concerned.

After arriving home from the restaurant, Robert and Heidi argue about Robert's complete lack of involvement with Thisbe. Robert thinks that Heidi invited Auden to spend the summer with them so that she could help take care of the baby. When Auden hears Heidi tell Robert that Thisbe is not Auden's responsibility, Auden is both surprised and happy.

Auden learns that Eli is Jake's older brother.

In Chapter 5, Hollis calls Auden from Europe. Auden and Robert reconnect as father and daughter over dinner that night. Auden cheerfully accepts Heidi's offer to work as a part-time bookkeeper at Clementine's.

Leah tells Auden not to worry about Maggie being jealous. Maggie has known for quite awhile that Jake thinks of himself as a ladies' man. After work, the girls talk about where to go that evening. Maggie goes for a bike ride down the beach with Adam. Leah and Esther head off home. Auden tells Jake that what occurred at the Tip was a mistake. Jake calls Auden a tease before storming off. Auden and Eli see one another on the street but neither of them speaks.

Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 1 - 89) Analysis

The most important feature of the novel is the use of first-person narrative. Engaging the novel from Auden West's perspective reveals the inner workings of the character's mind. The first-person narration gives the reader a point of connection and comparison: Do I relate to this character? Am I like this character? How does the character's experience mirror my own? In the first case, all of Auden's emotional workings are on



display for the audience as she winds her way in and out of intriguing personal encounters, questioning herself and others in her mind. In terms of experience, things in Auden's life are changing rapidly. Her father and his wife have a newborn; her brother Hollis is touring Europe without an itinerary, and soon Auden herself will leave for college. In terms of the plot, Auden's decision to spend the summer with Robert, Heidi and the baby is the catalyst for the changes that take place in all of the novel's major characters.

Victoria's affairs with graduate students is introduced as a thread which continues throughout the narrative. Also, this characterization of Victoria provides a counterbalance to Heidi's hyper-femininity.

Auden is hesitant to spend the summer with her father and his family for a number of different reasons. First of all, Auden has never been all that close to her father and there is still some awkwardness remaining from his divorce from Auden's mother, Victoria. Victoria believe that Robert's relationship with Heidi moved rather too quickly from courtship to marriage and family. Auden's negative preconceived notions of Heidi directly reflect those of Victoria. Auden finds Heidi grating because Auden's mother and Heidi are exact opposites. Furthermore, Auden still has unresolved feelings around her parents getting a divorce. Finally, Auden is somewhat apprehensive because of her social awkwardness around people her own age.

Auden's insomnia is a direct result of the stress of her parents' divorce. Insomnia is a kind of hyper-vigilance for some individuals. Also, Auden takes comfort in the night because it feels safe. The character begins the novel in a kind of social isolation.

A major story thread is introduced when Auden arrives at Robert and Heidi's house. Auden witnesses her father in action when she notices that he does not seem to be aware that his young wife is under a great deal of stress. This behavior reinforces Victoria's assertion that people never change. Robert is replaying his first life with Heidi and Thisbe. Thisbe's crying and Heidi's disheveled state are parallel experiences. Their simultaneous distress foreshadows the necessity for the interrogation of Heidi's relationship with Robert later in the narrative. Robert West, in his refusal to change, provides a counterbalance for those characters in the novel who do change and make emotional progress.

Auden's encounter with Jake Stock in Chapter 3. Also, Eli is introduced in the same chapter although his name is revealed later. The brothers contrast one another. It is a sign of Auden's social ineptness to have chosen to spend time with Jake. It also shows that Auden is an outsider as their experience at the Tip foreshadows Auden's first encounter with Maggie and the girls at Clementine's in Chapter 4.

Maggie, Leah, and Esther all appear together for the first time in Chapter 4. Maggie and Auden are automatically positioned as rivals based on what happened at the Tip the night before. Auden feels her outsider status acutely at this point. Trust between Auden and the other girls does not occur until later in the story.



Auden's relationship with Victoria is further illuminated in Chapter 4 as well. Victoria's motives for calling her daughter are more than clear. Victoria simply wants the satisfaction of watching Robert West destroy his second marriage. However, it is at this point in the narrative that Auden begins to have genuine compassion for Heidi and her new half-sister. And although the character is still unaware of it, Auden is beginning to see her father clearly. Also, Hollis remains in the background, but his reputation for instability precedes his appearance in the story.

Auden's first formal meeting with Eli is a significant point in the narrative because it functions to establish close connections between the Colby characters. It also puts into play the notion that in small towns, everyone knows everyone else. It also means that there are secrets to protect.

Auden's opinion of Heidi continues to decline when she sees how Heidi behaves at the restaurant in Chapter 4. Heidi manages to redeem herself when she stands up to Robert when he claims that Auden is there to babysit for the summer. This is the first step in the process of Heidi and Auden becoming friends and close allies.

In Chapter 5, the characters shift gears and lines of communication open up between Auden and the girls who work at Clementine's. Auden and Maggie cross their first bridge when Maggie admits knowing that Jake is less than a gentleman. Their first encounter also foreshadows the girls becoming roommates at Defriese University later in the narrative.

Auden's next meeting with Eli fuels the mystery of exactly who Eli is and what part, if any, he will eventually play in Auden's life. Their platonic interactions reinforce the core view that it is best to be friends before attempting to achieve emotional or physical intimacy. The episode with Jake shortly after her arrival in Colby shows that Auden still has something to learn about being true to herself and her genuine feelings. Also, the fact that Auden and Eli do not speak increases the tension between the characters. Furthermore, the fact that neither of them initiates conversation establishes them as characters who will eventually have something to say. The meeting also functions to add to the audience's anticipation. Finally, it foreshadows their position as the novel's primary couple.



Chapters 6 -10 (Pages 90 - 224)

Chapters 6 -10 (Pages 90 - 224) Summary

In Chapter 6, Auden begins to feel even more intertwined with her father's new family. Also, she is becoming more comfortable around Maggie, Leah and Esther. And although Auden would never refer to the girls as friends, she finds them mildly entertaining nonetheless. After work one evening, Auden hears the other girls talking about Eli. From what Auden can gather, Abe, a close friend of Eli's, was involved in some kind of accident. Apparently, Eli has not ridden a bike since Abe's mishap.

When she goes to the local convenience store to buy late-night provisions, Auden meets Adam and Wallace. Not really knowing where else to go, Auden ends up at the local (bicycle) jump park where kids go to practice their tricks. At the park, Auden sees Maggie watching the action from the stands. She also sees Jake picking up another girl. Auden also sees Eli and soon they are engaged in conversation. There is something different about Eli that Auden cannot quite put her finger on. Eli tries to convince Auden to take a turn on the bike jump circuit. Auden politely declines and heads for home.

In Chapter 7, Auden has a conversation with Heidi about the baby's name. Heidi wanted to name the newborn Isabelle after Heidi's best friend, but Robert insisted on choosing a literary name for the baby. In secret, Heidi calls the baby Caroline.

Victoria shows up at Clementine's unannounced. Auden is surprised and somewhat apprehensive about her mother's impromptu visit. It is obvious to Auden that her mother disapproves of everything associated with Robert's second wife. Over lunch, Auden defends Heidi to her mother, which does not sit well with Victoria at all. Auden discovers that her mother is staying in a local hotel with one of her graduate students. Later, Auden leaves Clementine's in tears and goes to the beach to sit and think. Maggie shows up and the two girls have a talk.

In Chapter 8, Auden and Maggie talk about Auden's mother for a little while. That night, Auden realizes that she completely misjudged Maggie and the other girls. Actually, Auden is glad for Maggie's company. Esther, Leah and Maggie invite Auden to hang out with them and the girls end up at a party at Belissa Norwood's house. It is a typical house party, complete with a keg and lots of underage people drinking. When Auden goes to the kitchen to get beer for Leah and Maggie, she begins a conversation with Eli.

Belissa becomes upset when she sees Auden talking to Eli. Maggie and Leah hurry Auden out of the house. Auden finds out that at one time Belissa was Eli's girlfriend. After the party, Auden goes in search of Eli. She finds him at the bike shop. Auden learns that Eli is also an insomniac. Eli takes Auden to a laundromat that has a small coffee shop at the back. Auden meets Clyde, the owner of the laundromat. Clyde also owns the Bike Shop and a couple of other local businesses. After leaving Clyde's, Auden and Eli stop at the Gas/Gro convenience store for coffee and snacks. On the way out of the



Gas/Gro, Auden sees her mother sitting in a car with a much younger man. Apparently, Victoria is dating someone local.

Robert West finally finishes his book in Chapter 9 and Auden agrees to babysit Thisbe while he and Heidi go out to dinner to celebrate. Auden takes Thisbe to Clementine's while Robert and Heidi are out on the town. Auden is competent with Thisbe and the baby responds to her well most of the time. Thisbe still has her moments when she does nothing but cry, though.

Auden has come to relish the sleepless evenings she shares with Eli. She has even learned how to bowl.

Auden is getting along well with Maggie, Leah, and Esther. They have all been invited to a spur of the moment hot dog party at Adam's house. Everyone is certain that Eli will stay away. After all, the spontaneous hot dog party was originally Abe's big tradition. Since Abe's death, no one has mentioned hot dog parties.

Robert is impressed that Maggie knows the story of Thisbe. Auden is impressed as well and a bit surprised to find out that Maggie is her intellectual equal.

Maggie and the other girls convince Auden to at least make an appearance at the hot dog party. On the way to Adam's place, Auden and Maggie see Eli sitting on a bench talking to Belissa Norwood. This upsets Auden, who was under the impression that Eli and Belissa had broken up. The girls make it to Adam's only to find that Jake Stock has also been invited.

Hollis telephones again to let Auden know that he has returned to the U.S. and is in love with someone named Laura. Hollis tells Auden that he wants to introduce Laura to the rest of the family and that they will arrive in Colby in a matter of days.

Auden finds out from Wallace that Belissa broke up with Eli for good at the beach. Auden phones Eli, who agrees to pick her up from the hot dog party. Things liven up when Eli arrives, though. Everyone is delighted to see Eli at the party and they all welcome him warmly. After Adam makes an off-handed remark about someone dying in an accident, Auden diffuses the tension by starting a food fight when she throws baked beans at Eli.

In Chapter 10, Auden finds out that Maggie has been accepted to Defriese University as well. Furthermore, Auden now knows that Maggie is also an accomplished bike rider; tricks, jumps and all.

Auden is finding out that Maggie is much more well-rounded than she is. That evening, Eli takes Auden to a club for the first time. Auden's feelings for Eli begin to deepen.

The next afternoon, Auden hears Robert and Heidi having another argument. Robert wants to go out of town to promote his book, while Heidi would prefer that he stay in Colby and help her take care of Thisbe and run the house. After all, Heidi does own a profitable business. Even though Heidi expresses her displeasure and resentment,



Robert ends up going anyway. Once again, he leaves Heidi to care for herself and Thisbe alone. When Auden returns to the house after Robert has gone, she finds Heidi in an awful state. Auden calls Eli for support. Eli tells her to "sit tight," he knows just what to do (219).

Twenty minutes later, Eli arrives with his mother, Karen Stock. Immediately, Karen takes control of the situation. Eli quickly swaddles Thisbe (which calms her) while Karen attends to poor, exhausted Heidi. Soon, the house is peaceful and quiet.

Chapters 6 -10 (Pages 90 - 224) Analysis

Chapter 6 focuses more closely on Auden's burgeoning friendships with Maggie and the other Clementine's girls. In truth, these girls are not the sort of girls Auden would regularly hang out with. Auden finds them to be somewhat shallow and not very motivated — unless boys, makeup, hair and fashion are involved. Auden takes the position of the observer at this stage of the narrative. Her entertaining time at Clementine's is juxtaposed against what is going on at home with her father and Heidi.

The mystery surrounding Eli Stock seems to deepen when Auden overhears the other girls talking about Eli's friend Abe. This episode also serves to reinforce the assertion that Eli is a paradoxical character. He sees Auden but does not speak to her. He spends most of his time at the Bike Shop and at the jump park, but he refuses to ride a bicycle. Eli's ambivalence mirrors Auden's ambivalence about life and relationships in general. Her refusal at the jump park is symbolic of Auden's fear of most kinds of interactions. Auden has a very well-defined comfort zone which has remained relatively unchallenged for a long time. Also, the characters are represented as experiential mirrors because they both have apprehensions that cause them to withdraw rather than move forward. In Eli's case, it is guilt that keeps him from doing what he most enjoys. Eli's figurative self-deprivation is his penance for literally depriving Abe of his life.

When Auden learns the story behind Thisbe's name in Chapter 7, her negative view of Heidi is further reinforced. By allowing Robert to have his way where the baby's name is concerned, Heidi acquiesces a good amount of power in their relationship. It is also ironic that Robert should be the one to name the newborn, given his utter lack of involvement with her.

When Victoria West comes to Colby in Chapter 7, Auden's sense that her mother's motives are less than honest is validated. Once again, Auden is subjective to her mother's vilification of Robert's second, frazzled wife. When Auden comes to Heidi's defense, Victoria is caught off guard. This particular interaction between Auden and Victoria is the first in a series which follow their relationship throughout the narrative. Auden is beginning to emerge from Victoria's shadow. She goes against her mother's expectations which challenges Victoria's authority over her daughter's life. Finally, Victoria's arrangement with the graduate student sets in motion a plot thread which is resolved in Chapter 19.



Chapter 8 signals multiple important moments for Auden. When she discovers that she misjudged the other girls and that Eli is an insomniac as well, Auden begins to move forward significantly. Auden had not given Maggie, Esther and Leah enough credit. She had been focusing on appearances instead of taking the time to get to know the other girls well. The near-mishap over Eli that takes place at Belissa Norwood's party is an early test of the girls' newly-formed friendship, as the girls rescue Auden from the wrath of the party's hostess.

By now, Auden feels comfortable enough with Eli to seek him out after the party fiasco. The character of Clyde is introduced in Chapter 8. Clyde's introduction into the narrative closes the circle of the Bike Shop and Eli's connection to it. Auden is becoming more adventurous on her nights out and about with Eli. She is gaining confidence that is spilling over into the other areas of her life which had been troubling her.

Auden is brought around when she sees Maggie talking to her dad about Thisbe. Once again, Auden must admit to herself that she has sold Maggie short. Auden is actually glad that Maggie is as smart as she is. Auden sees this as a positive step for her; an ego check.

When Auden sees Eli and Belissa together on the way to the hot dog party, she jumps to the wrong conclusion again but she does not harbor it for long. The food fight she eventually starts with Eli at the hot dog party lessens some of their tension.

Hollis' announcement that he is bringing his girlfriend to Colby lends anticipation to the storyline.

When Auden learns that Maggie has been accepted to Defriese University, Auden's esteem for her new friend deepens. However, what really impresses Auden about Maggie is the way that Maggie does not put limits on herself or who she wants to become in the future. Auden discovers that she must give herself permission to be whatever she sets her mind to. Maggie is self-assured and confident in an unassuming way and Auden appreciates the way Maggie moves through the world.

The arc of the storyline continues upward with the outing to the nightclub in Chapter 10. Auden is letting her guard down and feeling less nervous about being with Eli.

Robert and Heidi's final argument is not based on anything new or unusual. Robert wants to go out of town, Heidi wants Robert to stay home. Robert's decision to go and promote his book is a clear indication that he values his own desires over the necessities of being a father and husband. Robert West is the only major protagonist in the novel to remain the same from the beginning of the narrative to the end. He continues to make choices based solely on self that invariably put him and those closest to him in a position to be hurt. This story thread reaches its apex when Robert decides to go out of town anyway and leaves Heidi in a terrible state.

Chapter 10 introduces Mrs. Karen Stock into the narrative. Karen is every capable mother that ever was. She represents the wisdom that comes from having raised children of her own. Heidi is benefiting from Karen's expertise firsthand. When Karen

arrives, it is obvious that Heidi cannot handle things on her own, as Robert so often tells her. Her exhaustion is emotional as well as physical. It is in this chapter that it



Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 225 - 383)

Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 225 - 383) Summary

One week later, Hollis and his beloved Laura arrive in Colby in Chapter 11. Auden's mother calls beforehand to warn Auden about "The Laura" (224). Victoria dislikes Laura immensely, calling her "cold" and "methodical" (225). Finally, Victoria is concerned that Laura is going to suck all the joy out of her only boy.

Heidi sings Karen Stock's praises to Auden. Heidi is the first to point out the fact that Laura looks exactly like Auden's mother. Auden agrees that Laura's resemblance to Victoria is somewhat unnerving. Robert West does not seem to like Laura all that much. Likewise, Laura is not very interested in Hollis' family. Auden talks to Hollis about Laura but to no avail. Hollis believes he is in love with Laura.

Maggie tells Auden that she does not want Auden to break Eli's heart. Maggie meets Hollis for the first time. Hollis claims that Auden never learned to ride a bike. Auden is convinced that learning a bike is not something she needs to learn all over again.

In Chapter 12, Auden comes to the realization that her mother calls her at the same time every time. Auden knows that her mother just wants to vent about Hollis. Auden remembers how Hollis would wake up every morning just to get a glimpse of Eli and to tease Auden about having a boyfriend.

Later, Auden and Victoria have a heated discussion in which Auden begins to assert her independence. Victoria is not sure about how to deal with the new Auden. Robert and Heidi have a disagreement over Heidi wanting to go out with friends for a few hours. Heidi ends up leaving Robert alone with Thisbe. Auden notices that Heidi is changing for the better as well.

After delivering newspapers for the first time that night, Auden falls asleep on Eli's bed. She feels grateful to Eli for being so supportive of her. Auden returns home just as her father is leaving the next morning. Robert tells Auden that he is moving into a hotel for a short while. Auden enters the house quietly and notices that Thisbe is completely relaxed and at peace.

In Chapter 13, Auden finally accepts the fact that her father seems not to have changed at all. Heidi tries to explain things to Auden but Auden behaves as though nothing is wrong. Heidi and the baby are both calm and at ease without Robert in the house.

Maggie and Auden commiserate about their mothers and how stressful it is to be starting college at the end of the summer.

Eli and the others play kickball on the beach. Auden avoids the game because she is uncomfortable about falling asleep at Eli's place the night before. Still hiding out, Auden runs into Jason Talbot at the Last Chance. Jason backed out of taking Auden to the



senior prom at the last minute. Jason has not changed, either. He is still a socially awkward over-achiever, just like Auden was before coming to Colby.

Eli confronts Auden about blowing off the kickball game and avoiding him. Auden snaps at Eli and Eli walks away. Auden feels guilty for treating Eli so poorly.

In Chapter 14, Jason Talbot calls and texts Auden non-stop. Auden is convinced that Jason is only reaching out to her because he feels guilty for not taking Auden to the prom. Auden, on the other hand, has gotten over her disappointment and has begun studying in anticipation of her first term in college.

When she enters Clementine's, Auden sees Adam, Leah and Maggie watching a video online. Eli has started riding his bike competitively again. Auden is disappointed that Eli did not confide in her.

The following week, Auden meets Robert at his hotel. Robert does not seem to be suffering without Heidi and the baby. He tells Auden that he and Heidi talk but that nothing is ever resolved. Robert tells Auden that Heidi keeps her feelings bottled up until it is too late. Auden leaves her father to go to work at the store. She realizes that she is incredibly angry. When she reaches Clementine's, she asks Maggie for a favor.

In Chapter 15, Maggie teaches Auden how to ride a bicycle. However, Auden becomes so discouraged so quickly that Maggie calls in Adam to help. For the next week, Maggie helps Auden practice. Auden is still somewhat self-conscious, but she is beginning to enjoy the challenge.

Auden has a brief conversation with Hollis. Hollis is still madly in love with Laura. He has a job at a bank now, which disappoints Victoria to no end. Auden is somewhat incredulous as well, but she loves Hollis and just wants him to be happy. Hollis tells Auden that their mother's relationship with Finn the graduate student is not going very well. Auden promises Hollis that she will call Victoria. Meanwhile, life continues for Auden; sleeping at night, working and riding a bike and studying during the day. Auden finds herself thinking about Eli more and more.

Early one evening, Auden hears voices coming from downstairs. She pokes her head out of her room to find Heidi and the girls from Clementine's making party favors for an upcoming prom-themed gala that Heidi is planning. Auden would rather continue studying but promises to join the others after awhile. Auden then calls her mother and informs Victoria that Robert and Heidi are having problems. Auden then joins Heidi and the others and decides "for once to just go along for the ride" (323).

Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 225 - 383) Analysis

In Chapter 11, Victoria West comes face to face with her mirror. To her horror, her beloved son Hollis has tied his fortune to someone exactly like her. This is established as soon as Heidi points out the glaring similarities between Laura and Victoria. Of course, Victoria does not realize that she is looking at her reflection. She behaves as



though "The Laura" is a threat to her close bond with Hollis. In becoming involved with Laura, Hollis is beginning to break away from his mother. And while this is perfectly natural in society, Victoria is nonetheless taken aback that Hollis would choose to upset the status quo in such a way.

Auden's relationship with Eli is coming out into the open in subtle ways.

When Victoria finally notices that Auden is changing, it signals the necessity for her to change also. Auden's independence is another symbol of Victoria's diminishing role as an influential factor in her daughter's life. Both of Victoria's children are moving ahead without her, even in spite of her. As a result, the character is forced to take a step back and re-evaluate her own progress. Similarly, Robert is caught off guard when Heidi goes out for the evening and leaves him alone with Thisbe for the first time in a long time. This is the high point in the narrative where Heidi is concerned. She has finally made peace with the fact that the only way to make Robert change is to change herself. And while this episode does not ultimately keep the characters from separating, it is nevertheless a pivotal moment for them both. At this juncture, Robert West is forced to take a look at the life he has fashioned for himself. In the end, his decision comes as no surprise.

Robert's departure in Chapter 12 is a reminder that changing one's view of things takes a different type of effort than staying the same. Her father's choice to stay in a hotel gives Auden a valuable piece of information about him. She learns that her father creates things for which he takes no responsibility. That to a certain extent, her father is in a certain kind of denial. Robert West has become enamored of a fantasy which allows him to absent himself from his role as caretaker and helpmate at a whim. His ego-centrism does have its advantage, however. Robert's selfishness motivates Heidi to make mature adjustments within herself and to change the course of their unequal relationship. Thisbe's calm and relaxed demeanor after Robert leaves is a proof that Robert was the major source of the stress in their home.

Auden resigns herself to siding with Victoria where her father is concerned. His moving into a hotel lets Auden know that he is unable to get past having to have everything his way. There is some sadness in this knowledge, as Auden is seeing it with her own eyes. Her father is characteristically vague in his explanation of the whole affair.

Change continues to present itself when Maggie and Auden prepare to go away to college. Jason Talbot's appearance in this chapter continues as a loose end for Auden to resolve. This time, though, Auden goes into the experience with Jason a little wiser. Like Robert West, Jason Talbot does not change. Once again, however, Auden's ambivalence crops up and she goes into avoidance mode in order to process another invitation from Jason.

When Auden snaps at Eli, it is because she allows her embarrassment to get the best of her. The character is aware that nothing was wrong with falling asleep at Eli's place. Auden is having feelings that she is unable to articulate and she strikes out at Eli. Her frustration is primarily with herself and partially with Eli for not being able to read her



mind. Rather than entering into an argument after the kickball game, Eli chooses not to indulge Auden's inability to articulate. Eli's action causes Auden to respond with guilt.

Jason Talbot's obsessive texts and phone calls do nothing to wrangle Auden. Her decision not to respond to Jason's attempts to reach her prove that Jason is definitely a part of Auden's past. Auden has begun to focus on the future. The character continues with her transformation and leaving Jason Talbot behind, at least temporarily, is a sign of growth.

Finding out that she is the last to learn that Eli is competing again makes Auden feel like an outsider all over again. The character interprets Eli's decision not to tell her as lacking in trust. By extension, it proves that Eli has not let go of his fear. Auden takes this personally.

Auden's visit with Robert at the hotel in Chapter 14 gives the character an opportunity to re-frame her relationship with her father. Auden sees that her father seems to be in no way affected by the separation from his wife and younger daughter. His choices and decisions have left him alone twice in succession. Auden is now merely an observer and no longer a participant in her father's personal travails. The subsequent anger that comes over Auden is long overdue in its expression. Auden learns to ride a bicycle because she knows it will free her from the old family script and the old family roles. To her credit, she comes to understand that expressing her anger in either of her parents' direction would be useless and a waste of valuable energy. Learning to ride symbolizes Auden's ability to master things in the world — school, relationships, community. At the same time, learning to ride a bike is emblematic of the mastery that Auden is gaining over herself. In order to stay upright and pedaling on a bicycle, one must have control of the limbs, eyes, and thoughts.

In Chapter 15, the main characters are all on the verge of resolution. To begin, Hollis professes his undying love for "The Laura" and actually begins living a relatively mainstream kind of life. This horrifies Victoria but it does not prevent Hollis from seeking his happiness with or without her blessing. And while Victoria's reaction is not out of the range of possibility, it is likely that her floundering relationship with Finn is another reason for her vitriol.

Auden's willingness to talk to her mother about Finn shows the character's ability to distinguish between her mother and herself. Auden's compassion for Victoria's situation is a sign of a daughter's warm heart for her mother.

Auden is still isolating herself when the "Beach Bash" rolls around. Her final epiphany comes in Chapter 15 when she makes a conscious decision to follow life's course wherever it leads her. To "go along for the ride" is to live in an inner climate of acceptance. Auden has come to a time in her life when possibility abounds. There is an expansive feeling in the phrase, as though just saying it is enough to free the spirit from worry and care. In one way, deciding to take life as it comes is Auden's way of unburdening herself from her past self.



Chapters 16 - 19 (Pages 324 - 383)

Chapters 16 - 19 (Pages 324 - 383) Summary

In Chapter 16, Auden and Adam discuss the upcoming "prom." Auden knows that Adam has more than friendship feelings for Maggie. Adam encourages Auden to invite Eli to the prom. Auden then decides to meet Jason Talbot at the Last Chance for a bite to eat.

Heidi Tells Auden that she and Robert have agreed to let things stay as they are with Heidi and Thisbe in the house and Robert at the hotel. Auden thinks her father has already left the marriage in his mind.

Auden, Leah, Maggie and Esther ransack Heidi's closet for dresses to wear to the Beach Bash.

In Chapter 17, Robert calls Heidi because he cannot watch Thisbe while she goes to the Beach Bash that night. Heidi informs Auden that second chances in life do not come along very often, so when the opportunity comes along, it is best to go with the flow. Auden then helps Heidi get ready for the Beach Bash.

Jason Talbot cancels on Auden for a second time. Later, Auden asks Eli to go to the Beach Bash with her but Eli declines without offering an explanation. Somewhat deflated, Auden buys a new bicycle and Maggie tells the other girls that Adam asked her to go to the Beach Bash.

In Chapter 18, Auden babysits Thisbe while Heidi oversees the Beach Bash. While she and Thisbe prepare for an evening together, Victoria stops by unannounced to talk to Auden. Victoria and Auden have a heart-to-heart talk about all the changes taking place in their extended family.

Auden tells Robert that he has to figure out a way to make his marriage to Heidi work.

Auden leaves Thisbe with Victoria. She puts on a little black beaded dress and rides her new bike to the Beach Bash. On the way to the Bash, Auden sees Eli's truck. Auden jumps the curb on her bicycle, much to both her and Eli's surprise. Eli tells Auden that he refused her invitation to the prom because he attended a competition in the close-by town of Roardale. Eli then informs Auden that he is retiring after his win in Roardale. They are both dressed to go to the prom and Eli offers to drive Auden. Auden tells Eli that she prefers to ride her bike to the prom and that she will meet him there.

In Chapter 19, it is revealed that Auden and Maggie are roommates at Defriese University. Hollis and Laura are officially engaged and Heidi and Robert are slowly working through their issues. Robert has yet to sell his last book to a publisher, but has begun another novel in the meantime. Robert returns to teaching part-time and Heidi works part-time at Clementine's. Karen Stock continues to be a blessing and it is she who stays with Thisbe when Robert and Heidi are busy.



Eli and Auden's relationship continues to grow. Eli is taking classes at the local University and he and Auden continue to spend evenings together. Adam and Maggie are a couple now and Adam recently became the manager of the Colby bike store. They name the shop Abe's Bikes, which everyone thinks is more than appropriate.

Chapters 16 - 19 (Pages 324 - 383) Analysis

This final group of chapters brings completion to the major plot points. Adam's feelings for Maggie come full circle. He has wanted to be more than friends with her since high school. He and Maggie are another example of being friends before moving on to something more serious. When Auden decides to meet with Jason Talbot at the Last Chance, it is more out of a sense of curiosity than anything else. Unfortunately, her agreement to meet also foreshadows his standing her up one last time. This, however, finally allows Auden to let go of her connection to Jason and who she used to be once and for all. From this point on, the new Auden is in control of things.

Auden is not surprised to hear that Heidi and her father will continue in an indefinite state of suspended animation. The stalemate is emblematic of Robert's inability to put other people ahead of himself. The character's unwillingness to change belies his lack of trust in those around him not to take unfair advantage of his acts of love and vulnerability. It also brings into focus the fact that not everyone learns from their mistakes. Heidi, on the other hand, is in a position of power in this instance. In other words, she has the life she has always wanted. Her business continues to do well; she is more secure in her role as Thisbe's mother and primary provider. When Robert once again shirks his duties, Heidi does not give his lack of consideration a second thought. Instead, she calls upon her friend and supporter Karen.

Eli's refusal to go to the Beach Bash with Auden is a surprising twist so late in the narrative. Auden's response to the rejection, though, is unsurprising. Purchasing a brand new bicycle and subsequently taking herself to the Beach Bash is an act of true self-appreciation and acceptance of another person's feelings. Her disappointment does not last long and Auden proves that she has once again achieved mastery over herself.

Victoria's final appearance in Colby brings another surprise. She and Auden are able to reconnect as mother and daughter and as new friends. Victoria softens toward Auden, which constitutes deeper love and long-overdue acceptance. At this moment, Auden is truly her own person and Victoria's recognition of this change in her daughter enables both characters to move to the next phase of their experience. Another circle closes when Victoria agrees to babysit Thisbe so Auden can attend the Beach Bash. Spending time taking care of Thisbe is Victoria's opportunity to make up for lost time. In another way, Victoria is able to rediscover the maternal aspect of herself. Interestingly, Victoria and Thisbe are connected by way of powerful women in literature. They are family.

Auden's exhortation that her father find a way to salvage his relationship with Heidi is another way in which she has come into her own. Seeing her father for the man he really is, Auden can comment almost dispassionately on the situation. Telling Robert to



figure out his own life is reverse-parenting in a way. In this instance, it is Auden who must be the voice of reason and maturity and Robert who would do well to take instruction from his daughter. Unlike Robert, Auden realizes that repairing his marriage will give her father the momentum to repair the rest of his life as well.

Finally, Eli and Auden's relationship continues to evolve after the two of them run into each other on the way to the Beach Bash. When Auden turns down Eli's offer of a ride to the Bash, there is nothing ulterior attached to it. Auden is completely comfortable getting herself where she needs to go, when she so chooses. This is her way of letting Eli know that she appreciates having him in her life, but it is not necessary to be chained at the hip. Also, Eli's competitive career comes to an end, which signals the possibility of a broader future for him.

Auden and Maggie becoming roommates at Defriese is a natural step on their progression as best friends. Karen Stock becomes a welcome regular fixture in the West's Colby home. Eli and Auden and Maggie and Adam becoming couples at the close of the narrative is significant because this establishes them as Colby's connection to the larger world. That Auden, Maggie, and Eli are in college signifies movement and constant change in the lives of the younger characters.

While it is true that the novel ends rather neatly, it would also be helpful to view the narrative from against the grain. That is to say, even though things are resolved for the characters at this particular speck of time, there is always the reality that things will change. For instance, it is possible that Auden and Eli break up four or five years down the line. Perhaps Robert and Heidi work through their differences and have one or two more children. And the Hollis-Laura storyline is just beginning. This open-ended finale positions the characters and their adventures to be featured in other novels.

Auden West and the other characters in *Along for the Ride* learn that life is about going with things as they happen and remaining open to whatever is coming next. Several of the characters grow past fears and powerful emotions and personal inner scripts. None of the characters in the novel are presented as infallible or entirely selfless with the exception of Karen Stock.



Characters

Auden Penelope West

Auden West is the daughter of Robert and Victoria West. Auden has an older brother named Hollis. Auden is the exact opposite of her brother. She is driven and focused on her goals. Auden makes no secret of having a certain amount of disdain for those her age. Auden views other teenagers and their habits as immature and a waste of time. Before arriving in Colby, Auden is unaware of herself as a multi-faceted person. She is convinced that her worth is based on her intelligence only.

Auden is an insomniac who spends her nights drinking coffee and reading in an all-night diner. Auden has just graduated from high school and plans to attend Defriese University in the fall. Auden knows that she is more intelligent than most people and she often uses her intellect to keep others at arm's length.

Auden's summer in Colby is a transformative experience for her. She forms lasting friendships with Maggie, Eli and the others. Auden does not realize how much her parents' divorce affected her until she witnesses the same kind of disintegration in her father's new family.

Throughout the course of the novel, Auden learns several important life lessons. She spend her summer taking reasonable risks and working at staying open to life as it happens. Auden's metamorphosis is reflected in the changes which take place in her immediate and extended families. Eventually Auden comes to understand herself as a person of possibility. That is to say, Auden learns to enjoy the idea of seeing what comes next in her life and knowing that no matter what comes along, she is able to deal with it.

Eli Joseph Stock

Eli Stock is one of the characters who live in Colby. He works at The Bike Shop and he is the older brother of Jake Stock. His mother is Karen Stock. Eli is in his early 20s and he is fairly attractive. Eli was involved in an automobile accident in which his best friend, Abe, was killed. After the accident, Eli felt a great amount of guilt over Abe's death and he began having difficulty going to sleep at night. Like Auden, Eli is an insomniac. Not until they meet does Eli realize that he and Auden spent their evenings in exactly the same way: driving around town, sitting and drinking coffee and reading; looking for new places to explore while the rest of the world slept. Another result of the accident is Eli's decision to stop competing on the bicycle trick-riding circuit. By not competing, Eli gave up what he loved most in the world because he did not believe he deserved to live. To Eli, enjoying himself on his bike would have been unfair to Abe. Eli is another of the main protagonists who undergoes something of a transformation. By helping Auden to let go of her fear of new places and experiences, Eli comes to see that he had been



afraid of things too. He faces up the the guilt he feels about Abe and he competes again, one last time. He and Auden become the best of friends first and boyfriend and girlfriend later. By the end of the novel, they have established themselves as a couple.

Professor Robert West

Robert West is the father of Auden, Hollis and Thisbe West. Auden and Hollis are his children by Victoria West. Thisbe is his child by Heidi West, his second wife. Although no physical description is provided in the narrative, it can be assumed that Robert is a somewhat attractive man, approximately 50 years of age. Robert is a head of Creative Writing at Weymar College, located in the town of Colby. According to Auden, he has authored "one well-received novel" (p. 3). Robert is characterized as a man who is accustomed to having his way in relationships.

During his marriage to Victoria, Robert rarely helped around the house or with the children. He was much too busy trying to make a name for himself in academia. Their marriage began to sour noticeably after Robert's publisher dropped him. Eventually, he became spiteful and jealous over Victoria's success and the relationship ended. Robert has never been terribly close to either of his children but he does put forth an effort every so often to connect with them. In fact, Robert chose not to attend Auden's high school graduation because he was at the hospital witnessing Thisbe's birth.

Within a year, Robert met and married his second wife, Heidi. Heidi also became pregnant within that year and things changed quickly for Robert. When Thisbe was born, Robert went back to what seemed to be his old, familiar ways. Heidi was left to care for a newborn practically on her own while Robert worked on what he believed was going to be his next successful novel. At one point in the narrative, Robert even begrudges Heidi an evening out with her friends because it would mean watching Thisbe by himself. Robert's selfishness and single-mindedness prove to be his eventual undoing when his marriage to Heidi falls apart.

Heidi West

Heidi West is the second wife of Robert West and the mother of Thisbe West. She is also the step-mother of Auden and Hollis West. Heidi, at 26 years of age, is substantially younger than Victoria, Robert's first wife. Heidi is described as "the kind of woman whose strengths were her constant pedicures, manicures, [and] highlights" (2). Heidi, whose attitude is alarmingly "pink". In other words, Heidi is hyper-feminine. As the owner of Clementine's, a trendy boardwalk boutique, Heidi has a knack for recognizing what's hot and what's not.

At one time, Heidi of becoming successful in New York City. Within one year of meeting Robert, however, they were married and Heidi became pregnant. However, upon her marriage to Robert, Heidi found herself in Colby, the wife of a creative writing professor at Weymar College. Heidi is also now a new mother at her wit's end trying to care for a newborn without her husband's help.



Heidi is another prominent character in the novel who undergoes a transformation over the summer. For example, even though Heidi West begins the narrative with very little sense of autonomy, she eventually manages to grow. Her experience with a selfish, immature husband brings Heidi closer to the women around her in search of wisdom and advice. She comes to realize that her life is just as important as anyone's and that she deserves to be heard and supported. When Heidi and Robert decide to separate, Heidi is none the worse for wear. As a matter of fact, Heidi's separation from Robert lessens the stress on her and Thisbe.

Dr. Victoria West

Dr. Victoria West is Auden and Hollis' mother. She is also the former first wife of Professor Robert West. Victoria is a striking woman who is somewhere in her late 40s. Her daughter says she is "tall and curvy" and that she has "very long jet-black hair" and "a deep, raspy voice" (p. 3). She has a national reputation for her distinguished scholarly work on "women's roles in Renaissance literature" has brought her national acclaim (p. 2). Victoria has authored four books and has received countless accolades. She is highly intelligent and very impatient with people she believes are beneath her. More than anything, Victoria West loves to be adored by others. She is fond of hosting soirees at her home. She relishes the evenings spent in lively conversation with adoring male graduate students and plenty of wine. Victoria is less than maternal when it comes to Auden and Hollis. Victoria is not what one would call a bad mother. She is simply not very interested in the classic mother role. Victoria's transformation is evident when she agrees to babysit Thisbe for a short while.

Hollis West

Hollis West is Auden's younger brother. Hollis begins the narrative as a slacker who mooches off of his parents even from as far away as Europe. Hollis and Auden are complete opposites. Hollis is engaged to Laura, which aggravates Victoria West to no end. Hollis does not realize that he is going to marry a woman just like his mother. To his credit, however, Hollis does eventually come around. He gets a job in a bank and does the best he can to join the great American mainstream.

Maggie

Maggie is a local girl who works at Heidi's store, Clementine's. Maggie is confident, pretty and intelligent. Maggie is also an accomplished bicycle trick rider. Maggie becomes Auden's closest friend and confidante.



Leah

Leah is another of Heidi's employees at Clementine's. Leah is a tall redhead with an attitude. Leah is somewhat boy-crazy. Leah is best friends with Maggie and Esther (p. 79).

Esther

Esther is the third employee at Clementine's and a close friend of Maggie and Leah. Esther is somewhat eclectic in her clothing choices but she is good-natured and rather practical (p. 53).

Adam

Adam is a local boy who works at the bicycle shop with Eli and Wallace. Adam loves to take photographs and he has had a crush on Maggie for a long time.

Wallace

Wallace is Adam's roommate.

Clyde

Clyde is the owner of the local laundromat, the Bike Shop, and one or two other local businesses in Colby. Clyde is a good friend of Eli.

Laura

Laura is Hollis West's fiancée. Physically, Laura looks almost exactly like Victoria West, Hollis's mother. Laura is somewhat clinical and rather a cold fish. Auden and Victoria wonder how long the relationship will last. Victoria refers to her future daughter-in-law as "The Laura" as though she were an inanimate object (p. 225).

Finn

Finn is a graduate student who currently involved with Victoria West. Unlike the other similar relationships Dr. West has had, Finn refuses to be just another fling. It is unclear from the narrative whether or not Finn's relationship with Victoria lasts.



Thisbe

Thisbe Caroline West is the newborn daughter of Robert and Heidi West. Thisbe is Auden and Hollis's half-sister. Also, since Thisbe was born the day before Auden's high school graduation.

Jake Stock

Jake Stock is Eli Stock's younger brother and Karen Stock's son. Jake is something of a player and he has a large ego. At one time, Jake and Maggie were a couple. Also, Jake makes out with Auden the first night she arrives in Colby.

Karen Stock

Karen Stock is Eli and Jake's mother. Karen looks like a typical practical mother. Karen steps in to help when Heidi becomes overwhelmed soon after Thisbe's birth. Karen becomes a steady support for Heidi after Heidi and Robert separate.

Abe

Abe was Eli Stock's best friend until an accident took Abe's life.

Belissa Norwood

Belissa Norwood is Eli Stock's ex-girlfriend. Belissa comes from a wealthy family and is accustomed to things going her way.

Jason Talbot

Jason Talbot is the boy who invited Auden to the prom and canceled on her the day of the event. Jason runs into Auden in Colby and invites her out once more only to cancel on her again. Jason Talbot is one of the characters in the narrative who does not undergo any kind of transformation.



Objects/Places

Istanbul

Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey. At one time, Istanbul was known as Constantinople.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands. It is also the capital city.

Cape Cod

Cape Cod is a cape located in eastern Massachusetts.

New York City

New York City is the largest city in the state of New York. New York City is also one of the largest cities in the world.

Mensa

Mensa is an international organization for individuals with especially high IQs.

Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal is a mausoleum in Agra, India. Completed around 1653, the Taj Mahal was built by the emperor Shah Jahan to memorialize his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States of America.

Harvard University

Harvard University is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Founded in 1636, Harvard is the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States.

Schwinn

Schwinn is a well-known brand of American bicycle.

Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a dramatic device whereby a character reveals his or her true thoughts and feelings to the audience without addressing other characters. William Shakespeare often used soliloquies in his plays.



Themes

A Child of Divorce

Auden tries to convince herself that she is fine with the fact that her parents are divorced. Intellectually, the character realizes that her parents' failed marriage is more a function of Robert and Victoria's egos clashing than anything else. It is insecurity and pettiness which eventually divide Robert and Victoria permanently. What Auden does not realize, though, is the extent to which she is impacted by her parents' divorce. Auden is an over-achiever and overly concerned with grades and getting ahead academically. Auden prefers books and book learning to spending a great deal of time with friends or going out on dates. This is partially to be expected, as her parents are both well-known academics (especially Auden's mother). But her preoccupation with scholastic perfection also indicates Auden striving for her parents' approval. Auden comes to understand that her parents are both self-absorbed, stubborn people who have not changed. Interestingly enough, shortly before her parents split up for good, Auden develops insomnia. She spends her sleepless nights in coffee shops reading or studying. It is not until much later in the narrative that Auden's insomnia is resolved.

It takes a change of scenery to give Auden the perspective she needs in order to fully understand the effect it has had on her. Once she becomes accustomed to life in Colby with Robert, Heidi, and Thisbe, Auden learns that she has been missing out on a great deal of life. The more comfortable Auden becomes with herself, the less she feels the need to concern herself with her parents and their individual dramas. By the end of the narrative, Auden is able to sustain successful relationships with her parents and her brother as a direct result of her journey into herself.

Motherhood

Along for the Ride features three distinct representations of motherhood. Victoria West, Heidi West, and Karen Stock are all portrayals of particular kinds of mothers. To begin, Victoria West is probably the least maternal of the three women mentioned. Victoria is a professor and an actively publishing author, and very successful at what she does. Her intellect has earned her numerous accolades and she enjoys a certain amount of celebrity among both her students and peers. She is beautiful and quick-witted and she enjoys the adulation of young male graduate students. Notoriety notwithstanding, Victoria West is a less than ideal mother to her two children. In her defense, though, Victoria does put her interests on the back burner in order to allow Robert to make his way up the ladder to the ivory tower. In fact, she willingly stays home with Auden and Hollis for quite a few years. As Auden and Hollis grow into adults, Victoria finds herself at a loss as to how to connect with them. Auden's summer at the beach proves to be transformational and this leaves Victoria completely off balance. Furthermore, Hollis is growing beyond Victoria's grasp and this unsettles her even more. Hollis becomes engaged to Laura, who just happens to be a mirror image of Victoria herself. Finally,



Victoria struggles with telling her children the truth about her relationship with young Finn.

Heidi West is the second, much younger wife, of Professor Robert West. Heidi is Auden and Hollis' step-mother and the mother of newborn Thisbe. At the beginning of the narrative, Heidi is a typical "new mom". She is extremely insecure, hyper-vigilant and an emotional wreck. Much of the time, Heidi is sleep deprived and emotionally exhausted. She adores her new daughter and loves her husband, but it is too much for Heidi to do all on her own. On top of it all, Heidi is the owner of a successful boutique called Clementine's. It was once Heidi's dream to be a high-powered businesswoman living the lush life in New York City. All that changed when she met Robert. Like Victoria, Heidi temporarily sets aside her professional dreams in order to accommodate Robert. She becomes pregnant sooner than she would like but Robert assures her that he will be there with her every step of the way. Similar to Victoria, Heidi learns that Robert West will probably never change. By the close of the narrative, Heidi is an independent young woman who is no longer under any illusions about her husband. Heidi also becomes a better mother to Thisbe (and Auden as well) by learning the importance of self-care and realizing when to ask for help.

Karen Stock is a different type of mother altogether. Jake and Eli Stock are her sons. Karen Stock comes to the rescue when Heidi has a meltdown and Auden calls Eli for help. Karen is the kind of mother who has seen it all. Her children are older now and she is no longer frazzled and frantic. Karen helps Heidi realize that the most important thing a mom can do for her family is to take care of herself. Karen has a calming effect on everyone around her. She is capable and grounded, unflappable and emotionally stable. Karen is solid and her demeanor makes it easy for people to trust her quickly.

The three distinct mothers presented in *Along for the Ride* give a broad overview of the possibilities at play in the lives of the audience. Characters such as Victoria and Heidi West and Karen Stock signal the audience that everyone's experience with mothers is different and not necessarily good or bad.

Do People Really Change?

Auden's summer in Colby bears out her mother's warning that people don't change, especially when referring to Auden's father, Robert West. When Victoria tells Auden about the deterioration of her marriage to Robert, Victoria's complaints make her ex-husband out to be rather immature and unwilling to accept responsibility for his role in a family he helped to create. As is the case in many households, Victoria stayed home with the children full-time while Robert was busy carving out his niche in academia, and possibly the in larger literary community. In Victoria's opinion, the most galling thing about being married to Robert West was that he invariably had something more pressing to do than help with the children. During the later years of the marriage Victoria eventually became the brighter star and this may also have significantly contributed to the breakup.



Similar to her predecessor, Heidi was also driven and very ambitious when she and Robert were married. After graduating from business school, Heidi dreamed of living in a swanky New York apartment, running her own Fortune 500 company, living the high-life in the big city. Like Victoria, Heidi put her goals and desires on the back burner in order for Robert to further his writing career (which had never really taken off). Even in Colby, though, Heidi manages to come out ahead as the owner of a small, trendy boutique called Clementine's. It is Thisbe's birth, however, and not Heidi's success that proves to be Robert West's undoing. When Thisbe is just a few months old, Heidi finds herself practically pleading with Robert to sit with Thisbe for just one evening. Robert stammers and sputters when Heidi suggests that he could at least spend a little time with his own child.



Style

Point of View

The entire novel is told from the perspective of Auden West. Using a first-person narration lends weight to the narrative. That is to say, reading a story in which the main character chronicles his or her own adventure gives the reader a very solid point of connection. Reading a first-person account of something could generate immediate empathy on the part of the audience toward the protagonist. In the case of *Along for the Ride*, reading Auden's own story in Auden's own words has more of an impact on the reader. Specifically, Auden is in her late teens and about to enter college and her experience will speak to those readers whose lives are similar in that respect. Furthermore, Auden deals with issues of social awkwardness, friendships with boys and how to relate to other teenage girls. The novel serves as an example of individual internal process — the self relating to the outside world as best it can with the information it is given. Auden's inner workings are on display throughout the novel — the reader has the chance to listen in on her life and how she copes. Being a witness to Auden's (fictional) first-hand ups and downs could prove to be cathartic for some.

Setting

The majority of the novel takes place in the fictional beach town of Colby. A map of Colby is provided by the author. Colby is a small ocean-side town located on Colby Bay. Everyone in Colby knows everyone else; especially the local people. They all grew up together, riding bikes and eating burgers and fries at the Last Chance Cafe or buying just the right snacks at the Gas/Gro convenience store. People live relatively close together, which means that the people of Colby live in full view of one another much of the time. There are sections of Colby where the more affluent citizens live, but there does not seem to be much class tension. The small town has its own history and its own secrets. Colby is also a place of second chances, as Auden finds out eventually.

The locations in Colby are typical of those one might encounter in a small vacation town. There is the Last Chance Cafe where the food is close to heavenly, or so they say. The Gas/Gro (short for Gas/Grocery) convenience store is a source of entertainment for the characters in the novel. Auden and the others come to learn the value of choosing the appropriate snack for every occasion at the Gas/Gro. Also, the Gas/Gro is the site of more than one epiphany for Auden. Gas/Gro plays an important part in the story because it is where Auden and Eli Stock spend a good deal of time on their night ventures together.

Other locations in the small town include Jumbo Smoothie, the Bike Shop, and Beach Beans. The Washroom doubles as a late-night coffee and pie shop. The Jump Park also plays a pivotal role in Auden's friendships with Maggie and Eli. Finally, Clementine's (a specialty store owned by Mrs. Heidi West) is located on the Boardwalk. Clementine's



provides Colby with its daily dose of boutique chic. Clementine's is also a very profitable and well-respected local business. The Bike Shop is integral to Eli Stock's recent personal tragedy. The Tip is the local hangout spot for the teenagers and bike jumping enthusiasts.

Language and Meaning

As one would expect, the language used in *Along for the Ride* is geared toward young readers over the age of 12. Auden and the other characters speak intelligently and use a negligible amount of slang. The characters use fairly innocuous words like "nerdy". Bicycle terms such as "sprocket" and "drive shaft" are included in the narrative as references to classical literature as on page 185. The character of Auden is highly intelligent and this is reflected in her choice of vocabulary words. In addition, Auden's parents are both academics and as such speak in a way which could be construed as condescending, especially where Victoria West is concerned.

The style of the novel is conversational overall, in keeping with the main protagonist's age and level of experience. Auden and her friends talk much like teenagers do in everyday life. They are casual with one another, the conversation has a flow to it that all the participants manage to keep up with. Their conversations jump from one subject to another naturally and comfortably.

Structure

Along for the Ride is comprised of 383 pages divided into a total of 19 chapters. Included in this edition are an afterword, which is entitled "summer" (Pages 387 - 395), a music play list compiled by Sarah Dessen the author, and a 13-page excerpt of Dessen's most recent novel *What Happened to Goodbye*.

The chapters in *Along for the Ride* are untitled. In addition, the chapters range in length from approximately six to around twenty pages. The novel has a relatively predictable narrative trajectory. The action of the novel progresses normally, from one day to the next, until the resolution at the end of the story. There are very few retrospective moments in the narrative, and there are no dream sequences included in the narrative. The passage of time is standard throughout the novel and it takes place over the course of one summer and part of the following fall.



Quotes

"Heidi was [... the] kind of woman whose strengths were her constant self-maintenance, knowing everything you never wanted to about hemlines and shoes, and sending entirely too chatty e-mails to people who couldn't care less" (Chapter 1, p. 2).

"[Auden] was such a smart kid, [she]should have figured out that the only way to really get [her] parents' attention was to disappoint them or fail" (Chapter 1, p. 9).

" There is really nothing more intimidating than approaching a group of girls who have already made up their minds about you. It's like walking a plank, no way to go but down" (Chapter 5, p. 79).

"That was [Hollis], the living, breathing To Be Continued [...] he was always in progress" (Chapter 5, p. 79).

"There's something about living at the beach in the summer. You get so used to the sun and sand that it gets hard to remember what the rest of the world, and the year, is like" (Chapter 7, p. 113).

"Clearly, though, my instincts had been right: [my mother's] attention was not only hard to come by, but entirely too easy to lose" (Chapter 7, p. 126).

"[An] ending was an ending. No matter how many pages of sentences and paragraphs of great stories led up to it, it would always have the last word" (Chapter 13, p. 278).

"When you don't know where you're going, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to have more than you need" (Chapter 8, p. 133).

"But in the end, close didn't count. You were either in, or you weren't" (Chapter 15, p. 313).

"I thought of my mother, sitting at her kitchen table, with Hollis off working at a bank, and me, for all she knew, riding in a car with boys while wearing a pink bikini" (Chapter 15, p. 318).

"And the bottom line is, what defines you isn't how many times you crash, but the number of times you get back on the bike. As long as it's one more, you're all good" (Chapter 16, p. 325).

"It all counts. If you're not getting hurt, you're not riding hard enough" (Chapter 16, p. 325).

"When something's difficult to come by, you'll do that much more to make sure it's even harder - if not impossible - to lose" (Chapter 15, p. 299).

"[Heidi] let Mrs. Stock pull her into her arms, patting her on the back as she allowed herself to be the one soothed, finally" (Chapter 10, page 221).

"Maggie, from what I could tell, didn't do much other than hang out with the boys from the bike shop, most likely pining after Jake" (Chapter 6, p. 97).



Topics for Discussion

Why does Eli Stock give up competitive riding?

What is it about Laura that surprises Auden and her family?

What is significant about Auden running into Jason Talbot again?

What, exactly, is Auden West's quest? Use textual examples to support the claims being made in your response.

Why do Robert and Heidi separate for a time? What was Heidi's original dream?

Why is the name of the bike shop so important to Adam, Eli, and the others?

What is the real reason that Auden skips the kickball game?

How is Victoria West's relationship with Finn different from all the others?

What kind of mother is Karen Stock? How does Karen's style of mothering differ from that of Victoria?

What does Victoria mean when she claims that people don't change? Is she referring to anyone in particular?

What is the most important thing Auden discovers about Heidi?

What is Auden's first impression of the girls who work at Clementine's?

What does Auden do at the hot dog party that startles the others?

Why does Auden insist on riding her bicycle to the prom?

Discuss the novel's ending. Why do you think the author chose to end the novel this way? Would you say that the ending is satisfying or not?