

Althea & Oliver Study Guide

Althea & Oliver by Cristina Moracho

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Plot Summary

"Althea and Oliver" is the story of two friends, Althea Carter and Oliver McKinley, who have been inseparable since they were 6 years old. Althea's mother left the family when Althea was six and she now lives with her father, Garth Carter, who is an instructor at a college in their hometown, Wilmington, North Carolina. Oliver lives with his widowed mother, Nicky McKinley, who works as a masseuse at a local luxury spa. Althea and Oliver are now juniors in high school and spend all their time together even though they are not romantically involved. Their time together is complicated by the fact that Oliver has a sleeping sickness called Kleine-Levin Syndrome which causes him to grow exhausted and fall asleep for weeks at a time.

Althea grows bored when Oliver is in one of his sleeping episodes and finds a few new friends who like drinking, smoking, and hard music, but what she would really like is to be Oliver's girlfriend. One day Althea rouses Oliver slightly during one of his sleeping spells and has sex with him even though he is not really awake. Althea begins to spend more time with her other friends as Oliver sleeps and learns that they have friends in New York who provide food for homeless people. When Oliver eventually awakens, Althea finds the courage to tell him that they had sex without his full knowledge and Oliver is immediately angry that she took advantage of him. Oliver and Althea fight and Oliver leaves for New York with his mother who has entered him into a study of Kleine-Levin Syndrome at a hospital there. When Althea finds out that Oliver has left town, she lies to her father about going to visit her mother in New Mexico for the holidays and drives to New York instead.

By the time Althea reaches the hospital in New York, Oliver is in another sleeping episode. Althea finds the New York friends who prepare food for the homeless and stays with them for several weeks while Oliver is in the hospital. When Oliver awakens, one of his friends in the hospital study tells him that Althea had come to visit him so Oliver calls Althea's friends to see where she is staying in New York. Oliver surprises Althea and they spend New Year's together by drinking and having sex. They decide that they don't have a romantic relationship but will always be friends. Althea calls her father to tell him that she is actually in New York, not New Mexico, and that she is not returning home to finish high school. Oliver decides to take the medication recommended by the hospital study and returns home to Wilmington to finish his senior year.

Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

In Chapter 1, Althea Carter drives her friend, Oliver McKinley, home from school. She is going as fast as possible because Oliver is falling asleep due to a sleeping sickness and she wants to get him into the house before he is asleep and won't be able to walk under his own power. Oliver undresses down to his socks and underwear so he is ready to fall into bed. Althea stays for a little while after Oliver falls asleep and looks at the mementos in his bedroom, all of which she has seen before because they have been friends since they were 6 years old. The last time Oliver had a sleeping spell, it lasted two weeks and she wonders how long he'll be out now. Every morning Althea drives by Oliver's house before school in the hopes that he has awakened but he is not there. Althea feels lost without Oliver because they don't really have any other friends.

At home in the evenings, Althea bakes and does homework to take her mind off Oliver. She also draws in her sketchbook, often pictures of dinosaurs which she often sees in her dreams. The only other times that Althea and Oliver have been apart is when she visited her mother, Alice, after her parents divorced ten years ago. Althea is distracted because lately she has been thinking about Oliver in romantic ways, and she's not sure how to feel about that. A week later, Oliver wakes her up in the middle of the night, wanting to go to Waffle House because he's starving. They go but Oliver begins to fall asleep again and gets angry and throws food and yells at the waitress when Althea tries to get him to leave. Eventually Althea gets Oliver outside and they walk home but he falls asleep outside his house. Althea wakes Oliver's mother, Nicky, and they struggle to get him into the house.

Nicky tells Althea that Oliver does act weird sometimes when he wakes temporarily which is what happened at Waffle House. Nicky is not quite 40-years-old but has been widowed for 10 years, and Althea marvels at her eclectic house and choice of career as a masseuse at a local luxury spa. Nicky had lived in New York City with her husband years ago but they had moved to Wilmington to raise Oliver. Nicky is frustrated by Oliver's sickness because she has taken him to so many doctors and no one can tell her what is really wrong with him. Later that day, Althea can't raise any enthusiasm for track practice and she just walks off the field without a word to anyone.

In Chapter 2, Oliver has come out of the recent sleeping episode and he notices that his mother has had an alarm system installed to hinder his escaping the house in the middle of the night again. This time Oliver has slept for three weeks, and he can tell his mother is worried even though he swears to her that he's not taking drugs. Oliver goes to Althea's house and finds her in the basement where she spends most of her time. She's happy to see that he's awake again and she tells him about their Waffle House episode. Oliver thinks he must be losing his mind and will end up like a crazy person on the streets someday, but Althea assures him that he is not going crazy if he can worry about it.



Althea's father, Garth, enters the basement to see how Oliver is doing. Garth teaches history at the University of North Carolina and Oliver has always looked up to him. When Garth leaves for a date, Althea catches Oliver up on everything he's missed during the past three weeks. When it's time for Oliver to leave, Althea offers that he can sleep at her house which he has done for years, but Oliver is afraid of his new feelings for Althea and can't let her see them so he goes home.

Two months later toward the end of their junior year, Oliver talks Althea into going to a house party thrown by someone they hardly know. Oliver can see that Althea is not in a great mood so he tells her they are going to play a game where they say yes to everything tonight. At the party they see Oliver's friend, Valerie, and her friend, Coby, who is hiding cans of beer in random spots around the house so he'll still have some when the rest is gone. Coby is a rebellious type who is building an apartment over his parents' garage. Valerie leads them all downstairs to the basement where Oliver's friend, Howard, is warming up with his band. Howard sports blue hair shaped into a Mohawk which he keeps in place with Elmer's glue and toothpaste, earning him the name of Minty Fresh.

Althea soon tires of the hot basement filled with sweaty, drunk teenagers and retreats to an upstairs bathroom. She tries to open what she thinks is a medicine cabinet but turns out to be a mirror which comes away from the wall and crashes into hundreds of pieces. Oliver arrives to see the mess she has created and they climb out the bathroom window when the police arrive because of noise complaints from the neighbors. As they walk home, they stop near a tree and Oliver kisses Althea for the first time and their embraces increase in passion so Althea suggests that they go to her house for some privacy. Althea thinks that their relationship is moving to another level but to Oliver their kissing is just an experiment so he declines to go home with her because he just isn't ready for that type of commitment.

In Chapter 3, Althea hasn't seen Oliver all weekend and he is not at school and Valerie tells her that Oliver isn't here today. Althea wishes she were close enough to Valerie so that she could tell her about her feelings about Oliver. The next morning, Althea stops at Oliver's house and Nicky tells her that Oliver is asleep again. Althea feels out of place without Oliver at school but tries her best to make friends with Valerie, Minty Fresh and Coby and goes with Coby for Minty Fresh's band practice.

Althea has a chat with her father and wants to know why he has never taken her anywhere and he suggests that she can go visit her mother anytime she wants to. The next day Althea bikes past Valerie's house and stops when she sees Valerie and Minty Fresh washing a collection of big cooking pots on the front lawn. Valerie explains that they work with a group called Bread and Roses to feed homeless people. They get food out of supermarket dumpsters, cook it and serve it in the park where people know where to find them. Coby emerges from the house and hugs Althea and asks if she wants to go with him for a drive. Coby drives them out of Wilmington to an abandoned meat packing plant where they talk but Althea can't stop thinking about Oliver.



Nicky asks Althea if she'll stay with Oliver for a couple hours while Nicky runs some important errands. Althea rambles around the house for a while and ends up in Oliver's bedroom where she watches him sleep for a little bit. She then kisses his lips but there is no response because he is very deep in sleep. Suddenly, though, Oliver opens his eyes and states that he's hungry. Althea is elated that he's awake and crawls into bed next to him. He pulls her on top of him, they have sex and he falls asleep again immediately afterwards. During the next week, Althea spends time with Valerie, Coby, and Minty Fresh but she is haunted by having sex with Oliver and wishes she could take it back.

Analysis

The author establishes the characters, Althea and Oliver, as juniors in high school in 1995. They live in Wilmington, North Carolina; Althea especially loves living near the ocean and believes she could never be landlocked with her mother who lives in New Mexico. Althea is not close to her mother at all; in fact, they rarely speak on the phone and when they do, Althea is annoyed by her mother's superficial perspective on life. Althea lives with her father, Garth, who teaches history at the University of North Carolina. Althea is an only child and her father is in his own world of books and feminine companionship to take note of much of what Althea is doing. Oliver lives with his widowed mother, Nicky, and has recently come down with a condition in which he sleeps almost as if in a coma for weeks at a time. Oliver's mother is tense and anxious because she thinks it's possible that Oliver is doing drugs even though he tells her he isn't. None of the doctors she has taken him to can find out what's wrong with Oliver.

Althea and Oliver have been best friends since childhood and know everything about each other. People say that they even look alike, tall, thin and blonde. Althea is an artist with a more spontaneous and slightly rebellious personality while Oliver is studious and prefers peace to arguing. Althea realizes that she has romantic feelings for Oliver but he's not quite ready to go there just yet which puts the hint of a wall between them for the first time ever. The author introduces the theme of Friendship between Althea and Oliver which will continue throughout the story. Their friendship will morph and evolve but they started out as good friends and want to retain that relationship forever.

In a way, Althea feels like Oliver has abandoned her when he slips into one of his sleeping episodes even though he can't help it. Althea gets lonely when Oliver isn't around so she reaches out to some other kids at school—Valerie, Coby and Minty Fresh—who are a little bit punk. Their sense of rebelliousness appeals to Althea who is dissatisfied with her life right now so she begins to spend more time with them. The author wants to show that there are all types of friends available and that is all right to extend yourself to know other people. Althea has isolated herself with Oliver for years and she doesn't even have a girlfriend to talk to and share her feelings about Oliver. Althea's new friends, in all their rebellious behavior and clothing, have redeeming qualities in that they care about Oliver's health and they also prepare free meals for homeless people every week.



One of the most disturbing scenes in the book occurs in Chapter 3 when Althea essentially rapes Oliver when he is not in a fully conscious state. Althea wishes later that she had not done it but her feelings had reached a point where she felt it was the right thing to do at the time. When Oliver later finds out, he is very upset because he was not aware of what was happening and felt Althea took advantage of him. The topic of rape is a sensitive one, especially when the girl is the aggressor, but this story looks at the emotional side as well as the physical act to give a balanced perspective and ultimate feelings of remorse.

Discussion Question 1

How do Althea and Oliver exhibit the theme of Friendship in the story so far?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways have Althea and Oliver's lives been similar and how have they been different?

Discussion Question 3

Is it ever possible for young men and women to be just friends or do romance and sex always enter the picture?

Vocabulary

loll, cinched, enunciating, insurmountable, feebly, vexation, resolve, diminutive, debutantes, macerated, lament, morbid, oblivious, disconsolate, loiter, emphasis, nocturnal, cloying, ominous, licentious, chenille, notorious, chakras, denizens, melodramatic, falter, relentless, clavicle, congregating, phantom, Pavlovian, disconcertingly, zenith, eerie, exasperated, jeopardize, daunting, Ritalin, atrophying, obsessive, disassociate, illicit, abated, erudite, eunuchs, concubine, flourish, honing, doused, devoid, redolent, semantic, misallocation, vigil, pictographs, accusatory, vehemently, influx

Chapters 4 - 6

Summary

In Chapter 4, Oliver awakens after having been asleep for two months. He stumbles outside and walks to Althea's house where her father chats with him for a bit and tells him that Althea is with Coby and that her standard of company drops when Oliver isn't around. Oliver heads to Coby's house and can see him and Althea drinking beer on the roof of the garage. Oliver notices that Althea is skinny and has dyed her hair black. When Althea spots Oliver, she runs to hug him and they jump into her car, leaving Coby behind. Althea drives them to the water and they lie on the dock discussing who they want to be for Halloween this year. Oliver is surprised to see that Althea now smokes cigarettes and he's not happy that she's been spending so much time with Coby.

That night at dinner Oliver's mother tells him about a medical study being conducted on boys like Oliver with the sleeping condition. She had received a call from a doctor there who has defined the sickness as Kleine-Levin syndrome, and although they don't know much about it, he wants to conduct some tests to see if he can help the kids affected by it. His mother is shocked that Oliver is not excited about the prospect of spending months in the hospital under observation. Oliver heads to Althea's house and they get in her car and drive out of Wilmington to a roadside rest where they lie on a picnic table and just talk like they used to.

In Chapter 5, Althea suggests that Oliver share some of his pills with her and Coby. Oliver has a big stash of amphetamines and stimulants from all the doctors he has visited about his sleeping episodes. Valerie and Minty Fresh have put together a Halloween punk show to raise money for Bread and Roses. Althea and Oliver have decided to go as post-assassination JFK and Jackie Kennedy. Althea dances all night and tries to find Oliver when the bands finish but she can't so she and Coby wait by her car. Eventually they see Oliver talking to a girl dressed in a skimpy French maid costume. Oliver says goodbye to the girl and Althea can't help but think that she has lost Oliver. Oliver suggests that they leave because Jason is still mad about the mess that Althea and Oliver left in the bathroom of his parents' house a few months ago. Jason comes over to the group and threatens to key Althea's car and Oliver tries to intervene but Althea lunges into Jason and pins him to the ground. Althea finds Jason's keys and throws them into the woods before Oliver can push her into the car and he drives away.

While they drive, Althea tells Oliver how angry she is about life and she wants things back the way they used to be. Oliver thinks she means the night that they walked home from Jason's party and Oliver wouldn't go home with her after they had kissed for awhile near a tree. Althea tells Oliver that that is not the reason she is angry, she is mad because he doesn't remember when they did have sex. Oliver is outraged that Althea had sex with him during one of his episodes knowing full well that he would not remember it. Oliver leaves Althea standing by her car and runs away. Althea goes to Coby's apartment and they drink and play cards and eventually have sex.



Althea doesn't see Oliver at school on Monday and she thinks he is avoiding her. Coby tries to tell her that he doesn't think Oliver has been at school today and something snaps in Althea and she begins beating him about his face. On the third punch, Coby falls to the floor and a crowd gathers as she continues to pummel him until the principal pulls her off and down the hall.

In Chapter 6, Oliver yells at his mother to hurry because the cab taking them to the airport will be at the house at any minute. When the doorbell rings, Oliver expects it to be the cab driver, but it is Valerie and Minty Fresh who are worried about Althea who they think is going to be expelled. Oliver deflects what they're trying to tell him because he is still angry at Althea. Oliver had hoped to slip away to New York undetected but Valerie and Minty want to know where he's going so he tells them about the medical study. He makes them promise not to tell Althea and he leaves.

Oliver and his mother check into their hotel and the energy of New York gives him some home for the medical study. Oliver's mother plans to visit her friends and her parents for a few days after Oliver gets checked into the hospital. Oliver immediately distrusts the doctor, Dr. Curls, who seems too polished and too young. Oliver is given a physical and then admitted to his room which looks like a dorm room with medical equipment. During the days, Oliver can spend time with the 11 other boys in the study in a common area where they can watch TV and play games. A tutor comes in the afternoons to help them with schoolwork. Oliver prefers to stay in his room to read, leaving only when the orderly comes in to clean.

Oliver learns that the boys have given each other nicknames based on the states where they live. CT is from Connecticut, AK-47 is from Alaska and KY Jelly is from Kentucky. In the evenings, the boys are strapped into their beds with electrodes attached to their heads to monitor their brain activity. In the morning, Stella, a cute, blonde nurse tells Oliver that Dr. Curls wants to see him in his office. Dr. Curls is concerned that Oliver has been spending so much time by himself when it would be best if he could make some friendships with some of the other boys and they could vent about their condition. Oliver is not happy about the prospect but says he will try to be more social.

Analysis

The author continues the theme of Friendship in this section in that Althea is at a loss when Oliver is in a sleeping episode. He has been her only friend since they were children and she's not sure what to do without him. Oliver's sleeping episode lasts two months this time so Althea is almost forced to find new friends to have people to be with so she starts spending more time with Coby, Valerie, and Minty. Coby is not necessarily a good choice for a friend which Althea's father confirms but the rebellious side of her is drawn to him. Sometimes friendship can be forged for the wrong reasons which seems likely in the case of Althea and Coby. Things get further complicated between them because Coby has a crush on Althea which is not reciprocal. When Oliver and Althea have a fight about her taking advantage of him during a sleep episode, she seeks



solace with Coby and they have sex. Althea immediately regrets it and beats Coby at school when he tries to talk to her about Oliver.

Althea has a more artistic temperament, especially compared to the easy going Oliver, and she seems to have buried anger and resentment just under the surface. This causes her to dye her blonde hair black and start to hang out with a punk like Coby. She enjoys shocking people by what she says and does so it should come as no surprise that her volatility gets her in trouble. She compromises her relationship with Oliver by violating him during a sleeping episode, beats up Coby at school and even gets into an altercation with Jason in the parking lot after the Halloween party. Althea has some unresolved issues and they seem to stem from more than a thwarted romantic relationship with Oliver. Perhaps it has something to do with distant parents and being left on her own so much. Althea's mother left the family, and the state, when Althea was little and her father is lost in his work and girlfriends. Althea is provided for but she seems to have lacked the emotional support necessary for a young girl. Maybe she was looking to Oliver to also fill this need for her and when he can't do it, her disappointment takes a violent turn.

The author also uses the theme of Rape in this section. Althea finally admits to Oliver that they had sex during his sleeping episode and he is outraged by this violation. It is easy to see why Oliver is upset. If he had sex with Althea, it would be something he would want to fully experience and remember afterwards and he has been robbed of that. It is easy to see Althea's side of the situation though too. Oliver's physical response indicated to her that he was engaged and wanted to have sex. Also, Oliver's sleeping sickness is so new that all the nuances of it are not fully known. Apparently, Oliver has times during the episodes when he seems to be awake when he is not and is in an almost sleepwalking state. In Althea's defense, Oliver seemed awake to her because he was responding and she didn't know he was not fully present. This seems to be a situation of technical rape with extenuating circumstances because Althea would not willingly take advantage of or hurt Oliver in any way.

Discussion Question 1

In your opinion, did Althea rape Oliver?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Althea dye her hair black and start hanging out so much with Coby?

Discussion Question 3

Is Oliver right to feel so outraged that he and Althea had sex without his knowledge?

Vocabulary

maliciously, rancid, errant, disquiet, placid, infuriates, cagey, wistfully, smirks, makeshift, transfixed, sinister, regression, incoherent, intangible, dousing, subsequent, gesticulating, frenetic, retribution, albeit, disdain, incumbent, culminating, endearing, propaganda, impassively, fleeting, haphazard, irate, dysfunctional, cathartic, wasabi, cascade, vivid, hoards, expletives, surreptitiously, anticipated, allegiance, ogling, alienating

Chapters 7 - 9

Summary

In Chapter 7, Althea has been expelled from school for beating up Coby and is living in the basement at home. Her father tells her that he can get her into another school after winter break; that she doesn't have to like it, she just has to graduate high school. He also tells her to think about art school because going to college is a long shot now but she doesn't really care. Her father tries to get some reason from Althea as to why she went crazy on Coby at school that day but she can't put anything into words. He tells her she has to call her mother and tell her about the expulsion and they settle down on the couch to watch a movie about dinosaurs. Althea calls her mother the next morning to tell her that she got expelled and that she and Oliver have had a big fight and aren't speaking. Her mother tells Althea that she can come to New Mexico for awhile if she wants to get away but Althea doesn't commit to anything.

Althea goes to Oliver's house which shows no signs of life so she proceeds to Valerie's house and Minty Fresh tells Althea that they're not supposed to tell her where Oliver is. Coby is also at Valerie's and he is friendly toward Althea and takes her out to his truck and tells her that Oliver is in New York participating in a sleep study. Althea heads home to pack some clothes and at dinner that night tells her father that she is going to drive to New Mexico to visit her mother for Thanksgiving. Her father then tells her that he is going to Mexico over winter break and asks if she would like to come along and she agrees to go.

In Chapter 8, Oliver is getting restless being at the hospital as are the other boys who are all just waiting to fall into a sleep episode so they can be observed by the medical team. One day while the boys all wait for the therapist to arrive for group discussion, they share stories about the embarrassing things they have done while in their sleeping states. One of the boys says his friend calls this state, "id without a lid," meaning having no impulse control. After the session, Stella takes Oliver's temperature and it's elevated which indicates that a sleeping episode is probably imminent.

In Chapter 9, Althea packs her car and makes some sandwiches for her trip. She has told everyone she is going to New Mexico but really plans to drive to New York to find Oliver and make things right between them. All she has to do is make periodic calls to her mother and father and no one will be the wiser. As she drives, Althea tries to think of a nice speech to say to Oliver when she sees him, but all she can really think to say is that she is sorry. That night, Oliver calls his mother to tell her that a sleeping episode is coming and that's why he won't be calling for awhile. It's after midnight when Althea reaches New York City and she's filled with optimism at the prospect of making up with Oliver.

In the morning, the boy from Kentucky visits Oliver in his room and Oliver ends up telling him about having sex with Althea but that he doesn't remember it. Kentucky is



impressed but Oliver says that he just wants his life back so he can remember everything that happens to him. Stella checks on Oliver and he tells her that he is almost ready to sleep so she gets his sensors attached. Althea arrives at the hospital but is so nervous that she sits outside and smokes for awhile to gather her courage to see Oliver. Stella continues to prep Oliver to be monitored while he's sleeping. Oliver feels very nervous and emotional and Stella sings to soothe him. Oliver wants to make sure that Stella won't be around to see him if he does anything embarrassing, and she promises she won't see anything but she'll be there when he wakes up. Althea musters the courage to find Oliver's floor in the hospital and tells a nurse she is looking for Oliver, but the nurse tells her that Oliver is asleep so Althea leaves.

Analysis

The author introduces the theme of Unrequited Love in this section. Althea beats up on Coby basically because he is not Oliver. She has had sex with both of them even though she had only really wanted the experience with Oliver, but he is not able to remember and validate any of her feelings or share any of his. Althea used Coby as a substitute out of anger and the experience was less than satisfying. Unrequited love is a difficult situation to be in when you have strong feelings for a person but they are not reciprocated. Althea has wanted a romantic relationship with Oliver for quite some time but he hasn't been ready for it so she is frustrated on many levels. Now that she and Oliver are fighting, it seems as if the object of her affection has moved even further away from her. This is essentially why she lost her composure and beat up Coby. It's not Coby's fault that he is not who Althea loves but she shouldn't use him or toy with his emotions either. Coby does have real feelings for Althea, and it is Coby who ultimately tells her where Oliver is even though everyone else promised not to tell her. Coby is also experiencing unrequited love where Althea is concerned, but he does not act violently when his feelings are not returned.

This section also shows the fear that the boys in the study experience. There is so much that is unknown about their sleeping episodes and they have heard only embarrassing stories about what they sometimes do while in this mode. They are afraid because they don't know how much of their lives they are going to lose to the illness the next time it kicks in and they don't want to be mortified by doing anything inappropriate either. It must be very frightening to have no control over what happens to you but the boys try to be brave and use humor to mask their fear. There is some comfort for them in that they are with other people who have had similar experiences, though, which has made for some unexpected friendships within the group.

Discussion Question 1

Does Althea really know why she started beating up on Coby?



Discussion Question 2

Why do the boys in the sleeping study make jokes about everything including their condition? How does Oliver fit in or not fit in with this group?

Discussion Question 3

Does Althea have any sense of guilt for lying to her father about where she is going for Thanksgiving?

Vocabulary

subterranean, apocalyptic, mortification, pummel, shiv, superfluous, impenetrable, denounced, alienate, shun, claustrophobia, stasis, vicariously, cringeworthy, censor, hypnotic, protestations, Reiki, euphoric, veritable, burgeoning, infraction, galvanized, brandishing, inelegantly, whimsical, mirth, urchin, pomade, adrift, faux, evasive

Chapters 10 - 12

Summary

In Chapter 10, Althea buys a bottle of King Cobra malt liquor and heads to a pier in Brooklyn to think. She has driven all the way to New York without being able to see Oliver and needs to figure out a new plan. Althea finishes her bottle of King Cobra and promptly vomits in a nearby trash can. Unfortunately, her car keys have fallen into the can and she is forced to sort through the refuse to find them. While digging, she cuts her arm on something sharp and tries to stop the bleeding with a t-shirt she finds in her car. She takes beach blankets out of her trunk and lies down on the floor in her car to sleep after parking on a residential side street. Althea dreams of dinosaurs, a familiar theme for her for years, but tonight she dreams that two dinosaurs look at her through her car windows as they smoke and drink. The next morning, Althea awakes and squats down behind her car to urinate when she sees cigarette butts and empty beer bottles lying near her car. She freaks out and speeds away in her car.

Althea checks one of Minty's Bread and Roses pamphlets to find the Brooklyn Coney Island location so she can get something to eat this afternoon. Althea quickly eats the meal offered by a young woman named Matilda and her male companion and the woman tells Althea to come back tomorrow for a Thanksgiving meal. When Matilda learns that Althea doesn't have a place to stay, she invites her to come back to her house but Althea declines. Althea finds a pay phone and calls her father to tell him that she just arrived in New Mexico so that he doesn't worry about her and call Althea's mother and find out that Althea is not there.

With nowhere to go and the weather turning very cold, Althea hunts down Matilda's address and Matilda is glad to see her when she arrives. Althea and Matilda sit and talk on the stoop for a little bit before Matilda says she has to leave to scavenge for food for tomorrow. Althea offers to drive her and they stop at groceries and restaurants which throw away food that's still good but too old to sell. Althea accepts Matilda's invitation to stay the night and helps her carry all the food into the house. The inside of the house is in bad repair and disarray and Althea is overwhelmed by the odor of cigarettes and booze. Matilda introduces Althea to the guy who was with her in the park earlier today, Ethan, and a couple named Leala and Kaleb, and another guy named Gregory talking to a cat named Mr. Business.

Matilda tells the others that Althea is going to stay the night and they are not thrilled, especially Ethan. Matilda tells Althea that she can meet the others in the morning and offers her her bed for the night. Matilda brings Althea coffee in the morning and they go to the bathroom to smoke because the steam helps the nicotine absorb into the lungs. Later that morning Ethan helps Althea peel potatoes in the living room. Ethan tells Althea that he is 20 and walks dogs to make money. Ethan accuses Althea of being "Platinum card homeless," a kid from a wealth family who runs away to New York and

then heads home when things get rough. Althea considers throwing a potato at his head but does not.

A couple of days later, Althea helps Matilda serve food at Coney Park and Matilda tells her that she called Valerie to get the story on Althea. Althea then shares the story of her life with Matilda and Matilda cautions her to never beat up on anyone in the house or she'll be gone. Matilda hugs Althea and they have an understanding that Althea can stay.

In Chapter 11, Oliver wakes up in his hospital room but can't move or speak, so he starts to panic. Suddenly, though, the paralysis breaks and he screams, tears off all the electrodes, dresses, and heads to the lounge. Kentucky tells Oliver that Oliver was asleep for about four and a half weeks, missing both Thanksgiving and Christmas and that it is almost New Year's. Stella tells Oliver that Dr. Curls wants to see him so Oliver proceeds to his office. Dr. Curls wants to know if Oliver wants to talk about this last experience but he doesn't. Oliver wants to know what help he can get now, and Dr. Curls tells him that taking the psychiatric medication, Lithium, is one option. Unfortunately, the side effects are very extensive and it's not a sure thing or simple fix. Oliver is angry because the doctor had given him hope when it seems like everything is pretty hopeless and he storms out of the office.

In Chapter 12, Althea has adapted to the house and sleeps on a couch in the kitchen and keeps her few clothes in the pantry. Althea has called her father to tell him that she is staying for a longer visit with her mother in New Mexico but she would be home in time to go with him to Mexico after New Year's. Althea had periodically checked on Oliver over the holidays and she is afraid that her time in New York will run out before she gets to see him. One night Leala wants everyone to go out but no one has any money so Althea suggests a scavenger hunt and they all have a great time.

Analysis

The author uses the Coming of Age theme as Althea finds her way around New York and her instincts have to kick in. Sometimes in literature, the protagonist is set in difficult situations where nothing is familiar as a way to test their character and survival skills. Althea's plan is not going according to how she imagined it would and she has to rely on her wits to make it. Not only does she have to find food and shelter, she has to learn whether or not she can trust people and who might be good candidates for friends. Meeting Matilda was a stroke of luck for Althea because she not only shelters Althea, but gives her some emotional guidance, something Althea has been sorely lacking from her parents. Althea's only real emotional compass, Oliver, is not available to her at the moment so she is forced to extend herself into the world, all a part of growing and coming of age.

The theme of Dependencies is also strong in this section. All the young people in the house, including Althea, rely on cigarettes and alcohol to get themselves through the day. They start the day by smoking in the bathroom where the steam from the shower



delivers the smoke to their lungs more rapidly. Drinking seems to be their only real entertainment and the house is cluttered with empty beer bottles all the time. Alcohol is part of everything they do and it keeps them stuck in the cycle of having no ambitions or goals.

Oliver is experiencing his own feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, having slept for four-and-a-half weeks, and lost an entire holiday season. When Oliver hopes that his sleeping episode might have given the medical team some information to help him, he learns that there is only one possible solution right now and that is to take the heavy duty psychiatric drug, Lithium. The side effects of the drug are overwhelming for Oliver and he is consumed with hopelessness and depression. Amazingly, though, Oliver does not resort to recreational drugs even though he has access to them. He doesn't even smoke and drink. It seems as if Oliver, who has plenty of reason to be depressed and indulge in some form of substance abuse, is the only one who doesn't.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Althea so freaked out when she sees cigarette butts and empty beer bottles around her car after she has spent the night in it?

Discussion Question 2

How does Althea keep up the pretense that she is with her mother for Thanksgiving in New Mexico?

Discussion Question 3

What does Ethan mean when he calls Althea "Platinum card homeless?" Do you think this is a fair and/or accurate thing to call her?

Vocabulary

perpetual, sated, subside, preoccupation, minuscule, fervent, mediocre, concocted, postapocalyptic, shellac, reconnaissance, dilettante, remorse, decipher, minimalist, cryptic, vantage, excursion, kinetic, obscure, gist, guttural, oximeter, debrief, incendiary, perfunctory, countenance, lithium, vertigo, mesa, deft, clique, ludicrous, menacing

Chapters 13 - 16

Summary

In Chapter 13, Oliver takes a phone call from his mother who is annoyed because he has been ignoring her calls. His mother wants to talk about his taking Lithium, and Oliver isn't sure he wants to do it. Oliver is frustrated because there is no clear cut answer for him, so he goes to Kentucky's room, asks what his real name is (Will) and suggests that they get out of the hospital for awhile. Oliver's light jacket is not enough protection against the snow but he and Will head downtown amid the bright lights and crowds of people. Oliver shows Will the area where his parents used to live. Eventually the conversation turns to Althea and when Oliver describes her, Will tells him that she had come to the hospital to see Oliver right after he went into his last sleeping episode. Oliver tells Will that he is going to go on Lithium as soon as they get back to the hospital.

Oliver calls Althea's house from a phone booth and talks to her father who says that Althea has been expelled from school and is visiting her mother in New Mexico. When he hangs up, Oliver tells Will that there's no way Althea is in New Mexico because she hates her mother; she must still be in New York and Oliver is determined to find her. Oliver calls Coby to see if he knows where Althea might be and he tells him that someone from Bread and Roses in Brooklyn had called Valerie to check up on Althea and know whether she was safe to let in their house. This gives Oliver the information he needs and Will agrees to go with him but wants to hurry because he's getting really tired.

In Chapter 14, Althea and Matilda begin their day smoking in the bathroom. It is the day before New Year's Eve and Matilda is excited because they all have friends coming in for their annual New Year's Eve party. Later that day, Althea goes with Ethan to serve meals in the park and he again launches into his idea that she'll soon get tired of living this kind of lifestyle and call her father to tell him that she wants to come home. Althea wants to strangle Ethan but warms at the opportunity to fight with someone again.

In Chapter 15, Oliver and Will arrive at Matilda's house and Will is so tired he can hardly stand. Oliver wants to take Will back to the hospital but Will reminds him that they are probably in big trouble for leaving and they might not get out again so Oliver needs to talk to Althea now. Althea is very surprised, but pleased, to see Oliver and even more surprised to see Will sleeping in the fetal position on the porch. Oliver and Althea manage to get Will into her car to drive him back to the hospital. They try to wake him so he can walk into the hospital on his own because Oliver is afraid the hospital will keep him if he goes in with him and Althea can't take him in because she's supposed to be in New Mexico. When they get to the hospital, they find two women outside who are willing to take Will inside.

Althea and Oliver return to Matilda's house, and she introduces him to everybody. Oliver calls his mother to tell her that he is fine and still in New York and she is angry that he left the hospital without telling anyone. She wants to know if he has decided to stay and try the Lithium or return home and he tells her that he hasn't decided yet. Althea tells Oliver that she is going to stay in New York with her new friends who fell like family to her and he is upset that he is being replaced in her life. They talk in Matilda's room for awhile and then they make love.

In Chapter 16, Althea goes with Matilda on a liquor run where they buy a cart full of bottles of liquor, none costing more than \$8.00. Althea asks Matilda if she can stay with her for awhile longer because it's clear that Oliver isn't in love with her and she doesn't want to go back to North Carolina. Later that day, Althea calls her father to tell him that she never went to New Mexico and that she plans to stay in New York with her new friends. Her father is furious that she lied to him and tells her that she needs to come home to finish high school then she can go back to New York, but that's not what Althea wants. Plus, she needs to be away from Oliver because it's too painful to see him all the time, knowing that she can't have him the way she wants.

Later that day, Oliver helps Althea peel potatoes and she tells him that he should finish high school and go on to college because he has so much potential. Oliver can sense that Althea has turned a corner without him and maybe he should try doing the same thing. That night, the New Year's Eve party is a raging success and Althea and Oliver talk about how they will always be friends but they know that something has changed. Oliver tells her that he has decided to go on Lithium and finish high school. The next day the whole group from the house goes to Coney Island to swim in the freezing ocean and they all agree that it feels good but it also hurts.

Analysis

This section of the book is all about honesty for Althea and Oliver, with each other and with other people. Oliver wants an honest answer from Dr. Curls about his condition and leaves the hospital in frustration when he doesn't get one. He wants nothing but honesty from the people around him now and even starts calling Kentucky by his real name (Will) when they take out on their little street adventure. Althea also comes clean with her father about where she's been for the last several weeks and tells him that she won't be returning to North Carolina because she has found a good situation in New York. Being honest without being cruel, Althea lets her father know that neither he nor her mother have been a great support system for her. Finally, Althea and Oliver are able to be honest with each other. They can't have the romantic relationship that Althea had always hoped for so it's time for them to part company so they can develop full lives apart.

The Coming of Age theme comes to closure in this section with both Althea and Oliver making decisions about their lives going forward. Althea decides to stay in New York with her new friends because they have become the family she never had. Oliver decides to start taking Lithium and return home to finish high school and probably



continue on to college. These decisions mark a turning point in both of their lives because they do not include the other person. For so many years, Althea and Oliver have been inseparable but they realize that they are stuck and the time has come for them to grow which means separating.

Going swimming in the frigid ocean on New Year's Day is symbolic in a few ways. First, New Year's Day is typically a time for new beginnings, when people make resolutions to change their lives in the new year. Second, going swimming like they do is a type of baptism into a new way of life as well. When they come out of the water, they will be changed people going forward. And, last, when the author writes, "Turns out, they're both right—it feels good, and it hurts," she means that the water is refreshing but the cold stings their bodies like needles until they get used to it. She also wants the reader to know that she means symbolically Althea and Oliver's decision to part company has the energy that comes with fresh potential but it is also sad because that way of life is over for them.

Discussion Question 1

Is Oliver justified in his frustration with Dr. Curls' lack of a formal plan of care for him or is he overreacting to a situation in which the doctor is doing the best he can with an unknown disease?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Althea decide to stay in New York?

Discussion Question 3

Will Althea and Oliver remain friends even though they won't be seeing each other often anymore? Was Oliver right in that theirs was a relationship of geography anyway?

Vocabulary

serpentine, curmudgeonly, monstrosity, luminous, variants, alienate, palpable, perverse, telekinetic, feigning, nonchalance, cathartic, stupefaction, nemesis, demurred, contemplate, tactical, heist, smug, derision, lucid, rambunctious, instigator, smarmy, merlot, trounces, concoct, ascetic, plagiarist, wormhole, impromptu, detritus

Characters

Althea Carter

Althea Carter is one of the two main characters in the book. Althea is 17 years old and a junior in high school in Wilmington, North Carolina. Althea is an only child. Her father teaches history at the University of North Carolina and her mother lives in New Mexico, having left the family when Althea was six-years-old.

Althea is an artist who loves to sketch her friend, Oliver, in different situations. Althea and Oliver have been friends since they were 6 years old. Althea is a loner with no real friends other than Oliver. Althea has an angry undercurrent probably because her parents have always been so disinterested in her. She is also lost because she has been left to fend for herself most of the time. Althea's anger keeps most people at bay but she does gravitate toward some punk rock kids when Oliver is not available due to his sleeping sickness. She also enjoys living with the young people of Bread and Roses in Brooklyn because they don't have regular lifestyles.

Althea's main interest in life is Oliver and she would like a romantic relationship with him but when that isn't possible, she vows to remain his lifelong friend. Althea makes the ultimate rebellious move when she refuses to return home to finish high school in favor of staying with her newfound friends in Brooklyn who have become a family of sorts, something Althea has always missed although she wasn't really aware of it.

Oliver McKinley

Oliver McKinley is one of the main characters in the book. He is 17 years old and a junior in high school in Wilmington, North Carolina. Oliver is a really laid-back kid who is very smart, especially in science. Oliver likes things to stay the same, and he's not really into exploring any deep feelings.

Oliver has Kleine-Levin syndrome which causes him to sleep for extended periods of time. Oliver is frustrated because there is no cure for the illness and no real way of managing it so he loses big chunks of his life. This lack of control makes Oliver feel very vulnerable and he becomes frustrated and angry.

Oliver is an only child, his mother being widowed when Oliver was a young boy. Oliver is close to his mother but has a hard time managing her fears for him as well as his own anxieties about his condition and the impact it is having on his life.

Oliver's best friend since grade school has been Althea Carter and they have been inseparable ever since. Oliver is not able to reciprocate Althea's romantic feelings for him which causes the first major rift in their relationship. Oliver feels that Althea has taken advantage of him by having sex with him during one of his sleep episodes



because he can't remember it. Ultimately, Oliver is able to be honest with Althea about his friendship with her and they part company but agree to be friends from afar.

Garth Carter

Garth Carter is Althea's father. He teaches history at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington. Garth is described as, "A Southern gentleman from Savannah, where all of his family still resides, Garth quietly nurses--despite his outward trappings of erudite bookishness: reading glasses, ever-present glass of good scotch, and insistence on proper grammar--a fervent love of the lowbrow, particularly mass market paperbacks and poker." Garth can be a little laid back and not really in tune with raising a teen-aged daughter. He is very into himself and prefers to bury himself in history books and novels as a means of escape. Garth also drinks a lot of Scotch also probably as a way to take the edge off life disappointments.

Alice

Alice is Althea's mother. Alice left the family when Althea was 6 years old and now lives in New Mexico. Althea never sees her mother and talks to her on the phone only when something significant happens. When Althea talks to her, Alice is more like a big sister in the cavalier advice she gives out instead of a mother who has her daughter's best interests at heart. Part of Althea's anger issues stem from Alice's absence in her life.

Nicky McKinley

Nicky is Oliver's mother who works as a massage therapist at a luxury spa. Nicky is described as, "...not even forty, and though it's been over ten years since Oliver's dad died, widowhood has not aged her. If anything, it seems to have trapped her in a severely extended postadolescence, full of cigarettes and mood swings and antisocial behavior--despite a steady stream of would-be suitors, Nicky hardly ever goes out. And though she complains about the neighbors' silent judgment, she does sometimes give the impression that she is daring them to come over and suggest she brush her hair, mow her lawn, or empty the ashtrays." Nicky has had a tough time in her life and she's firm when she needs to be, especially about Oliver. Nicky would rather be living back in New York and keeps in regular contact with old friends there. She smokes a lot and drinks wine all the time to calm her nerves.

Valerie

Valerie is a girl at school who was originally a friend of Oliver's, but Althea becomes friendly with her during one of Oliver's sleeping episodes. Althea has no friends other than Oliver, so when he isn't available, Althea is forced to seek out new friends. Valerie is part of the punk rock group and invites Althea to band rehearsals and shows. Valerie

also heads up the Wilmington chapter of Bread and Roses, a group that scavenges for food to feed the homeless people in the area.

Minty Fresh

Minty Fresh's real name is Howard and he was a friend of Oliver's before Althea also became friends with him. Minty is in a punk band and sports a blue Mohawk which he keeps in place with Elmer's glue and mint toothpaste, which is how he earns his nickname.

Coby

Coby is a friend of Oliver's who becomes enamored with Althea when Oliver is out during a sleeping episode. Althea needs someone to hang out with but Coby thinks there is more to their time together than Althea does. Coby and Althea do end up having sex but it's more to spite Oliver than anything else. Coby realizes, though, that Althea will never feel about him like she does about Oliver and he even tells Oliver where he can find Althea in New York when Oliver is looking for her.

Dr. Curls

Dr. Curls is the physician in charge of the Kleine-Levin study at St. Victor's hospital in New York City. He has good intentions with the study but Oliver is angry with him because he can't provide a cure for the syndrome.

Stella

Stella is the pretty, blonde nurse who cares for the boys in the hospital study for Kleine-Levin syndrome. All the boys are attracted to her because she is pretty and shapely, but she represents yet one more thing that is unattainable in their lives.

Matilda

Matilda heads the Coney Island group of Bread and Roses. She is teased by the others in the group for being so organized and they call her Management. Matilda's house is filled with renters who are free spirits and don't have regular jobs. Matilda has a big heart and takes Althea in, eventually inviting her to stay if she pays her way and contributes to the group.

Ethan

Ethan is one of the housemates in Brooklyn who helps Matilda with the Bread and Roses work. He is antagonistic toward Althea at first because he suspiciously thinks she is a rich kid who will run home when she gets tired of the lifestyle led by those in the Brooklyn house.

Symbols and Symbolism

Kleine-Levin Syndrome

Kleine-Levin Syndrome is a sleeping sickness which causes patients to sleep for extended periods of time. There is so much that is unknown about it and it has no cure and no real way to manage it. It usually occurs with young men who are just beginning to learn who they are as people. This symbolizes the volatility they are already feeling about their lives because it strikes with not much forewarning and leaves the patients feeling very vulnerable, frustrated, and angry.

Dinosaurs

Althea has a big interest in dinosaurs. She draws them and they are often prevalent in her dreams. It is possible that the dinosaurs symbolize old value systems and ways of thinking that do not work for Althea. She is rebellious and angry on many levels, mostly because her parents have been non-existent in her life. So the old ways of thinking about the nuclear family and associated values are extinct and have no relevance in Althea's life.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a huge element in the story. Althea and Oliver's parents both drink all the time; Garth is always with a glass of scotch, and Nicky is always with a glass of wine. Althea also begins to drink when she hooks up with Coby and she is hooked from that point on. The housemates in Brooklyn also drink all the time so Althea fits right in. On New Year's Eve they spend all their money on a cart full of cheap booze, knowing full well that they will vomit it up the next day. The alcohol is a crutch for all the characters except for Oliver who doesn't drink. They all are trying to escape their circumstances and disappointments while Oliver tries to face his stone cold sober.

Althea's Car

Althea's car is a source of freedom for her. She and Oliver ride around in it and they are in their protective bubble for just the two of them. It allows her the mobility she needs to do what she wants to, as evidenced when she goes to New York to see Oliver. The car ingratiates her with Matilda and the housemates because it gives them more freedom and mobility that they didn't have before she arrived.

Bread and Roses

Bread and Roses is an organization of people who scavenge for food from groceries and restaurants so that they may prepare meals and serve them to homeless people. The young people who work with the group such as Valerie in Wilmington and Matilda in Brooklyn are not part of mainstream organizations. They are not the popular kids in school and they don't really care what other people think of them. They are also not afraid to do what they think is right by serving vegan meals to hungry people. The group encompasses the thinking that it is necessary to provide the basics to people who need them but they can also add the flavor of kindness and consistency in a world sorely lacking those qualities.

Rape

When Althea rapes Oliver, it is the turning point of their relationship. Althea is wounded that they had sex and Oliver had no recollection of it and Oliver is outraged that Althea took advantage of him during a sleeping episode. If they were ever going to have sex, Oliver wanted to be fully present, and as it occurred he was still in a sleep state even though his body was responsive. This is the point of no return for both of them, and their relationship will never be the same.

"Would You Rather" Game

Althea and Oliver sometimes played a game called "Would you rather" in which they would suggest two situations, equally unattractive and the other was supposed to say which one they would rather do or have. Ultimately, their relationship became a "would you rather" situation in that they have to decide to remain friends and always be frustrated and angry or part company and stay friends from afar but go on to live lives they can be fully present in.

Coney Island

It is a cold day in November when Althea first sees the iconic Coney Island amusement park. It is the location where she gets a free Bread and Roses meal served by Matilda and Ethan. It is symbolic that the park is shut down and lifeless because that mirrors Althea's feelings and it symbolizes that her life which had been carefree to this point will now be more serious as the cold, harsh truth of reality envelops her.

New Year's Day

Althea and Oliver make the decision on New Year's Day to part company. This is symbolic because New Year's is typically a time when people make resolutions to make

positive changes in their lives and this is exactly what Althea and Oliver have decided to do no matter how hard it may be for them to follow through.

Atlantic Ocean

The Atlantic Ocean has always been a big part of Althea and Oliver's lives. They have spent many hours at the beach swimming and talking so it is symbolic that the book ends with them swimming and talking while swimming in the ocean on New Year's Day. The warm water of North Carolina had always been soothing for them but the frigid temperature of the water near New York in January stings in sharp contrast. This symbolizes the cold realization that their lives, and especially their relationship, is changing and nothing will ever be the same for them.

Settings

Wilmington, North Carolina

The first part of the story takes place in Wilmington, North Carolina. This is where Althea and Oliver live and go to school and where they met when they were 6 years old. They have lived in the same neighborhood in Wilmington for 11 years.

Waffle House

The Waffle House restaurant in Wilmington is where Althea takes Oliver when he comes to her house in the middle of the night demanding to go. Normally, they don't like Waffle House but she takes him because he is so insistent. When Oliver wants to sleep in the booth there and Althea tries to get him to leave, he becomes enraged, throwing things and becoming verbally abusive. Althea had no way of knowing but Oliver was still in a sleep state and not really aware of what he was doing.

New York

Both Althea and Oliver end up in New York, he for the medical study at the hospital and she came to apologize to him and ends up staying with some bohemian friends she finds. Oliver goes to New York hoping to find a solution to his sleep problem and ultimately heads back home at the end of the novel not really finding one. Althea hoped that going to see Oliver would be a solution to the awkwardness and betrayal in their relationship. It ended up not being one, but Althea did find a solution in New York being a new home for her where she could be among people she felt she fit in with better.

St. Victor's Hospital

Oliver agrees to undergo testing for Kleine-Levin Syndrome at St. Victor's Hospital in New York City. He is confined to his room and the lounge area where he spends all his time sleeping, studying or hanging out with the other boys participating in the study. Ultimately Oliver does not find a permanent solution, but he does seem to make friends with some of the other boys.

Matilda's house

Matilda befriends Althea when she has nowhere else to go in New York and invites her to stay at her house in Brooklyn. The house is inhabited by bohemian types who don't have jobs but they do have good hearts and are good to Althea and other people who are down on their luck in the city.

Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Coming of Age is an important theme in literature and in the book "Althea and Oliver." This means the transition period in which a child becomes a young adult. There is no set age for this transition because it is different for each character. Some characters reach young adulthood through the natural progression of age and maturity while some children face traumatic situations which essentially force them to grow up more quickly than their peers.

In literature, Coming of Age usually features a protagonist who struggles with a belief system or other challenge in order to begin to identify as an adult. In "Althea and Oliver," both of the main characters come of age as their relationship changes dramatically by the end of the story. Althea and Oliver have been friends since childhood and have been inseparable, almost to the point of exclusivity. When Oliver's illness changes the dynamic between them, they are both forced to grow in different ways in order to survive. Oliver, naturally turns inward to try and understand what is happening to him and Althea begins to extend herself to other people because Oliver isn't always available. Also, Althea wants more from the relationship than Oliver is willing or able to give so that is a turning point for them and they realize that although they will always be friendly, they have to change the course of their lives to continue to grow and become who they are meant to be.

Friendship

The theme of Friendship is an important one in "Althea and Oliver." Oliver has a few random friends, but his primary friendship is with Althea. Althea and Oliver have known each other for several years and trust each other implicitly. They live in the same neighborhood, they are only children of single parents and go to the same school. They have secret games and jokes that only they understand. And there's a lot to be said for knowing someone for 11 years like Althea and Oliver do. They can tell what the other is thinking or going to do without the other one saying anything.

Althea and Oliver reach a point, though, when their friendship has to go to another level or end because Althea wants a romantic relationship with Oliver but he is not ready for that. The real tipping point comes when Oliver learns that he and Althea had sex when he was in a sleeping state and doesn't remember anything about the experience. Oliver feels cheated by having no memory of it, good or bad, and it would have been something he should have agreed to, not have forced on him. Althea apologizes because she thought he was awake because his body responded appropriately but Oliver is still hurt and angry. Ultimately, Althea and Oliver realize that they can't be together all the time anymore so their friendship morphs into something that they will speak of fondly but won't be an active force in either of their lives.

Rape

The theme of Rape is an important one in "Althea and Oliver." Althea has wanted a romantic physical relationship with Oliver for quite awhile but he hasn't been quite ready for that so there is an unspoken tension between them. One night walking home from a party their kissing gets very passionate and Althea invites Oliver to come home with her but he declines. Oliver goes into sleep mode before they can talk anymore about it but they do have sex when Althea is at Oliver's house one day. His mother asks Althea to stay with him so she can run some errands so she sits on his bed watching him. He seems to awaken and reach for her, and they have sex but he falls asleep immediately after.

When Oliver comes out of his sleeping episode weeks later, he can sense that Althea is angry with him but doesn't know why. He thinks she is mad because they didn't have sex after walking home from the party that night but actually she is angry because they did have sex in his bedroom but he doesn't even remember it. When Oliver finds out, he is outraged that Althea took advantage of him while he was in sleep mode which technically would qualify as rape and that's how Oliver views it. However, in fairness to Althea, it would be difficult to know that Oliver was still asleep because he initiated the physical contact between them and his body responded appropriately during the experience. In essence, Oliver was present, but the real Oliver wasn't really there, so the violation feels very real to him.

Unrequited love

The theme of Unrequited Love is an important one in "Althea and Oliver." Unrequited love is when a person has strong, loving feelings for another person who does not return that love. The love is all one-sided usually ending in frustration and anger for the person with the strong feelings. Althea and Oliver had been friends since childhood and the growth of their relationship as they matured into teenagers caused Althea to fall in love with Oliver. She wanted more than just a friendship with him, she wanted to be in love with him, and he with her. However, Oliver either couldn't or wouldn't return the same level of feelings for Althea. It could be that girls attach romantic feelings quicker and easier than boys who usually are more interested in the physical side of sex as teenagers. It could be that Oliver didn't want to complicate their friendship as sex always seems to do in those situations. Or it could have been that Oliver's sleeping sickness was overwhelming for him physically and emotionally and he couldn't cope with the demands of a loving, romantic relationship with Althea. Whatever Oliver's reasons, it becomes clear for Althea that she cannot have what she wants with Oliver so it is best for them to part company and avoid any further pain stemming from unrequited love.

Dependencies

Dependencies is an important theme in "Althea and Oliver." There are dependencies on physical substances experienced by most of the characters with the exception of Oliver



who refrains. Garth always has a glass of scotch at hand; Nicky drinks wine all the time; and Althea starts to drink King Cobra malt liquor after hanging out with Coby. When Althea gets to Brooklyn she drinks a 40 oz. King Cobra and proceeds to vomit in a nearby trash can.

Drinking is an everyday occurrence at Matilda's house, too. Then when New Year's Eve rolls around, the drinking is really over the top. They all spend money on booze knowing full well that they will be vomiting it all up tomorrow and feeling louse with hangovers. Althea and Coby even take some of Oliver's leftover drugs he has been prescribed but never used for treatment of his sleeping syndrome.

In a way, Althea and Oliver are drugs for each other. They are so dependent on each other, it's almost like they can't function without the other. When Oliver is in sleep mode and not available to Althea, she has to find some other escape from her life and that's when she starts to smoke and drink. Essentially, the characters use some sort of substance to escape the realities and disappointments of their lives regardless of the consequences.

Styles

Point of View

Like many novels, "Althea and Oliver" is written in the third person omniscient point of view. This means that the author writes the story using third person pronouns such as "she" and "he." The author also has insight into what the characters are thinking which makes it an omniscient view, as opposed to a limited view where only the activities of the characters are reported. For example, the author writes, "The sunlight makes Oliver's mouth taste strangely metallic, like he's biting down on a piece of tinfoil. He's barely been awake for an hour, but already he's anxious to the point of fatigue. Though this is his mother, his porch, his block, it all looks the same but wrong, like an elaborate set constructed to trick him into thinking he's in the right place." Not only does the author share what is going on with Oliver, she shares what Oliver is thinking which adds more depth to the story.

Language and Meaning

The story is set in North Carolina and New York in the 1990s so the language is current. The author uses actual location names and street names to lend authenticity and believability to the story. The dialogue for each of the characters remains true to each of them throughout. Althea's dialogue is terse and flip most of the time and she has a raw sense of humor as opposed to Oliver who is slower to respond and does not have angry undertones in his voice. Garth has the slow Southern drawl of a Savannah native, and Nicky's tone is always filled with anxiety due to Oliver's illness. Coby, Valerie and Minty Fresh all have the conversational style of punk rockers prevalent during this time period. Overall, the author writes in an engaging style and moves the plot along by alternating the focus on Althea or Oliver as the chapters extend.

Structure

The structure of a novel usually takes one of four forms: character, milieu, event, or idea. And while a story can contain all four forms, one usually predominates. Althea and Oliver takes the structure of a character form. These types of novels tend to show a character's personal growth as the story extends. A character structure shows transformation as being important as opposed to an event story which is more concerned with what a character does. It is easy to identify a character structure novel because there comes a point in the story when the main character reaches their limit of frustration with life or a set of circumstances that are no longer acceptable for personal growth. The character then decides on changes, both small and dramatic, that will move the character's life in a different direction. The story concludes then when the character has resolved his or her issues and feels satisfied with the transformation or decides to stay in the current situation. In "Althea and Oliver," Althea reaches the point where she

can no longer be with Oliver because she loves him and he does not have those same feelings. Oliver also reaches a point where he decides to take the psychiatric medication for his sleeping syndrome even though there is no guarantee that it will help him; he just knows that he has to try to get better to have any chance at a full life.

Quotes

There's nothing happening with me and Oliver," Althea had protested, into the phone, and in retrospect it was obvious that her vehemence had given her away.

-- Althea (chapter 1)

Importance: Althea is having one of her rare phone conversations with her mother who is quizzing Althea about her relationship with Oliver. Althea gives her true feelings about Oliver away in the way that she strongly protests that there is anything romantic going on between them.

I'm sorry," Althea finally says. "He came into the basement and said he wanted Waffle House. I didn't realize he was still--still sick, I guess, so I took him there."

-- Althea (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

Importance: Oliver's illness is new, so his mother and Althea are just learning about how it exhibits. After Oliver has a fit in Waffle House and Althea struggles to get him home, his mother reveals that sometimes he acts out when he's not quite out of the sleeping state. This is important because it is hard to determine when Oliver is fully awake or not and Althea's behavior later on in the story will be compromised by this hindrance.

So it was some sort of psychotic break, right? I'm crazy, I'm literally one hundred percent bona fide batshit crazy. I'll end up one of those sketchy guys who sits in the library all day, rocking in my chair and writing in my journal about my imaginary enemies until Nicky shows up begging me to take my medication.

-- Oliver (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Oliver is scared and frustrated because he doesn't know why he has this sleeping sickness all of a sudden. It is particularly frightening because the doctors can't find anything physically wrong with him so he thinks that he must be going crazy. He is able to share his fears with Althea who is the only person who can calm him down about it.

Althea considers telling Valerie everything that happened on the walk home. Isn't that what most girls would do? Unfortunately, Althea is not well versed in sharing anything personal, and Valerie's the one person even less equipped to give advice about boys. 'Not really,' Althea says. 'Maybe a little.'

-- Althea (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Althea is very lonely when Oliver is in a sleeping state and she has no real girlfriends to talk to. She wants to talk about Oliver and her feelings for him but Valerie is a relatively new friend and Althea has no confidence in her just yet. Valerie wants to know if Althea is worried about Oliver and Althea answers in a minimalist way to protect her own feelings.

I'm not upset because we didn't have sex, I'm upset because we did. And you don't remember, and it's like it never happened, but it did happen, and you keep complaining because things are different except that nothing's different.

-- Althea (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: Althea and Oliver have a fight and he thinks it is because he did not want to go to her house to go any further after they had been kissing near a tree on the way home from Jason's party. However, Althea is really angry because she and Oliver really did have sex in his bedroom but he was still in his sleeping mode and does not remember being with her. They are both hurt because it should have been special but it is a negative event for Althea because Oliver wasn't fully present and for Oliver because he doesn't even remember it happening.

It should be you that has this fucking thing. If you threw a pitcher of syrup across a Waffle House and started screaming for no reason, it would just seem typical.

-- Oliver (chapter 5 paragraph 6)

Importance: Oliver lets his true feelings about Althea out after she tells him that they had had sex in his bedroom. He accuses her of always getting what she wants regardless of anybody else's feelings and that she just bulldozes her way over everyone. According to Oliver, Althea's personality is much more in line with the erratic behavior of the sleeping syndrome than Oliver's more easygoing style.

We get to stop recording, but we don't get to hit pause, and we don't get to rewind.

-- Oliver (chapter 9 paragraph 5)

Importance: Oliver shares his frustration with Kentucky about not knowing what happens to him when he's in a sleeping episode. He and the other boys have no control about when another episode will hit and what they might say or do during their sleep. Their vulnerability and lack of control is frustrating and frightening.

We see it all the time, when we're out serving. 'Platinum card homeless,' we call them. Kids come down from Westchester during the summertime, live on the streets spare-changing for forties, and when the weather turns cold they go home to their parents--

-- Ethan (chapter 10 paragraph 2)

Importance: Ethan is skeptical of Althea and her sudden appearance in the house. Althea senses some hostility in him and it is later revealed that Ethan has nothing against Althea personally, but the system in general because Althea will always find shelter and whatever else she needs because she is a pretty, white girl. Those who are really underprivileged don't get the help they need because they are undesirable in society.

Why did you tell me I shouldn't feel hopeless when you knew there was no hope?"

-- Oliver (chapter 11 paragraph 6)

Importance: Oliver has reached a turning point in his sickness and the medical trial. He



has been in New York for a couple months, done everything asked of him and they still have no real idea of treatment for him. Oliver just wants his life back and it doesn't seem as if that's going to happen and he is extremely frustrated and angry.

This was supposed to be it, right? Coming here was the last resort, the Hail Mary. And what do I get? Another shitty Would You Rather. I don't want to have to decide between the lesser of two evils. Haven't I lost enough already?

-- Oliver (chapter 12 paragraph 3)

Importance: Oliver is talking to his mother on the phone about whether or not he should start the Lithium treatment. He is tired of not having any clear direction. Everywhere he turns, there are consequences and none of them seem positive. Oliver is tired of compromising his life for something he never asked for and something that can't be stopped.

She didn't confide shit. But I don't think she went all the way to New York just to learn the fine art of Dumpster diving and serving food to the homeless. Not when she's got two vegan gurus right here at home. She went up there for you. That's the only reason she ever does fucking anything.

-- Coby (chapter 13 paragraph 7)

Importance: Oliver has called Coby to see if he knows where Althea might be staying in New York and Coby tells him what he knows. Even though Coby would like to date Althea, he knows it's hopeless because the only person Althea can see is Oliver.

I'll say,' she finally says,'that you were my favorite.' 'Your favorite what?' 'That's it,' she says. 'Just my favorite.

-- Althea (chapter 14 paragraph 3)

Importance: When Althea and Oliver are talking about how they will be with each other in the future when they have fallen in love with other people, Oliver asks her what she will tell her new love. Althea simply says that she will tell him that Oliver was her favorite and that seems to encompass everything she has felt and is satisfactory to him.