

Attachments (Rainbow Rowell) Study Guide

Attachments (Rainbow Rowell) by Rainbow Rowell

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Rowell, Rainbow. Attachments. Penguin, 2011.

Attachments begins in fall of 1999. Film critic Beth Fremont and copyeditor Jennifer Scribner-Snyder are best friends and coworkers at the Omaha Courier Newspaper. In their emails, Jennifer and Beth exchange witty banter, jokes, and an underlying affection to help them get through their frustrations in life and love. Jennifer is married to Mitch, a high school music teacher and marching band leader. Mitch wants to have kids, but Jennifer is more reluctant. After almost willing it to happen, Jennifer becomes pregnant. Beth, meanwhile, is living with her college boyfriend of eight years, Chris, a musician and the lead singer in a rock band, Sacajawea. Chris has lived with Beth for many years, but Beth gets the sense that he will never propose. With her younger sister getting married at the end of the year, Beth feels the stagnant nature of her relationship with Chris deeply. Over the course of the novel, Beth struggles with the simultaneous comfort and coldness she gets from Chris. At times, Beth rationalizes his laziness, but there is an underlying frustration she has when she admits their relationship is going nowhere.

Lincoln O'Neill, in his late twenties, is new to the Courier having just been hired as an Internet security officer as part of the Information Technology department. The Courier is new to email and the Internet and wants to remain vigilant about waste of company time. Lincoln works the graveyard shift reading employees' emails that are flagged for inappropriate content. Soon, though, employees catch on and adapt. The only conversations that continually land in the WebFence folder are Beth and Jennifer's. Instead of turning them in or warning them, however, Lincoln continues to read their correspondence, feeling a sense of human connection and, later, a love for Beth.

Before the action of the story, Lincoln lived at home with his overbearing mother, much to the chagrin of his older sister, Eve, who was married with kids and actively trying to distance Lincoln from their mother, who had undiagnosed severe separation anxiety issues. Lincoln was still recovering from the fallout after his relationship with his high school girlfriend, Samantha, dissolved when he followed her to college in California. Eventually Lincoln transferred to a local university, but he still felt raw from how things ended with the passionate, outspoken, and mercurial Sam.

Throughout the course of Attachments, Lincoln tries to find out who he was and what his strengths were. Lincoln gradually makes more friends, both with the night shift copyeditors and an older employee, Doris, and begins working out and thinking about taking classes at the city college since he has a curious mind and a love for learning. He also moves out to an apartment, though he does not tell his mother this right away.

Lincoln and Beth's lives intersect. Beth's emails turn up a frequent reference to a handsome, strong, hunk of a man at the Courier on whom she has a crush. Lincoln pieces together that her crush is in fact on him. Beth becomes more aggressive in trying



to find ways to formally meet him, but it is not immediately apparent to Lincoln who Beth is or what she looks like. This attraction bolsters his confidence, but Lincoln realizes the ethical dilemma he has gotten himself into by violating Jennifer and Beth's privacy. Not long after the new millennium comes on January 1 and after the IT team works to avert a disaster with the Y2K issue, Jennifer and Beth's emails stop showing up in Lincoln's queue. He rationalizes to himself that this is a good thing and he can finally think about dating her without the ethical issue hanging over his head. Lincoln takes steps to establish himself in his new apartment and also expand his social circle, all the while missing Beth and Jennifer's banter. When Jennifer and Beth's emails do show up again, something is clearly different in their tone. One night, Lincoln finds Jennifer trying to change a flat tire in the pouring rain. He helps her, and then realizes that the tragedy that Beth and Jennifer were alluding to was the loss of Jennifer's child when she miscarried. Jennifer had mentioned pain she was having, but the midwife reassured her falsely that everything was normal.

Beth and Jennifer return to their ease of conversation, though Jennifer is clearly in mourning after the miscarriage. In late February, Jennifer finally asks Beth about her sister's wedding. Beth narrates the experience, including how she and Chris broke up after he admitted to her outright that he would never marry her because loving her was too much. She kicks him out of the apartment. Lincoln sees this as his chance to make a move on Beth, especially since it has been many weeks since she broke up with Chris. However, Beth seems more indifferent about her cute guy and begins to date another man. Lincoln is heartbroken and quits his job, leaving a note on Beth's desk explaining his transgressions with violating her and Jennifer's privacy. Lincoln accepts a new job in IT and Internet security at a local university that gives him tuition benefits so he can take classes.

Many months pass, but one day Lincoln sees Beth in a movie theater. She recognizes him both as her Cute Guy and as the man who read her emails. Still, they kiss and after the movie, Lincoln follows her back to the Courier office. They discuss the awkward situation they are in, but both of them seem happy together. At the end of the novel, Lincoln and Beth's relationship is going well. They hint at a marriage in their future, and meeting each other's families was a positive experience. Beth is deliriously happy that she could be loved by someone who does not need as much space as Chris did. They are both wildly in love.

Attachments is an epistolary novel, one that is told in letters or, in this case, emails. Jennifer and Beth's chapters are presented as email correspondence. Because Jennifer and Beth write in the present tense as if they are having a conversation, their chapters will be summarized in present tense, excepting events the friends describe in the past tense. Lincoln's chapters are written in past tense and thus will be summarized in past tense.



Chapters 1 - 8

Summary

Attachments alternates between different narrative formats. The novel is written in a semi-epistolary way, meaning it belongs to a genre where the narrative is comprised of letters, correspondence, and non-narrative prose. Beth and Jennifer's chapters are presented as emails. In the emails, the two friends speak in the present tense. Therefore, the chapter summaries for their correspondence will be written in present tense except for events described in past tense. Lincoln's chapters are told in third person omniscient past tense, so events in those chapters will be recounted in past tense.

Chapter 1 is Wednesday, August 18th 1999. An email exchange between Jennifer Scribner-Snyder and Beth Fremont, two employees at The Courier, a newspaper in Omaha ensues. In their emails, Beth and Jennifer discuss their love lives. Jennifer believes she is pregnant, but she doesn't want to tell her husband, Mitch. Beth tries to tell her she isn't really pregnant, but Jennifer is convinced. Jennifer is clearly alarmed and fantasized about what life would be like if she was pregnant and how things would be different after she had the baby. Jennifer tells Beth that Mitch wanted her to take a pregnancy test, and Beth writes she thinks that is a good idea.

In Chapter 2, the reader meets Lincoln. Lincoln lived with his mother. At lunch, his mother expressed confusion over what type of work Lincoln did at his new job, which he doesn't come home from until after his shift ends at one in the morning. Lincoln explained that his employer, the Omaha newspaper The Courier, wanted him working late so he couldn't interact with anyone. His new job was to read the newspaper's employees' emails. Lincoln's mom said it wasn't right. His mother was horrified to see his fingers had blackened because of the newspaper ink. Later, Lincoln reminisced about his time working at McDonald's in high school when the cooking oil smell would seep into his clothing. He thought about how the other night employees at the paper were like moles working at night, though he was stationed in the Information Technology office away from everyone else. Lincoln liked it when he had to fix someone's computer in the main newsroom, and he wondered if people who worked the night shift went on dates in the daytime.

Chapter 3 contains emails from Friday, August 20, 1999. Jennifer is still thinking she was pregnant. Beth, wanting to change the subject, talks about her younger sister Kiley's impending wedding to Brian. Beth laments how her boyfriend, Chris, will likely never propose to her even though they are living together and they had been dating for eight years. Beth pays the rent and the utilities on their apartment while Chris focuses on making his demo for his band. Beth rationalizes to herself that their dynamic was okay even when Jennifer suggests he is freeloading.



Chapter 4 explained how Lincoln came to have his job at the Courier. He answered a job posting for an Internet security officer. He did not realize that it would mean spying on people's emails. The paper had recently gotten online, so management felt that there was a need for Lincoln's job since it believed people were goofing around on the Web and not working. The program Lincoln monitored was called WebFence. Lincoln was supposed to send out warning messages to employees who broke certain rules with their email. Greg, Lincoln's boss, told him that people were afraid of him. Greg knew that Lincoln didn't have enough work to do, but he said it didn't matter, that someone in IT had to be there at night anyway. Lincoln mostly surfed the Web to pass the time.

Wednesday, August 25, 1999 is the date of Chapter 5's email exchanges between Jennifer and Beth. Beth and Jennifer discussed the email security measures and agreed they weren't nervous about being flagged. Jennifer told Beth that she got her period, so she was not pregnant after all. Jennifer's husband Mitch was disappointed and said he wanted kids and he hoped they could have them soon. Jennifer felt afraid to lose Mitch, but she also didn't want to have children.

In Chapter 6, Lincoln researched who Jennifer and Beth were. Jennifer was a features editor at the Courier, and Beth wrote movie reviews, ones he had already read and liked. Their conversations had already been flagged, but Lincoln didn't send them warnings because he liked to read their emails. He thought they were funny and nice. Lincoln's mom packed him Tandoori chicken for dinner. When Lincoln got into work that night, Greg gave him a meaningless file archiving project to keep him busy even though they both knew it was busy work. Emerging into the newsroom, Lincoln noted a pretty woman and some of the other employees who seemed to be having fun. Lincoln never had much luck with women. His older sister, Eve, tried to encourage him to date, but it was difficult for him. Lincoln's one girlfriend was a classmate from high school, Sam, a woman with a big personality, though they eventually broke up.

Monday, August 30, 1999, is the date of Chapter 7's email exchanges between Beth and Jennifer. Beth lamented her sister's picks for skimpy and unflattering bridesmaids' gowns. Beth admits that she felt jealous of Jennifer and her other friends who were married. Beth tells Jennifer about how she has so many dresses in her closet that were from weddings she'd been in over the years. Jennifer tells her that she feels embarrassed for her, that she sounds pathetic when she was like this, and Beth makes a joke.

In Chapter 8, Lincoln called Eve to try to break up the boredom at his job. Eve told him his job sounded miserable and that he should quit. Eve said he should use this money to move out, then find a new job, and then quit. Eve seemed to think much of Lincoln's problems were with living with their mom at his age. They talk about how Lincoln should try to meet new people and make some friends. Greg told him that he was hiring some students to work on Y2K issues, and Lincoln could supervise. Lincoln's plan for the night was to read through the "What Color Is Your Parachute?" book that Beth had mentioned in an email. Lincoln read through a list Sam had made, "Things Lincoln Is Good At." Sam had made the list in college back when Lincoln was deciding what to major in at college. Lincoln had followed Sam to an expensive college in California. Lincoln's mom



didn't like Sam at all, and she didn't want Lincoln to move so far away. The list stretched to 36 items. Sam decided he should major in American Studies since it was a bit of everything, and he was good at a lot of things. On the night of their joint going away party, Sam and Lincoln talked. She said she was ready and excited for everything to change. Lincoln said he didn't feel like everything was changing. Lincoln ended up thinking more of Sam that night than of his career or switching jobs.

Analysis

From the beginning of the novel, the reader notes that it is written in two different style formats. Jennifer and Beth's emails comprise the epistolary (containing correspondence and other non-narrative prose) sections of the novel. Lincoln's chapters are written in third person omniscient past tense. The epistolary genre dates back to the beginnings of the English novel, including Samuel Richardson's "Clarissa" (1749) and Bram Stoker's "Dracula" (1897). The author's choice to use emails and situate the narrative in 1999 demonstrates the continued relevance of epistolary novels and also shows that a contemporary update would transform handwritten letters into their modern equivalent: emails. This introduces the theme of Communication and how it has changed over time. Beth and Jennifer have clearly adapted to how their conversations have evolved from merely talking in the break room.

The opening chapters establish the personalities, conflicts, and motivations of the main characters. Beth and Jennifer are extremely close, well-tuned not only to the other's voice but also capable of reading subtext all through the course of a nonverbal conversation and anticipate how the other will react. Their conversations speak to their differences, too. Beth can be quite cynical and bitter and is highly critical of herself and other people. Meanwhile, Jennifer is a little less confident, constantly putting herself down and evidently filled with much self-loathing, particularly her guilt about not wanting to have kids. Jennifer also finds it hard not to show her dislike for Chris. The opening chapters quickly introduce some of the main themes of the novel. Beth and Jennifer's conversations show the strength of their connection, one that is explored throughout the novel in the theme of Friendship. Jennifer's conflicted feelings about pregnancy and Beth's disappointing relationship with Chris are two of the major focuses of Jennifer and Beth's lives throughout "Attachments." Beth's younger sister Kiley's wedding brings her dead-end situation with Chris to the fore. Kiley's dream wedding and engagement serves as a foil to Beth's failure to get married, to Chris or any other man.

Lincoln seems somewhat lost at the start of the novel. He has recently taken on the job at the Courier, but he quickly becomes bored. His is a mind that needs intellectual stimulation and challenge. He does feel cut off from the rest of the Courier. He also has some doubts about reading other people's emails. In particular, Lincoln let the emails between Jennifer and Beth, who he knew from her movie reviews, go and decided not to give them a warning. This is one way he shows an affection for them despite reason, illustrating the Attachment theme. On a character level, Lincoln's mother is dangerously overbearing. Lincoln notes that she had begun to organize her week around what delicious, elaborate home-cooked meal she would make for him to take to work as



dinner. Her at times nearly hysterical hold over him is another example of Attachment. Lincoln realizes there are some issues: "He didn't mind living with his mother, but there are *degrees* of living with your mother" (17). Yet Lincoln was too comfortable to want to leave. Lincoln's sister Eve encourages him to find a girlfriend and says there is nothing "inherently un-dateable" about him (20). This introduces the theme of Love and Lincoln's inability to find love, partially because he cannot move on from a relationship he had with his high school sweetheart, Sam. As the reader will see throughout the story, Sam's hold on Lincoln remains strong, preventing him from jumping into dating and even discovering his strengths. His lack of a direction in life is illustrated by his sister's urging to use the *What Color Is Your Parachute?* book and Lincoln's return to a list Sam wrote ages ago about what his strengths were. Lincoln's ongoing struggle to define himself and his wants fits into the theme of Identity.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Beth and Jennifer. Why do you think they make good friends? How do they challenge each other?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Lincoln seems unable to leave his job and unable to leave his mother's house?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the author chose to have Beth and Jennifer's chapters told in email and Lincoln's chapters told in straight prose?

Vocabulary

shards, aneurysm, deficient, momentum, unalienable, hacker, frenzy, regressive, paranoid, archive, amicable, inherent, manipulative



Chapters 9 - 19

Summary

Chapter 9 is a very brief email exchange taking place on Wednesday, September 1, 1999, in which Jennifer asked Beth to hang out that night. She said she needed a break from Mitch. Beth said she couldn't because she was going to see the new Tom Cruise movie, "Eyes Wide Shut." Jennifer and Beth traded opinions on Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts.

In Chapter 10, Lincoln and his mom bickered over a color of paint. Lincoln asked his mom if she found Tom Cruise attractive. She interpreted this to mean that Lincoln was gay. Lincoln was surprised and said he wasn't gay. This launched a discussion in which Lincoln's mom expressed some of her misgivings about Sam, Lincoln's ex-girlfriend, including that Sam was not very "womanly" or feminine. Lincoln said he was only asking about Tom Cruise because he didn't find Julia Roberts attractive and that maybe it was a lie perpetrated by the media (a direct reference to Beth and Jennifer's email the day before). On Friday, Lincoln told Eve about his progress with the "What Color Is Your Parachute?" book. Later at work, Lincoln decided that maybe he should get in touch and work out.

In Chapter 11, taking place on Friday, September 3, 1999, Beth asks Jennifer if she wants to hang out that night since she has a break from watching films for review. Jennifer says she can't since she is going to the high school football game where Mitch, a music teacher, will be the marching band leader and conductor. She invites Beth to join her, but she says she doesn't want to go. She admits to Jennifer that she had stopped going to her boyfriend Chris' shows. They discuss Beth's changing relationship with Chris over the years and how it feels a little awkward financially supporting him while he pursued his rock star dream.

In Chapter 12, on Friday, Lincoln decided he wanted to go out that weekend. Usually he went to Dungeons & Dragons nights with his friends. But instead, Lincoln called his friend Justin, a classmate from high school and college. Justin was different than Lincoln in that he was more social and more into finding women and partying. Justin picked him up on Saturday, and they went to a bar with friends. Justin pursued some women, and Lincoln went along, but Lincoln was awkward and the woman, Lisa, left. Justin left with a woman named Dena and asked Lincoln to drive his truck home. Lincoln did this and spent the night at Justin's place. Lincoln had a conversation with Eve about meeting women and going to bars when he returned home.

Chapter 13 is an email exchange between Jennifer and Beth on Monday, September 6, 1999. Beth and Jennifer trade notes on their weekends. Jennifer went to Mitch's high school football game, and Beth ended up going to Chris' concert. Jennifer asks Beth how she met Chris, and she starts to tell her about how they met at the Student Union in



college. However, Beth is interrupted by a colleague. She says she would finish the story another time.

Chapter 14 had Lincoln deciding he would stop reading Beth and Jennifer's emails because he knew he would never send them a warning. He saw this as a reason to keep reading them if he wanted, but he decided that would be voyeuristic.

In Chapter 15, on Tuesday, September 7, 1999, Beth and Jennifer trade stories. Jennifer tells Beth about how stressed things are with Mitch. Jennifer had told her mom that she and Mitch were fighting about having a baby, and her mother had sighed and said, "That's how it starts. You better watch yourself." "It" implying divorce. Jennifer and Beth discuss Jennifer's mother's attitude towards Jennifer's indecisiveness about having children, and they also talk about how she met Mitch in college. The conversation returns to Beth's story about meeting Chris at college and how she was attracted to his mysterious, loner status as "Headphone Boy," the guy who always wore headphones. One day he asked her out, and they began dating. Beth notes that he was the one who always hung up first, pulled away from kissing first, and kept her on the edge so she was wanting more. Beth and Jennifer agree they are glad they finally talked about the origins of their relationships with their boyfriends (husband, for Jennifer).

Chapter 16 is very brief. Lincoln read over Beth and Jennifer's September 7 email exchange several times even though he promised himself he wouldn't read their emails anymore. He decided it wasn't all that good, but maybe it wasn't that bad, either.

In Chapter 17, on Friday, September 10, 1999, Jennifer and Beth trade jokes about eating food in the office and briefly discuss how they used to have conversations away from their desk, not chained to email.

In the brief Chapter 18, Lincoln was given supervisory instructions to manage the college kids there to work on the Y2K project. Lincoln wondered if anyone was reading his emails but doubted it, and he recognized that the college interns ran out of work early on. Greg, Lincoln's boss, said he didn't care as long as his own job wasn't eliminated because of Y2K.

Chapter 19 is a Wednesday, September 22, 1999, email exchange between Jennifer and Beth. Beth sounded the Cute Guy Alarm because she had seen a mysterious, tall, and strong-looking man working in the offices. Jennifer was a little short, and she confessed that she had stopped by the Baby Gap in the mall on a whim and lied about being pregnant, saying that her baby was due in February. Jennifer bought a coat for her fictional little girl.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, the author develops the theme of Love further. Neither Beth nor Jennifer is in a totally perfect relationship. Jennifer and Mitch are at odds with the children issue. Mitch is pressuring Jennifer to the point where they are now fighting. Even though Jennifer's mother was always very critical of her daughter, her statement



that fights like the one Jennifer had with Mitch are how "It" starts deeply unnerves Jennifer since she knows her mother means divorce. Beth, meanwhile, has all but stopped going to Chris's band concerts entirely anymore. That both women spend time reminiscing about the beginnings of their relationships with their partner underscores how love changes over time. Mitch still loves Jennifer, and she loves him, and she does not want to lose her marriage to him. This forms a core of her decision later to have a child; she overcomes her indifference because she does not want to sacrifice the love she and Mitch share.

Note how Beth forms crushes. She becomes infatuated with Chris and stalks him down to the time and place he was most likely to be, hoping he would ask her out. She also gave him a nickname, Headphone Guy. For Beth, attraction is very physical. Her account of how she met Chris and started dating him foreshadows her relationship with Lincoln later in the novel. By Chapter 19, Beth has spotted Lincoln a few times and calls him "Her Cute Guy" to Jennifer. She was especially impressed by his physique. Beth's attraction to someone for their appearance contrasts with Lincoln and how he falls in love with Beth. This motif is developed throughout the novel in the theme of Love and will be explored later by Christine and Lincoln.

These chapters also give the reader more of a background on Lincoln and his social life. Even though Lincoln lives with his mother, he does still continue to see friends and does have some options. When Lincoln wants something low key, he goes to Dungeons & Dragons to play the board game and hang out with his nerdy friends. Sometimes, though, Lincoln wants to dip into a more active evening. He then calls his friend Justin. Justin's ability to flirt with and take a woman, Dena, home is contrasted with Lincoln's failure to engage Lisa in conversation. Lincoln is simply awkward and stiff. He does not know how to loosen up and talk to women. This frustration appears later in the novel when he cannot work up the courage to start a conversation with Beth. This represents an obstacle in Communication. Throughout the novel, Lincoln seems to see Justin as a way to make up for it when he reads about Beth and Jennifer's lives and they seem more active than his. Readers should take note that even though Justin might seem like a playboy, in meeting Dena he finds someone he really likes long term.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Beth and Jennifer's conversation about Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts and how Lincoln later discusses it with his mother?

Discussion Question 2

What are some examples of how Jennifer feels conflicted about having children?

Discussion Question 3

What are some ways that Lincoln's decision to keep reading the emails is wrong?

Vocabulary

funk, scandalous, swoon, groupie, monogamist, burly, immaculate, bandolier, trounced, gushy, voyeuristic, lurk



Chapters 20 - 29

Summary

In Chapter 20, Lincoln took a trip upstairs to the writers' rooms. He set out to find Beth's desk and was able to identify it through a poster of Sandman. He tried to look busy in fear of raising suspicion, but he looked at Beth's photographs and objects on her desk to try to get a sense of her through them. Lincoln was particularly concerned with Beth's boyfriend, Chris. Eventually, Lincoln felt some kind of self-awareness that what he was doing was wrong and noted that, "He shouldn't have done that. What he'd just done. Gone to her desk. It felt wrong, like he'd crossed a line" (80). Still, he was glad that he did not find a picture of Beth so that at least he could protect her privacy that way. A brief snippet of conversation between Lincoln and Eve revealed that he felt like he missed the window to start having a life after college, something Eve blamed (once again) on Lincoln moving back with their mother. Next, Lincoln went to his friends' Dungeons & Dragons board game night for the first time in a month. Though welcomed into the group again, Lincoln wondered about his place and who he was in relation to his friends. After the seven-hour game, Lincoln stayed and chatted with the hosts, David and Christine, a married couple he met in college. Lincoln reflected on when he kissed Christine in college and how he sometimes wished their relationship had gone further. At work, Eve called and asked about his progress with the Parachute book. Lincoln said he was retooling to focus on planning the near future. Later, he considered the things you couldn't plan, like finding love and finding a purpose. At the end of the chapter, Dave canceled Dungeons & Dragons night for the next few weekends after his son gets sick. Lincoln then opened the queue of flagged emails.

Chapter 21 captures the Thursday, September 30, email exchange between Beth and Jennifer. Beth initiates a conversation wondering about why Clark Kent chose to be a newspaper reporter. Jennifer asks Beth what project she is working on now, and Beth describes her article on an historic hotel that was being shut down in the Indian Hills neighborhood.

In Chapter 22, Lincoln picked up a schedule of classes at the city college. His mother challenged him and his desire to go back to school, saying he was like a woman who did not know when to stop getting plastic surgery. Meanwhile, The Courier begins having weekly meetings to prepare for Y2K.

Chapter 23 contains the Tuesday, October 12 emails between Beth and Jennifer. The friends exchange observations about how construction in Omaha is boxing out businesses like the movie theatre set to close. Beth and Jennifer trade humorous banter about an attractive protestor Beth met. Jennifer reveals that she has been going to the local Baby Gap and buying children's clothing.

In Chapter 24, Lincoln, frustrated, reflected on how this was what his romantic life had come to: reading about the romantic interests of other people through their emails.



Lincoln went on a drive around Omaha, reminiscing about how Sam used to love driving around at night and listening to the radio. Lincoln remembered one conversation in particular when Sam asked if they would get married and whether he had ever wondered what it would be like to be another person. Lincoln said no, that it would only be "less" because he loved Sam so much, that he only ever wanted to be with her. Later that summer, Sam and Lincoln had sex in his car, meaning Lincoln could say they had "been" together.

Thursday, October 14 is the date of Beth and Jennifer's email exchange that comprises Chapter 25. Beth is excited for the fall, though she went to a party held by her boyfriend Chris' band. Beth comforts herself that at least it is October, a month she loves. Beth reveals that she has turned into a "killjoy" who has changed in the eyes of Chris' friend, Stef, because she no longer wants to stay up all night and smoke and drink like they did when they were in college. Stef then ripped apart Beth's profession as a critic. Chris did not stand up for Beth and left her to fend for herself. Beth reveals to Jennifer that she has always had a fantasy that she could be married to a rich dentist, have children, and not need to work. This surprises Jennifer, but she wishes she, too, could be a stay-at-home mom, only without children.

In Chapter 26, Lincoln found his fondness for Beth growing. He admired her kindness with her Jennifer, her wit and humor, and encyclopedic knowledge of genre movies like Ghostbusters and kung-fu movies. Sometimes he would even walk by her desk after his shift was over. This time, he saw a poster for Chris' band, Sacajawea, to perform on Saturday night. Lincoln decided to go, and he recruited his friend, Justin, to come along. Despite the dingy bar setting, Sacajawea were really quite good, and Justin in particular liked their music. Later, Justin revealed that he was still going out with Dena, the young woman he left with when he and Lincoln went to The Steel Guitar together, and it was going well. Dena wanted them to be exclusive, which Justin was confused about because he did not want to be with anyone else. Lincoln pointed out that this was true, that Justin could be with some other woman but instead chose to be with Dena.

In Chapter 27, Greg asked Lincoln to install new computers in the copyediting area. Lincoln avoided seeing Beth or talking with anyone except a nice copyeditor who offered him banana bread.

Chapter 28 takes place on Monday, October 18. In an email exchange, Beth and Jennifer discuss bringing children to work. Jennifer is annoyed by it, as a co-worker brought her child to work. Beth reveals that she saw her "Cute Guy" again, a mystery man she saw working in the Advertising area. Jennifer is intrigued.

In Chapter 29, Lincoln was taken aback by Beth's cute guy revelation and rocked that he and Beth had been in the same room at some point. He wondered who the man could be and was a little jealous.



Analysis

Lincoln is becoming more drawn to Beth. His feelings for her lead him to go upstairs and look at her desk. Even though Lincoln feels a sense of wrong, he rationalizes his trip by concluding that at least he did not know what she looked like. However, it is clear that Lincoln might be taking things a step too far. He recruits Justin to go hear Chris's band perform. Lincoln is becoming attached to Beth to the point where he is becoming involved in her life tangentially, crossing ethical lines. Lincoln is still struggling to find his identity. When he goes to the Dungeons & Dragons game night, it seems like each of his friends have fit into a type: "If Dave was the Intense One, and Christine was the Girl ...And Larry was the Serious One.... Then who was Lincoln?" (83). His observation might seem like just a passing thought, but this fits into the larger confusion Lincoln has about his identity. He starts to arrange his life by making his own choices, like taking classes at the city college and focusing on the near future.

Romantically, Lincoln is still attached to his memory of Sam. The reader will soon see what is becoming evident from Lincoln's memories. Sam had always been someone who was impulsive and potentially promiscuous, even asking Lincoln if he thought about what it would be like to be with other people. Still, Lincoln was totally in love with Sam and blind both to her faults and to signals she was sending that she was at best ambivalent about their relationship and at worst planning on ending things. Sam liked Lincoln, sure, but she also drove the direction of the relationship. This could have contributed to Lincoln's inability to talk to women. Without a strong personality to guide him, Lincoln was at a loss, especially since Sam was the one who "chose" him in the first place.

Beth and Jennifer's emails reveal more about their feelings towards children and love. At this point, Beth has almost entirely divorced herself from Chris's band and music career, especially when his bandmate Stef calls her a killjoy and insults her job as a critic. Chris does not stand up for her, indicative of his passive personality. There is a part of Beth that feels very angry about her current situation. To Jennifer, Beth was quick to excuse Chris, squaring the blame primarily on her. In her heart, Beth thought she would be married by now. Her fantasy of marrying a rich dentist, traveling, and having kids she could stay home with shocks Jennifer since it seems so at odds with Beth's current situation with Chris. Her desire to be a stay-at-home mom clearly contrasts with Jennifer's conflicted feelings about motherhood. Note how Jennifer and Beth still have the capacity to surprise each other with new revelations about their past, present, and future. Their friendship is sustained on intimacy, honesty, and support. Jennifer's confession that she is sneaking into the Baby Gap and secretly buying baby clothes is an example of how conflicted Jennifer is. Yet Beth does not make a big deal out of it.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lincoln go to the Sacajawea concert?



Discussion Question 2

How does his relationship with Sam continue to affect Lincoln even now?

Discussion Question 3

How is Chris's choice not to stand up for Beth symptomatic of their relationship?

Vocabulary

shaggy, rogue, ruffled, intimidating, hypertensive, hypothetical, blasphemy, killjoy, alliterate, inevitable



Chapters 30 - 40

Summary

In Chapter 30, on Tuesday, October 26, Jennifer believes that she is pregnant again, but this time not a joke. Jennifer admits that she had unprotected sex with Mitch while she was ovulating, something that Beth is shocked to discover. Jennifer also reveals that she knows exactly how pregnant she is because she bought a fertility monitor. A tense night at home with Mitch made her feel like her marriage was the most important thing to her, that to save it she would even have a kid. Beth points out that she might not have gotten pregnant after all, and Jennifer decides to wait and see.

In Chapter 31, Eve and her boys came over to visit Lincoln and their mother. Eve asked how work was going, and Lincoln told her that he liked it more now, especially if he went back to college. Eve's sons told their grandmother that they only eat specific things, and food cannot touch each other on the plate. Eve and Lincoln's mother was shocked to find her grandsons so picky. Eve and her mother then got into an argument about how to raise children. It was clear that Eve felt a lot of pain and trauma because her mother was so needy and had (undiagnosed) separation anxiety issues with her children.

Greg pulled Lincoln aside in Chapter 32 and asked him if the young staffers hired to handle the Y2K project were really working. Lincoln knew that they sometimes played computer games, but chose instead to tell Greg that they were just coding like they were supposed to be doing.

In Chapter 33, on Wednesday, November 10, Jennifer confirms her suspicion: she is definitely pregnant. Beth congratulates her, but Jennifer is still feeling uncertain about having children. Beth reflects on how she is going to three showers over the next six weeks and that she can definitely throw Jennifer a baby shower. Jennifer wishes to change the subject, so she asks Beth how Chris is doing. Beth says that he is in a distant mood that he is not home much and does not say a lot. Apparently, this happens sometimes with him. Jennifer jokingly suggests shaking it up like getting pregnant, but Beth says then he would definitely leave.

In Chapter 34, Lincoln and Justin went to another Sacajawea concert, something they had been doing for a while now. This time, Dena went along. They speculated about the lead singer (Chris) and whether or not he had a girlfriend. Lincoln did not reveal that he knew Chris did: Beth. Justin was always trying to get Lincoln to date, perhaps because he remembered when Lincoln was dating Sam, the most attractive girl in their high school. He and Justin became closer after Lincoln returned home from California and transferred to the state school nearby.

Chapter 35 details the demise of Sam and Lincoln's relationship, something that Lincoln had never told anyone about the details. Sam had started hanging out with the drama department students, and this made her start to see her relationship with Lincoln in a



different light. She compared Lincoln to a "farm boy" and trivialized their relationship. She began to withdraw from him and avoid him. Lincoln was frustrated, but Sam explained that she, "...didn't come to this school to spend all my time with my high school boyfriend. I came here to start my career" (129). One day, right before winter break, Lincoln saw Sam kissing a boy she knew from theater, Marlon. Lincoln flew into a rage. On the way home, Lincoln wrote Sam a letter.

In Chapter 36, Lincoln and Sam finally met up again after they were both home. They go to a playground. Sam admitted the truth about cheating with Marlon, and she believed that it brought the issues with her relationship with Lincoln to light. Lincoln would not admit that he believed that their relationship would ever end, something Sam called naive. Sam said that she did not plan on things ending this way, but that, "It's not that I fell out of love with you....People change" (135). Lincoln was the first to leave. Sam told him that she, "[didn't] want it to end like this," to which Lincoln replied, "You don't get to choose....It's just happening" (137).

In Chapter 37, Lincoln decided not to return to California after his breakup with Sam. He transferred to the University of Nebraska instead. Bringing things back to the present, the narrative details the blossoming friendship between Lincoln and Doris, the woman who stocked the vending machines at the Courier office. They had a conversation about basset hounds and in particular one that Doris had owned and died. Lincoln took a sick day the next day and told Eve that he wanted to change something that he wanted to shake things up. Eve told him to join a gym.

Jennifer and Beth's emails from Tuesday, November 16 comprise Chapter 38. Beth is excited because she saw her crush the night before that he had been chatting with Doris in the break room. Beth described him as cute and funny. She also delighted in his physique, strong and big and even "massive," and that he was cuter than the actor Jason Bateman (143).

Chapter 39, very brief, contains just one sentence: "No, no, no, Lincoln thought" (145).

Chapter 40 picks up where Chapter 39 left off, detailing more of Lincoln's reaction now that he realized that Sam was talking about him. Lincoln could not imagine that anyone would describe him as "massive." He went to the men's bathroom and looked in the mirror, all of a sudden seeing himself in a new light.

Analysis

For the entire story, Eve has been telling Lincoln that the main problem with his life is he is still living at home. Eve had always been cynical in her descriptions with her mother, but in Chapter 31 Eve's lingering pain from her childhood is front and center. Eve suggests that Lincoln get an apartment closer to the college campus where he will be taking classes. Lincoln says it wasn't a bad drive from home. Eve then rips into their mother when she suggests Lincoln was welcome to stay with her, or "He's welcome to rot here for the rest of his life," Eve says (117). Eve's mother says not to tell her how to



raise her son, but Eve says at 28 he is risen. Eve's mother then warns her that, "You're never done raising your children...You'll see. You're not done until you're dead" (118). Eve ordered her sons out and then argues with her mother more. Her revelation that her mother came to kindergarten every day for the first month was painful. Eve's parting words to Lincoln said she would not apologize for anything she said and that "It was all true. You are rotting here," which Lincoln answers, "Maybe... Maybe I'm ripening" (118).

Lincoln's mother is one dramatic example of the theme Attachment. Mrs. O'Neill is very attached to her children, especially Lincoln. Eve seems to suffer from lingering trauma from her mother's severe coddling while Lincoln, although somewhat suspended in life, has more agency. In Eve's words, the reader can sense a lingering hostility at how her mother coddled her and later Lincoln. Eve herself seems to be attached to pain from the past and is taking it out on Lincoln. At the same time, Lincoln's life is not Eve's to lead, and she does interfere quite a lot. Living at home surely does contribute to Lincoln's inability to move on and find himself. But Eve seems to want to control Lincoln's life just as much as his mother does, as if focusing her efforts on "correcting" Lincoln's late-twenties search for identity would help reverse the damage her mother did on her life. Indeed, Eve seems in some ways to want to out-parent her mother. Lincoln plays the middle road trying to mediate between his sister and mother. When Lincoln does move out, it is on his own terms.

Jennifer has finally taken the steps to conceive a child. Even still, she alternates between hoping for and dreading a pregnancy. Beth congratulates her when Jennifer finds out she is pregnant, but she is still tense and uncertain. She herself seems in disbelief. Beth reveals that she thinks Chris would leave her if she became pregnant. Jennifer thought she was kidding, but Beth was pretty certain. Whereas Jennifer has tried to get pregnant to keep her marriage with Mitch together, Beth knows that could never be an option with her and Chris. Beth loses herself in her crush on her "Cute Guy" and trying to find out who he is. It's unclear what she hopes will come out of her crush. Readers will note that her behavior is eerily similar to how she became obsessed with and stalked Chris (a.k.a. "Headphones Guy") in college.

This section finally details the rapid decline of Sam and Lincoln's relationship. Lincoln kept missing clues that Sam did not want to pursue a relationship with him in college. He followed her to California, but she had been saying again and again that she wanted to get away from everyone back home and start fresh in California. She was very excited about meeting new people. Lincoln was happy just to go along with her. Once they get on campus, Lincoln is so eager to please that he lets Sam push him away and make friends with the theater department students. Lincoln was not being stupid, but he was incredibly naive and blind to the signs their relationship was over. When he witnessed Sam kissing another man, he knew that he could not stand it anymore. Their talk on the playground over winter break is the nail in the relationship's coffin. It's over. Lincoln starts a long process of healing, transferring to the state school nearby and moving back home. Even at age 28, Lincoln is still haunted by Sam. With her, he was sure of his future. He would be her husband and the father to her children. When that image was ripped away, Lincoln could never quite sort out who he post-Sam, a journey to find his identity that is ongoing at the time of the novel. Lincoln does not seem to



have a ton of self-awareness. When he reads Beth's description of himself as "massive" he is shocked, yet it all goes together since other characters in the novel had also made reference to his size. Lincoln stares at himself in the mirror. He begins to understand more about his identity through other's eyes. He's not the awkward geeky tech guy he might have thought he was. He is handsome, strong, and well-built.

Discussion Question 1

How does Eve try to parent Lincoln and how do her efforts to control him compare to their mother's influence?

Discussion Question 2

What were some of the signs Sam and Lincoln's relationship was over?

Discussion Question 3

What does it say about Lincoln's personality and character that he is surprised that others call him massive and discuss his build and strength?

Vocabulary

prudish, opposable, ripen, parasitic, riddance, concede, visualize, postscript, croquet, imperceptible, gruesome, chiseled, crinkly



Chapters 41 - 51

Summary

In Chapter 41, Lincoln joined a gym. Afterwards, he stopped by Eve's bank. Eve was pleased that he followed her advice to join a gym, but wished that she had told him to get his own apartment. He asked her if he looked like Jason Bateman, and she said that he did. That night at the Courier, the IT department workers were getting nervous about the Millennium issue. Kristi, the woman with whom he shared a desk, noted that they did not even understand what would happen on January 1, 2000. Lincoln listened but was dying to open the WebFence folder and see if Beth had written about him again. Finally, he opened the folder to find emails from Jennifer and Beth.

Chapter 42 contains emails between Jennifer and Beth from Thursday, November 18. Beth asks Jennifer how she is feeling. Jennifer tells Beth that she feels tense, like a suicide bomber. She knows she should be feeling positive about having the baby, but she still feels shaky and uneven.

In Chapter 43, one morning Lincoln and his mom discussed the gym Lincoln joined: "Superior Bodies." His mom cannot get over the name. His mother's nitpicking did not bother Lincoln, who felt happy and smiled all the time now. Lincoln enjoyed his morning workout and how it made him feel. At Dungeons & Dragons, Lincoln told a joke that everyone enjoyed. He wondered if he was "the Funny One."

In Chapter 44, in her Monday, November 29, email to Jennifer, Beth reveals that she is jealous of her sister getting married before she is. She says she had a whole plan to meet her husband in college, get married, travel, and have four children. Beth feels confused. She always had boyfriends and dates growing up, but she still has not found "the one," therefore acknowledging that she knows Chris is not the right person for her.

Chapter 45 details how Lincoln began to eat lunch in the break room every night hoping to catch sight of Beth. He kept Doris company. A young woman asked him to help fix a computer issue. Her name was Emilie. He fixed the problem, and she invited him to come eat with the copyeditors sometime. Lincoln thanked her. Emilie reminded him of Sam because she was so petite.

In Chapter 46, a Friday, December 3, email exchange between Beth and Jennifer from December 3 sees Beth complaining about how really tiny women always end up with tall men, that every time she sees a tall man with a short woman it annoys her since she is tall and never gets together with a taller guy. Beth says that she saw her cute guy again last night talking with Emilie. Beth and Jennifer try to speculate about for which department Lincoln works. Jennifer gently points out that Chris is tall and does not suffer from "Thumbelina syndrome" (163). Beth dodges the implication that she is cheating on him with her crush.



In Chapter 47, Lincoln and Doris discussed his crush on someone at work. Doris thought it was Emilie, but Lincoln told her that she wasn't her type, that she was too short. Privately, Lincoln was savoring the feeling that Beth saw him and was jealous that he had been talking with Emilie. At the gym on Saturday, Lincoln started to think about the complications with his situation with Beth. Beth had a boyfriend, and it would also be awkward to reveal that he read her emails and therefore knew all kinds of personal details about her life. A young employee named Becca helped him learn how to use the free weights. At Dungeons & Dragons, Lincoln helped Christine make pizza. She told him that something was different with him. Christine discerned that it was a girl and told Lincoln that she had been praying for him. Lincoln told her about Beth, but he swore Christine to secrecy. She told him that it was indeed an awkward situation with Beth and that he would have to tell her that he had read her emails. Christine found it romantic that Beth had a crush on him even though she had never met him, while Lincoln fell in love with Beth through her words alone. The next morning, Christine wished him luck with Beth.

In Chapter 48, Beth and Jennifer's emails from Monday, December 6, have the two friends exchanging thoughts on baby names. Mitch wants to name their kid Cody, for a boy or a girl. Beth and Jennifer dissect this name. Jennifer does not feel like she can complain about this since she thinks Mitch is more invested in the baby, something Beth disputes. The two close the conversation affirming that they are each other's best friend.

In Chapter 49, that night Lincoln went out to a bar with the copyeditors. He was pleased to be making new friends, especially one of the copyeditors, Chuck, who invited him to play golf. Emilie flirted with Lincoln, who could not help but think of Beth and Jennifer's descriptions of her. At the next weekend's game night, Christine asked if Lincoln had made progress with Beth. He said he had not stopped reading her emails but also hadn't walked by her desk. Christine said she didn't think that was progress.

In Chapter 50, Beth and Jennifer's emails from Monday, December 13, discuss Beth's sister Kiley's tea-themed wedding shower, which Beth threw over the weekend. It was a little chaotic, but Beth was able to get Chris to help out. All of Kiley's girlfriends loved Chris and flirted with him. Beth admits that she loves it when Chris is that engaged, but that it always comes out with other people and with audiences, not with her when they are alone. Meanwhile, Jennifer told Mitch that she did not like the name "Cody." Mitch allowed her to have more choice in the name.

In Chapter 51, Lincoln was very disturbed when he read the emails from December 13. He was agitated when he considered Chris being nice and considerate to Beth, but then equally unnerved if he was mean to her. The magnitude of Chris and Beth's eight years together fully hit Lincoln. Even talking with Doris did not help. The next day, Lincoln met Eve for lunch where she told him that he looked fitter and more energetic. He said that he was finally starting to get over things, thinking of his new friends and experiences. He then told Eve that he still felt helpless sometimes, and that he seriously doubted he would ever have a relationship like he had with Sam again. Lincoln asked her if she thought it was damaging to grow up without a father. He was just trying to figure out what was wrong with him. Eve said probably but that he should focus on what was right



with him. He agreed to take Eve's son, Jake Jr., to the movies to see a Pokémon movie the next weekend. Lincoln went, even though the movie was pretty bad.

Analysis

Jennifer's inability to relax and conflicted feelings about her pregnancy are becoming more severe. Even Beth is taken aback when Jennifer says she feels like a suicide bomber: "Really, I feel a little bit like a suicide bomber. Like I'm walking around pretending to be normal, all the while knowing that I'm carrying something is going to change—possibly destroy—the world as I know it" (150). "Destroy?" Beth asks. This conversation highlights the fear Jennifer has for how her life would change. At the same time, so much of the events of the novel thus far have made having children is not optional. Jennifer has been pressured into having children, and her conversations with Beth reveal her fears. Later, though, Jennifer seems more excited, helping Mitch choose a name after Beth's encouragement. Through Jennifer's anxieties, the author is foreshadowing a tragedy to come later in the novel. Note that while Jennifer at times seems very negative about her pregnancy, she does seem to come around to it.

The impending wedding of Beth's sister Kiley is pushing all of Beth's frustrations with her love life front and center. Beth becomes more vocal about how her life is not measuring up to how she thought it would. Growing up, she always had a date to dances and was never in want of a boyfriend. Essentially, Beth felt wanted, in demand in contrast with now when Chris seems to be indifferent at best. Even worse, Chris is a charmer and good with the ladies at the wedding shower. It is only when he is home with Beth that he is withdrawn and distant. Her life is in contrast to her past and to the fantasy she always had to find a guy early on, get married, and not have to work. In a bitter reversal, Chris is living out Beth's dream life—he does not work while she has a full-time job and pays the rent—except they are not even married. Beth admits it to Jennifer: Chris is not the one. Beth's dilemma fits into the broader theme of *Love* by showing how people can fall out of love, just as Sam and Lincoln fell out of love. Sam said to Lincoln that "people change" as an explanation of how she fell out of love with him. With Beth and Chris's relationship, they have both changed. Beth has gone on to a celebrated career with benefits and is able to support an independent lifestyle. She became a killjoy, growing out of staying up all night partying. Chris has never gotten more present with Beth. He plays the same songs with the same band from college. His music career never took off. While Beth's words make it sound like their relationship was never perfect, Beth and Chris are lacking the passion they once had, passion that would eventually lead to marriage.

Emilie is introduced in this section of the novel. Emilie is a night copyeditor who, along with Chuck and some of the other editors, befriends Lincoln. Quiet and nice, Emilie is physically very tiny and petite. When Beth sees Lincoln talking to Emilie, she releases a string of insults against Emilie and other Thumbelina like women. Beth feels that short and skinny women always end up with tall hunks like Lincoln. Jennifer joins in the body shaming, trashing smaller women. Jennifer and Beth were both taller and larger. Jennifer has always been self-conscious about her weight, in no small part thanks to her



mother, who was critical of her daughter's weight growing up and even today. Whether intentional or not, the author's choice to have Jennifer and Beth gang up on Emilie and petite women in general displays an unsavory hostility toward women of all sizes. Throughout *Attachments*, Emilie's character is not well developed, perhaps intentionally. Emilie is a stand-in for another love interest for Lincoln. She makes Beth frustrated, but Emilie never really captures Lincoln's eye as a serious romantic prospect, though she flirts with him. Her attention to Lincoln makes him feel more confident for sure. Also, after reading Beth and Jennifer's catty mocking of Emilie, from her size to the way her parents chose to spell her name, Lincoln cannot help but think about his size and how it relates to women. Emilie is definitely as small as Sam. This makes her somewhat of a blank canvas. Lincoln gets the chance to learn how to talk to women, something that has always been a stumbling block for him, and he also sees the intensity of how badly Beth wants him.

In this section, Lincoln begins to understand the severity of his ethical transgression to keep reading Jennifer and Beth's email. Over and over throughout the novel, Lincoln has promised himself that he will stop reading them and yet he cannot. He is attached to them. When he reads about Chris being kind to Beth, however, Lincoln feels awkward and uncomfortable. He does not want Chris to treat Beth so kindly, yet of course he does not want him to treat her poorly, either. Christine, Lincoln's confidant, finds it romantic that he has fallen in love with Beth just through her words, meaning appearance was not an issue (unlike for Beth and her crush on Lincoln). At the same time, Christine recognized that Lincoln was crossing a moral line. He had to stop reading her emails, she told him, while also acknowledging that that would be hard for him. At this point in the novel, Lincoln has not yet reached his breaking point that would dislodge his rationalization for reading the emails, but when Beth talks about her feelings for Chris in a positive way, this unnerves Lincoln. The author hints that jealousy—or Beth's happiness—could be the impetus for Lincoln to stop reading the emails.

Discussion Question 1

Although Lincoln is generally able to rationalize reading Beth and Jennifer's emails, what makes him feel that he is crossing a line?

Discussion Question 2

What makes Christine think Lincoln's crush on Beth is romantic?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Jennifer not initially challenge Mitch on naming their child "Cody"?



Vocabulary

blackout, confrontation, emphasis, haplessly, salvageable, unassuming, reckless, bitter, solicitous, moronic, maternal



Chapters 52 - 62

Summary

In Chapter 52, Beth sends an email to Jennifer on Monday, December 20, with the subject line "My Cute Guy has a kid." Beth dishes that she went to see *Fight Club* on Sunday and saw her Cute Guy in the lobby of the theater. He was there with a kid, and she got in line behind to soak up his presence for a few minutes. Beth was so delighted to see him that she followed him into the Pokémon movie and sat six rows behind Lincoln and his kid, who she took to be his son based on their familiarity. After the movie, Beth tried to follow Lincoln home to see where he lived, but she lost him on the highway. Jennifer tries to get a sense of how far gone Beth really is in her infatuation with the Cute Guy. At the end of their email chain, Jennifer asks Beth if she would flirt with the Cute Guy if she ever ran into him. At that, Beth draws back and says she has a boyfriend, she would not flirt with her crush: "Are you kidding? What kind of floozy do you take me for? I have a boyfriend. More than a boyfriend. I'm living in sin" (190). Jennifer calls her a complicated woman, and Beth agrees.

In Chapter 53, that night, Lincoln did not walk past Beth's desk, but he did print out a paragraph about him from Beth's email. The next night he parks his car at the top of the Courier's parking lot willing Beth to find him now that she knew what his car looked like.

In Chapter 54, Beth writes Jennifer on Tuesday, December 21, with the news that a historic movie theater, the Indian Hills, will be torn down in March and that a celebration was planned to be held the weekend before it would close. Jennifer asks Beth to give her a ride at lunch to her appointment with Mitch at the midwife's, where she should be able to hear the baby's heartbeat. Jennifer finally told her mother, who was happy at the news. Jennifer noted the contrast between her mother, who had been critical of Jennifer her whole life, and Mitch, who loved her unconditionally. When Jennifer got home from having lunch with her mother, Mitch said something very nice that made her feel better. Jennifer will not tell Beth what it was until she eventually relents: "He just said, instead of hello, that I looked beautiful—and that, when we got married, he never realized I would look more beautiful to him each year. He said it had nothing to do with me glowing. 'Even though you are.' He was standing on a ladder when he said it, which made it sound almost Shakespearean" (193-194). Beth gushes over how Mitch is "the best husband ever" (194).

In Chapter 55, Chuck invited Lincoln to join the night side breakfast club, a tradition the night editors had of getting together for breakfast at diner every Wednesday at noon. This time, the editors worried about the impending doom of the Y2K crisis, which Lincoln said his department had taken measures to prevent. Doris had also been worried about the Y2K crisis. Lincoln found himself with no shortage of options for New Year's Eve get together.



Chapter 56's emails between Beth and Jennifer from Wednesday, December 22, include Jennifer's account of the meeting with the midwife, which did not go well. Meanwhile, Mitch was excited about the appointment and had clearly read up on pregnancy and natural birth.

In Chapter 57, Lincoln worked Christmas Eve and went out for dinner afterwards with some of the copyeditors. On Christmas morning, Lincoln's mother received a phone call from Doris, Lincoln's friend from the office. Doris complimented Lincoln's mother on her fine cooking, which Lincoln had been sharing with her, and asked if Lincoln could come to her apartment building sometime and help her move her grandmother's curio cabinet. Lincoln's mother grilled him for details to see if he was dating Doris, and Lincoln was happy, though embarrassed, to tell her that no, he was not dating Doris.

In Chapter 58, Lincoln and Doris had some of his mother's cake together. She confided in Lincoln that she started dating even after her husband died many years ago, that she realized that she would likely have more time left than the time she and Paul had been together. During the course of the conversation, a young woman about Lincoln's age came into the break room and spoke briefly with Doris. Lincoln noted how pretty she was, and after she left, Doris noted that the woman had a boyfriend. Lincoln wondered if she was Beth and later found her at city desk. It was not Beth after all, he thought.

In Chapter 59, Beth and Jennifer exchange emails on Friday, December 31. They trade millennium-themed headlines. Beth tells Jennifer that she is planning on working late and spending time in the break room to try to find and talk to her crush. Beth says that she was wrong when she said earlier that she would not talk or flirt with him. Now she definitely would. She also admits that she followed him into the break room and chatted with Doris briefly, that she and Lincoln were sharing a cake.

In Chapter 60, after reading Beth's enthusiastic affection towards him in the day's emails, Lincoln resolved to go up to the newsroom and find her, though he wasn't sure what he would do from there. He went up and saw her at her desk, talking on the phone, but he was not sure how to proceed from there. Chuck interrupted his thoughts with a task related to making sure the computers were okay once the clock switched, but Lincoln said he could not do it right now and left, flustered by Beth and his inability to decide how to talk to her. Lincoln was so unnerved that he left work early. Bothering Lincoln in particular was now that he knew what Beth looked like it made the sticky ethics of his reading her emails much more immediate. Lincoln met up with Justin and Dena and went to T.G.I. Fridays for dinner and then to the Sacajawea concert. Seeing Chris made Lincoln feel uncomfortable; he knew he should not be there. Lincoln then got very drunk and had to sleep at Justin's. The next morning, Dena and Justin took care of a very hungover Lincoln. At home, Lincoln contemplated his failure to talk to Beth and compared her to Sam.

In Chapter 61, Beth's email to Jennifer from Tuesday, January 4, says she has not seen her cute guy in five days. Jennifer tells Beth about how she and Mitch bought a crib. Jennifer invites Beth to go nursery shopping with her, but Beth's sister's wedding is the next weekend. Beth details her ongoing frustration with her sister's wedding and the



maid of honor dress, which she does not think is flattering. Her mother's comment that nobody would be looking at Beth's arms anyway only further annoyed Beth. Chris comforted Beth. Jennifer asked her if she wanted to go nursery shopping the next week, and Beth accepts.

In Chapter 62, Lincoln was pleased to read that Beth missed him. He wondered if hitting rock bottom on New Year's Eve meant things could only go up.

Analysis

In this section, Beth's preoccupation with her Cute Guy gets taken to another level when she stalks him at the movie theater and tries to follow him home. Even Jennifer was impressed, if not slightly horrified, at how far gone Beth really was. Beth initially felt like talking with Lincoln would be cheating on Chris, but by the end of this segment she has gone the other way. She would definitely flirt with her crush. Note how Beth does not know much of anything about Lincoln. Like Christine said, Lincoln fell in love with Beth through her words rather than through her appearance. Beth, though, is obsessed with Lincoln knowing him only through his appearance and a few small details, like he is friendly with Doris and Emilie. Given that Beth once fell in love with someone (Chris) through appearance alone, not getting to know him or his personality, the reader might be tempted to wonder just how good Beth's judgment is regarding crushes. Her unapologetically extreme feelings for him bolsters Lincoln's confidence. He is so far gone in his admiration for Beth that he even prints out an excerpt from an email wherein she praises him and never considers the iffy morals in doing so. The contrast between Beth and Lincoln's patterns of attraction fit into the novel's theme of Love by posing two questions. First, can you fall in love with someone just through their appearance and, second, can you fall in love with someone only through their words? By the end of the novel, Lincoln and Beth will need to consider their answers to these questions to determine if they have an attraction that can go the distance and become love.

Another way that love is present in this section is through Jennifer's marriage to Mitch. Dating back to when he met her in college, Mitch has always been head over heels and completely in love with Jennifer, whom he worships like a goddess. His devotion to her made Jennifer feel like things have always been uneven. She loves him, but there has always been a part of Jennifer that has imposter syndrome. One of her core beliefs seems to be that she is unlovable, that she does not deserve the attention and love of Mitch. This ultimately makes her choose to conceive rather than risk losing Mitch. Throughout the pregnancy, Jennifer and Mitch have been at odds. He is much more enthusiastic while she is scared and hesitant. When Jennifer comes home from seeing her mother and telling her the news, Mitch tells her something that melts her heart. As Jennifer narrates to Beth: "He just said, instead of hello, that I looked beautiful—and that, when we got married, he never realized I would look more beautiful to him each year. He said it had nothing to do with me glowing. 'Even though you are.' He was standing on a ladder when he said it, which made it sound almost Shakespearean" (193-194). Here, Jennifer never doubts that she is making the right choice by staying with him. Additionally, this segment contrasts with Chris and Beth's relationship. While



Mitch loves Jennifer more and more each day, Chris is growing further apart from Beth than he ever was before. Likewise, Sam and Lincoln quickly grew apart. The idea of having "too much love" is a constant motif throughout the novel. Mitch obviously has not limitations on his love for Jennifer, and she, too, for him.

Lincoln believes that he hit rock bottom on New Year's Eve and hopes things can go up from there. One of the contributing factors to his demise—in which he walked out of his shift at the Courier and went to see Chris's band with Justin before getting passed out drunk—was his inability to move things forward with Beth. Some part of Lincoln must know that he will not ever stop reading her emails yet the more attached to her he has gotten, the more he is at risk for feeling sensitive about her. Lincoln deeply wants to meet her and start a conversation with her, yet he struggles on a fundamental level to converse with women, a disconnect that fits with the novel's theme of Communication. By now, Lincoln knows what Beth looks like. He knows that she has a crush on him and is actively trying to find him and flirt with him. Yet he is unable to find a good way to start a conversation. This inability to talk to her is what sends Lincoln to rock bottom. His thoughts desperate and irrational, he goes to see Chris's band, something that would only ever make him feel bad, like he violated Beth's privacy (which, of course, he already had several times, on many levels). Still, waking up hungover at Justin and Dena's and eventually moving forward made Lincoln see it as an opportunity to only go up from there. That his rock bottom moment happened on the last day of the year—and the millennium—seems a cosmic gift to Lincoln. With the beginning of the New Year, Lincoln can put that experience behind him and get a fresh start.

Discussion Question 1

How does Beth's behavior toward her crush and her boyfriend make her a "complicated woman"?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast how Mitch and Chris treat Jennifer and Beth, respectively.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Lincoln has such trouble initiating a conversation with Beth?

Vocabulary

sarcastic, debauchery, ludicrous, evasion, brisk, looting, cusp, stagger, delirious, frumpy



Chapters 63 - 72

Summary

In Chapter 63, Jennifer asks Beth to distract her in a Friday, January 7, 2000, email. Beth asks what she needs distraction from, and Jennifer tells her that she is experiencing sharp pain, but that the midwife says that nothing about that sounded unusual. The midwife told her that things were supposed to feel strange since it was her first pregnancy, and she suggested that Jennifer talk to the baby, but Jennifer thinks it just seems strange. Beth reassures Jennifer that if the midwife says that it is fine, then it is probably fine. Beth tries to distract her with her ongoing drama about her arms not looking great in the sleeveless maid of honor dress. Jennifer gives her an honesty check and says she really needs to let the arms thing go. It stinks, but nobody really looks good in a sleeveless dress. Jennifer and Beth sign off, with Beth going to her sister's wedding over the weekend.

In Chapter 64, Lincoln felt good after the day's work, so he went to the Village Inn to have some pie. He was shocked when Chris walked in. Chris sits in a table opposite Lincoln, and Lincoln realized that he was dressed up for the rehearsal dinner. Chris asked him if he had a cigarette, which Lincoln didn't, but Lincoln did give him a section of the newspaper. Lincoln told him that he worked at the Courier, and Chris talked about Beth. Lincoln said he had not met her, and Chris told him that Beth was "A force to be reckoned with" (228). Chris observed that he had seen Lincoln at his shows, but he was always solo. He said he did not remember what it felt like to be single and suggested that Lincoln had it made: "No cigarettes, no girl, you're living an unencumbered life, my friend" to which Lincoln responded pointedly, "That's one way to look at it" (229). Acknowledging the awkward moment, Chris apologized and said he wasn't himself and that Lincoln should say "hey" if he goes to the band's event the next weekend.

In Chapter 65, Lincoln noticed that there was less work than ever in the IT department after the millennium. All throughout the week, however, Lincoln did not find any emails from Beth and Jennifer in the WebFence. Lincoln felt an odd sort of calm, that maybe this would be how it would end; he would be forced to stop reading Beth's emails and could transition into a relationship without less of an ethical dilemma.

In Chapter 66, Lincoln was having trouble concentrating when Doris was teaching him pinochle. Doris asked him if he had plans that weekend. Lincoln had plenty of options, between a (delayed) New Year's party and golf, but he agreed to help her move the curio cabinet on Sunday. Playing golf that weekend with Chuck the copyeditor, he tried but failed to get Lincoln interested in going to a party and maybe dating Emilie. Lincoln had not seen an email from Jennifer or Beth in three weeks, and it was beginning to get to him. Instead of going to the party, Lincoln went to rent the movie Harold and Maude. He saw Sam there. Sam was overjoyed to see him and said that she had moved back to the area a month ago and was wondering when and if she would run into him. Lincoln asked her how she was doing, suddenly feeling more confident. Sam said she had a



new job in development at a theater downtown, that her husband was staying behind in Dublin for six months to see if it was the right move but her boys were with her. Sam, excited, tried to get Lincoln to get banana ice cream with her right then and catch up. Lincoln said he could not because he had a party to go to. Sam gave him her business card and told him to call her.

In Chapter 67, instead of renting a movie, Lincoln went to the party. He threw out an excerpt from one of Beth's email and also threw out Sam's card. At the party, he flirted with Emilie. He kissed her on the cheek at midnight and did the same to everyone else so as his actions did not stand out.

In Chapter 68, when Lincoln woke up that Sunday, it was snowing. He went over to Doris's apartment and helped move the cabinet, the last piece of furniture left in the apartment. Lincoln fell in love with her apartment, which she had lived in since she was married. On their way out, they talk to the super, and Lincoln rented the apartment. After dropping Doris and the cabinet off at the retirement residence, Lincoln went back to explore his apartment more. He noted that he would have to tell his mother.

Chapter 69 contains the Monday, January 31, email exchange between Beth and Jennifer. The friends trash a coworker, Amanda, for always wearing super low-cut shirts. Jennifer says she loves that Beth has not asked her how she is feeling. "Feeling about what?" Beth responds, and Jennifer thanks her (242).

In Chapter 70, Lincoln was surprised that Beth and Jennifer were back in his WebFence folder. Later that Monday night, he drove over to his apartment and tried to figure out an excuse for where he had been so he could avoid telling his mother about the apartment. Lincoln puzzled over why Jennifer and Beth were emailing again and what it meant for him before drifting off to sleep to the sound of a radio somewhere in the apartment complex.

In Chapter 71, in a Tuesday, February 8, email, Jennifer tells Beth about the contradictory personality of her coworker Danielle, who censored a word in a story because it seemed unwholesome even though she read romance novels.

In Chapter 72, Lincoln could not understand what had changed between Beth and Jennifer, but their emails were missing something. He walked into work and saw a woman crying in the parking lot. Lincoln changed her tire for her, and she introduced herself as Jennifer. He offered her his McDonald's dinner. On his way into work, Lincoln wondered over why she was crying until he put it together: Jennifer had been having issues with her pregnancy, and then she and Beth had went dark. He turned around and went back to Jennifer, who had not left the parking lot. Lincoln asked if he could call anyone for her, but she said no and drove off. Lincoln went to his new apartment again that night, and he still had not told his mother where he had been going.



Analysis

Structurally, this section of the book pushes Jennifer and Beth's narrative aside to allow Lincoln some space. When the narrative opens, Jennifer is worried about sharp pain she is experiencing. The midwife does not believe there is anything wrong, and she tells Jennifer to try talking to her baby to connect with it. Although Jennifer is not completely freaked out, when she and Beth go dark with no emails between them from January 7 to January 31, something contributed to their silence. Even when they return to emailing again, Jennifer and Beth do not sound the same, something even Lincoln picks up on. He knows that something has happened between them. In the meantime, Lincoln signed the lease to take over Doris's old, quirky, drafty and cozy apartment. Lincoln seems more clearheaded now, and the time away from Beth and Jennifer's emails, though agonizing, allows him to focus more on himself.

Lincoln's experience with Chris at the Village Inn diner underscores a key difference between them. If Lincoln had been comparing himself to Chris, who was sexy, talented, and easy with conversation, now they finally meet face to face. In person, Chris seems cool, asking for a cigarette and lamenting not having anything to read. But throughout the conversation, Lincoln learns some uncomfortable things about Chris. Realizing that Beth and Lincoln were coworkers, Chris describes Beth as a "force to be reckoned with" and "An act of God" (228). This plays into the theme of Love and the idea of someone being "too much" to love. Chris insults Lincoln—and by extension, Beth—when he tells Lincoln that by not having a cigarette or a girlfriend, Lincoln was "living an unencumbered life" (229). Offended for Chris, Lincoln tells him coldly that "That's one way to look at it" (229). While Chris wants to live unattached, Lincoln wants to have an attachment, a bond, a relationship with someone... Beth. In this conversation, Chris essentially reveals that he feels chained to Beth, burdened by their relationship. He knows it's over, but he still hangs on. This conversation happens on the night before Kiley's wedding after the rehearsal dinner. Lincoln knows this from the emails and also through Chris's nice clothing. The reader will want to note Chris's attitude in this scene when Beth describes the wedding and what takes place the next day.

When Lincoln encounters Sam in the video store, Lincoln is nearly speechless. Sam seems similar to who she was the last time he saw her, with that same kind of frantic, unpredictable energy. She has kid and is married to an Irish man and hints that this is not her first marriage. Sam is overjoyed to see Lincoln, telling him he still smells like peaches. She hopes to revive their friendship, impulsively asking him to go on a banana ice cream run with her. Lincoln is much more guarded around Sam this time. He says he has something else he has to do, and then he throws her business card out later knowing that he can always call her parents' house and vice versa if they want to get in touch. Yet Sam's presence does not unnerve Lincoln nearly as much as he might have thought it would just a few months earlier. Lincoln now has the prospect of a potential relationship with Beth, if not Emilie. He has his own living space and a solid job. He is also not lonely socially. Indeed, throughout the course of the novel Lincoln becomes much more social, expanding his friend circle and hanging out with different crowds. He is not desperate for companionship. He also does not get sucked into Sam's magnetic



personality and impulses again. By saying no to her offer to go get ice cream, Lincoln situates himself as an individual with free will, not someone who automatically goes with the easiest romantic option. Furthermore, note the contrast in Lincoln and Sam's reaction to each other. When they were dating ten years ago, Lincoln saw everything through an idealized filter. Even toward the start of the novel, Lincoln still romanticized his relationship with Sam rather than accept the clues he missed along the way that they would inevitably break up. During the novel, Lincoln has to work hard to divorce himself from that fantasy, process the pain, and move on. In contrast, when Sam encounters Lincoln, she fixates on little details from their past, like getting banana ice cream together at a restaurant that has since closed. It is almost as if Sam wants to recapture what they had, which is confusing for Lincoln because Sam is a married woman and a mother now. Ultimately, Lincoln does not pursue reconnecting with Sam. Her spell is broken, and Lincoln is free to have an identity separate from Sam.

Jennifer finally encounters Beth's Cute Guy when Lincoln helps her during a rainstorm. The scene is told through Lincoln's eyes. He bravely changes her tire and offers her food. Lincoln is awkward around Jennifer, partially because he knows who she is even though she does not know who he is and also because she is crying. Lincoln pieces things together when he realizes that the sharp pains that Jennifer had been having and the emails weeks later that do not refer to the pregnancy or childbirth that Jennifer experienced a complication. Lincoln tries to call someone to let her know that she is all right, but Jennifer refuses and eventually drives off. This episode seeks to show Lincoln's discomfort now that he has broken through the wall and actually had an encounter with either Jennifer or Beth. He is fully aware of the strange nature of their conversation, with him knowing more about her. Lincoln even slips up when he references Jennifer having a husband. Again, the reader sees Lincoln's unease with communicating with women.

Discussion Question 1

How does Chris's description of Lincoln's life as "unencumbered" fit into the idea of attachments?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lincoln's reaction to running into Sam demonstrate how he has changed throughout the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Lincoln has still not told his mother about his apartment?

Vocabulary

assertive, astral, rakish, carnal, kismet, amends, quibbling, exhaust, arousing, restless



Chapters 73- 80

Summary

In Chapter 73, in a Wednesday, February 9, email, Jennifer tells Beth that she thinks she met her cute guy. She explains what happened the night before with her flat tire and Lincoln bailing her out. She recounts how the experience, triggered when she thought she should not change the tire in her condition, was a release of stress and built-up emotion for her. It was the first time she had truly mourned since the loss of her baby. She does not want to draw attention to her trauma even though she does want pity. Beth steers the subject towards her crush. She says Jennifer's encounter with Lincoln was a "meet-cute," a term from film when a couple meet in a non-normal way. Beth is pleased to hear Jennifer's description of him as "Awkward, chivalrous, decent, kind..." (256). She says she will start parking in that lot, and Jennifer tells her to stick to the break room.

In Chapter 74, Lincoln was pleased that he was still Beth's cute guy. He went out to dinner with Justin and Dena, who surprised him by announcing their engagement. Justin asked Lincoln to be in the wedding and told him that he had hired Chris's band, Sacajawea to play at the reception. Lincoln agreed to help them move. Later, he picked out sheets for his apartment at Target.

In Chapter 75, Jennifer's Wednesday, February 16, email to Beth explains how she is the "most self-centered person in the world" (260). Jennifer says that she feels responsible for the loss of the baby because she had been feeling so ambivalent about the pregnancy. She told it to go away, and it did. Beth reminds her that eventually she did come to be happy about being pregnant. Beth tells her something that Jennifer feels crosses the line of being honest, and she cuts off their conversation abruptly.

In Chapter 76, Jennifer picks up her email exchange with Beth later on the 16th and asks her how the wedding was. Beth apologizes again, and Jennifer brushes it off, not forgiving her but wanting things to move on. Beth says she will type up an account of the wedding and send it her since it is too long for a conversation.

Chapter 77 picks up later that day with Beth's account of the wedding. The wedding was much nicer than Beth thought it would be, and Chris was friendly with everyone. At the reception, she felt as in love with Chris than she ever had. Chris pulled away when they were dancing, and he told Beth that he loved her so much, but that it took a lot of energy for him to feel that emotion. He told Beth straight that although he loved her, he would never marry her. He clarified that he would never marry her, not necessarily that he would never marry, and he told Beth that she was "too much" (267). Out in the parking lot, they argued. Beth told him not to come home, but he said he needed his guitar, which Beth felt signified that he did not love her after all. Back at her apartment, Beth insisted that Chris leave. He finally agreed. Jennifer is very upset to read about her friend's hardship and wonders why Beth did not tell her, but when Beth heard about



Jennifer's tragedy she felt it was not the right time. Jennifer tells Beth she did not think she would ever break up with Chris. Switching the subject, she tells Beth that she wants to try to have another baby.

In Chapter 78, Doris told Lincoln that his mother had been calling her to talk recipes and that she was worried about Lincoln since he had not been coming home. Meanwhile, Sam had been calling his house looking for him. At home the next morning, Lincoln was able to get his mother to come see his apartment. His mother went but was deeply wounded about Lincoln's decision to move out. She could not understand why she was not enough. Later, Lincoln went home, and his mother was more accepting, giving him furniture. The next day, Eve called Lincoln at work and congratulated him.

In Chapter 79, Beth's email from February 29 tells Jennifer about how everyone knows she is single now. Jennifer suggests that this is the right time to start something with her crush, but Beth seems a little unsure.

In Chapter 80, Emilie had been visiting Lincoln during her breaks and was interested in him. Lincoln liked the way he felt around her, but he was not sure he wanted to date her if he had feelings for Beth. Lincoln went to Dungeons & Dragons that Saturday, the first time in a while. He told his friends about his apartment. They were happy for him.

Analysis

From Jennifer's perspective, her encounter with Lincoln in the parking lot occurred when she finally accepts that she has lost the baby. What brings her profound sorrow to light is realizing that she can now try to change her tire since she is no longer "in a condition," meaning pregnant. Jennifer feels this loss deeply. It is the first time she has cried about it, really cry, and even when Jennifer drives home she still dissolves into wrenching sobs.

In her emails to come, Jennifer demonstrates extreme self-hatred. She tells Beth that she is the one who was responsible for her baby's death. She blames herself because of her negative energy, that she at times wanted to will the baby away. Jennifer believes that her conflicted emotions toward the baby, ranging from ambivalence to dread to guarded anticipation brought the miscarriage upon her. Beth realizes that she does not have much leeway here. Jennifer is processing her loss and is hard on herself on a good day. Beth tries to tread lightly, but she feels emboldened enough to tell Jennifer that: "If you're determined to see what happened as some sort of universal justice, consider that the lesson here might not be to retreat into cynicism, even if that's where you feel most comfortable. Maybe the lesson is, rise up" (261). Essentially, Beth tells her that in the future, try not to look at everything so cynically but instead try to push forward and be optimistic or at least accepting. Jennifer is very offended by this and breaks off their email thread. Beth was thinking that Jennifer wanted her to be as honest as she always was in their friendship, but Beth took it a step too far for Jennifer, who was still feeling emotionally fragile. Yet true to their bond, Jennifer and Beth are soon emailing again, just hours later.



Beth details Kiley's wedding, which she never told Jennifer about because Jennifer had her miscarriage around the same time. The wedding was lovely, and Chris was charming and well-behaved. Beth could not help but catch the romantic feeling in the air, and Chris seemed to feel it, too. Yet when they danced, Chris told her he would never marry her. This leads to Beth breaking up with him in the parking lot. Beth felt extremely hurt, in main part because Chris said he would never marry her, not necessarily never get married to anyone. Chris's explanation, that the love he felt for Beth was too much to handle, brought all his imperfections to light: Chris was selfish, manipulative, and emotionally immature, he led her on for years, and quite possibly could have been just using her for food and shelter. In fact, when he told Beth that he could not move out because his guitar was at her place, Beth knew he never loved her. The breakup was difficult, and now Beth says she does not feel ready to date again. Jennifer holds back from saying "I told you so," but that sentiment underlies the conversation. Jennifer tries to comfort Beth, who is fascinated by Jennifer's encounter with her "Cute Guy."

Lincoln is happy that Jennifer and Beth are back, though he still does not know where this leaves him. Emilie remains a dating option since she flirts with Lincoln and spends a lot of time with him in the IT room. The biggest change for Lincoln is he finally shows his mother his apartment. Mrs. O'Neill found out about it because she had been talking to Doris over the phone. Lincoln had been spending so many nights away that she was getting worried. Even though she is upset at first, Lincoln's mother starts to come around, telling him that the apartment suits him and offering old furniture that he might need. For the entire narrative, Mrs. O'Neill's struggle to let go of her son and daughter has been a point of conflict. She breaks down and tells Lincoln that she does not understand why he wanted to be alone when he never had. She details her painful memories when she left her husband and had baby Eve and nowhere to go, no home. She slept on couches of her friends. Lincoln's response to "Why" is that he wants to live his own life, which aggravates his mother because she tells him he is her life. Although she is hurt, finally, Mrs. O'Neill lets Lincoln go—and is pleased that she knew about it before Eve did. This scene shows the intersection between love and attachments. Mrs. O'Neill recognizes that Lincoln and Eve are her whole world, that they are a part of her. She means this figuratively, though sometimes she treats them like they are literal extensions of her she needs to keep close. However, she confuses this with love. Just as Chris needs to let Beth go because, if he is to be believed, he loves her too much, Mrs. O'Neill needs to let Lincoln detach and live his own life. Mrs. O'Neill's attachment eclipsed her love. Only when she acknowledges her love for Lincoln is she able to see that if she loves him, she needs to let him go.

Discussion Question 1

How do Beth and Jennifer's emails from Wednesday, February 16, show the complexity of their friendship?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of loving someone too much using examples from throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 3

How can Mrs. O'Neill's revelation about her loneliness early in life explain her at times irrational attachment to her children?

Vocabulary

pathetic, awkward, chivalrous, vulnerability, emphatically, dumbfounded, jubilant, dysfunctional, ludicrous, moony, bluntly, leach



Chapters 81 - 89

Summary

In Chapter 81, the Monday, March 13, email exchange between Beth and Jennifer discuss Jennifer's deep conversations with Mitch about having another child and what it means to be a parent. Beth says she is doing better, though she does not feel ready to date again and she does sometimes feel lonely. Jennifer urges her to go after her crush.

In Chapter 82, Lincoln lay awake at night trying to figure out how to initiate things with Beth and what he would say. Lincoln had an open house for his apartment and friends and family came. He was still uncertain about what he should say to ask Beth out.

In Chapter 83, Lincoln got a haircut and went to the Courier's office to try to find Beth. He went to her cubicle, but she was not there. Her coworker Derek asked him if he needed anything, and he said he needed to talk to Beth. He did not leave a message.

In Chapter 84, Beth tells Jennifer in her email from Monday, March 20, that she has a date, not with her cute guy but with another man: the pharmacy student she met the previous year when covering the Indian Hills movie theater's sale. They went out to see one of the final movies playing there, and Beth had a good time. They planned to go out again. Beth tells Jennifer how excited she is about this.

In Chapter 85, after reading Beth's email to Jennifer, Lincoln started deleting and scrubbing the WebFence folder to erase all data about who had been flagged and how often. That night, he told Doris and Chuck that he was quitting the next day. He wrote a letter of resignation and set it on Greg's desk. Then he set out to write to Beth, though he was not sure what he wanted to say. He eventually wrote a note explaining that he had kept reading her emails to Jennifer because he liked her, but he felt guilty about this invasion of privacy. He put the letter on her desk and walked out of the Courier's offices for good.

In Chapter 86, the next morning Greg called Lincoln and tried to get him to come back to work or at least give him two weeks' notice. He told Lincoln that his work was valuable, but Lincoln was determined not to go back. Lincoln went to watch the Indian Hills theatre be demolished, and then he looked for job openings in the paper. One stood out: a full-time senior computer technician at St. James University, tuition and benefits included.

In Chapter 87, Lincoln enjoyed settling into his new job and taking courses. The work was more challenging, which he appreciated. However, he still missed Beth. He subscribed to the newspaper just so he could read her movie reviews and try to get a sense of how she was doing through her writing. There were some romantic prospects at his new job, including a young professor he liked. At Justin and Dena's wedding,



Lincoln encountered Chris again since Justin hired his band for the reception. He felt bitter and melancholy throughout the ceremony.

In Chapter 88, Lincoln went to a movie one night in October. He heard someone spill candy, and when he turned around he saw it was Beth. She immediately recognized him and came over to sit down next to him. The movie started, and Lincoln told her he was sorry but she said not to be. They kissed. At the end of the movie, Beth was flustered. She left Lincoln alone in a hurry. Lincoln went back to the Courier office and tracked Beth down. She told him she was not as good at talking as she was writing, but they decided to go to the break room to try to talk. Beth was upset about Lincoln reading her email, but she did not want Lincoln to apologize even though it was an awkward situation. She told him Jennifer was pregnant and had said that Lincoln was excused because of his cuteness. Beth said that Lincoln's note was the weirdest part of it. Beth and Lincoln tried to find a comparable movie that would fit their situation. Beth struggled with what she could say that he did not already know about her. Still, Beth admitted that she was serious about her crush on him. Beth told him that every time she saw him, Lincoln made her feel like the song "Here's Where the Story Ends" by the Sundays. She asked if he believed in love at first sight, and he explained how he had feelings for her even though he did not know what she looked like. He fell in love with her through her words and asked if she wanted him to try to keep explaining. She said she did not want that, she wanted to be where they were then. Lincoln kissed her.

Chapter 89 shows Beth and Lincoln's life after they became a couple. Lincoln's mother and Eve both enjoyed Beth, and Beth's parents loved Lincoln. They referenced their wedding sometime in the future. In the final scene, Lincoln and Beth were together in bed. Beth told him that she did not know that she could be loved so much without someone needing space. Lincoln replied, "There's no air in space" (324).

Analysis

The closing chapters of the novel tie up loose ends for the characters, in particular Beth and Lincoln's relationship. Though emboldened by Beth's newly single status, Lincoln struggles to find a way to initiate a conversation with Beth. He tries out lines in his mind all the time, day and night, including before he falls asleep. He even gets a haircut. Yet he is unable to make a move. Lincoln knows that Beth is a catch, yet it still surprises him when she goes out on a date with a pharmacy student she interviewed a while ago and ends up having a great time. This is too much for Lincoln; he failed to initiate a relationship with Beth because of his own issues with communication, and the ethical dilemma is insurmountable. He believes the only thing he can do is quit. Lincoln's note to Beth is his attempt to come clean. He knows when he walks out the door of the Courier offices that night, he is never going back. And, just like that, Lincoln detaches from Beth.

In the intervening months, Lincoln takes on another job, an IT job at a local university that gives him tuition benefits. If nothing else, Lincoln pursues coursework for personal enrichment. He enjoys his new apartment and still sees friends. He has successfully



distanced himself from the Beth situation—almost. Lincoln still reads her film reviews and tries to divine her mood based on her writing. He still will not let her go even though there are other romantic prospects around. And so, away from his mother, his sister, and a girlfriend, Lincoln begins to carve out his own identity. He is an independent adult. He has a curious mind. He is capable of quitting a dead-end job.

When Beth and Lincoln are reunited, now with the baggage of the email surveillance, the experience is electric for both of them. Beth cannot resist kissing Lincoln even though she still feels the ethics are murky. Lincoln is stirred even more than ever by his attraction to Beth, her freckles, her glasses, and her personality. Even if it was just chance that they ran into each other, Lincoln is not going to let her go now that they have embraced. The break room is a fitting place for the two to hash out their relationship. Beth asks Lincoln if he believes in love at first sight. This sheds more light on Beth's feelings towards her "Cute Guy" crush. Earlier in the narrative, Beth's obsession with Lincoln might have seemed just physical because he was handsome and, as she later found out, kind and capable. Beth implies that she fell in love with Lincoln visually, an interesting counterpart to Lincoln's experience with falling in love with her through her words. Whatever the differences, their love is a product of communication that goes beyond words and beyond appearance. Additionally, Beth refers to herself as not good with talking. She thinks she is better at writing than speaking, and that does seem to hold up. Beth is flustered around Lincoln and does not always know what to say to him. In fact, she frequently asks him for his opinion for what kind of movie they are in. For all the angst and agony in struggling to find a way to initiate contact with Beth, Lincoln is remarkably smooth and calm around her. He is not a babbling, stumbling mess, and he does not hold it against her that she does not speak in the same whip-smart, witty voice she uses in emails. He knows her sense of humor, and they soon develop a rapport. Their communication has finally crossed paths and now finds them compatible. The reader also learns from their conversation that Jennifer and Mitch are expecting again.

In the final chapter, Lincoln and Beth are a couple deeply in love. Mentions of the future—Beth's offhand remark referencing their wedding—does not scare either Lincoln or Beth. Their love is rooted in honesty and mutual passion. Beth did not know that someone "Could love me and love me and love me without ...needing space" (324). The final line, when Lincoln tells Beth that "There's no air in space" signifies the enormity of their love that knows no limits (324). Lincoln has a heart big enough to hold his profound love for Beth.

Discussion Question 1

Does Lincoln's farewell note to Beth absolve him of his transgressions?



Discussion Question 2

Explain how communication impacts Lincoln and Beth's conversation together in the break room.

Discussion Question 3

What is your interpretation of the final line of the novel, Lincoln telling Beth that "There's no air in space" (324)?

Vocabulary

trivial, damsel, affirmative, advocate, estranged, mesmerized, gala, remnant, allot, rhapsodic, bypass, intercept



Characters

Lincoln

Lincoln is in his late twenties at the time of the novel. Kind and quiet, Lincoln is intellectually curious, though he has trouble finding focus academically and, as shown in this novel, throughout his early adulthood. At the beginning of the novel, Lincoln still lives with his mother, who is extremely overbearing and coddling, much to the distaste of Lincoln's older, married sister, Eve. Somewhat of a geek in high school, Lincoln falls in love with his classmate, the wildly passionate and popular Samantha ("Sam"). Sam is quite tiny, very opinionated, and has a flare for the dramatic. Lincoln's mother, who never liked Sam, seems to be rooting against their relationship. Lincoln believes that they will be together forever, that they will get married, but when he follows her to a college in California things become tense between them. Finally, they break up, and Lincoln feels deeply wounded by this, so much so that he leaves the college, moves back home, and transfers to the University of Nebraska. There he meets his friends Justin, Christine, and Dave.

At the opening of the novel, Lincoln is stuck, suspended in a kind of existential lingo. He knows that he should probably move out of his mother's house and live on his own, as Eve urges repeatedly, but he likes having a comfortable salary in his new job as an Internet security tech at the Omaha Courier newspaper. Also, he enjoys his mother's unbeatable cooking. Quickly, Lincoln becomes bored at work, where his duties are limited primarily to just reading the employees' emails to check for inappropriate behavior. The novel is set in 1999, and email is still a new component to the modern workplace, and likewise Y2K, or the crisis about switching computer code to the year 2000, is a growing concern. Over the course of his job, Lincoln becomes attuned to two employees in particular, Beth Fremont and Jennifer Scribner-Snyder, who frequently violate the language and content red flags. Lincoln never gives them a warning, but instead reads their email for entertainment, slowly falling in love with Beth through her words. Lincoln even takes to visiting her desk and going to her boyfriend's band's concerts. Beth eventually develops a crush on Lincoln from seeing him around the office.

At the same time, Lincoln is undergoing a journey of self-discovery. Although the job at the Courier provides a substantial income, he does not like having the night shift and, moreover, becomes bored because there are so few things to do. Eve urges him to read a career self-help book, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Lincoln muses over an old list that he and Sam crafted to find out what he was good at doing. There is some evidence of distortion on his part; frequently throughout the novel, several characters reference his bulky, tall, and relatively toned physique. Eventually, Lincoln realizes that this is a pattern, that he actually does have an impressive build, one he works on firming up through the gym. Throughout the novel, Lincoln repeatedly sees himself and his love life in comparison to when he was with Sam, a relationship he romanticized until its end and then, after a period of anger at their breakup, later into his twenties. Lincoln's struggle



for identity also continues in relation to his friends. He constantly wonders who he was in their circle, deciding maybe he is the Funny One. Lincoln begins to think about taking classes at the local college. Gradually, Lincoln becomes more confident. He makes new friends and goes out more. He moves out to an apartment of his own, a significant step for himself and his overbearing mother.

Beth Fremont

Beth Fremont is the chief film critic at the Omaha Courier, though she occasionally writes articles about local topics. She is in her late twenties. In her emails, Beth is clearly very affectionate towards Jennifer Scribner-Scrivener, an editor at the paper and her best friend. Beth is always quick with a pop culture reference or a joke. Beth can be very snarky, with an acerbic wit and at times bleak view on the world. She can also be cynical, but usually when she becomes her most mean and bitter this is a mask for underlying pain, self doubt, and anxiety, feelings Jennifer is able to help her express and work through.

Beth meets her longtime boyfriend, Chris, a musician who had been part of a rock band for many years, at college. Chris lives with Beth and does not pay any rent, nor does he really contribute to the household income. Beth's stable income allows him to work on his music career which, while successful locally, does not seem to be taking off in a lucrative way.

Beth's relationship with Chris is a major source of frustration with her. Even though he had been dating Beth for eight years at the start of the novel, Chris does not seem likely to propose to Beth anytime soon. Beth still feels a lingering sense of cool for dating Chris and being the girlfriend of a lead singer in a rock band, but the shine is starting to wear off. This becomes more evident when Beth's much-younger sister Kayley becomes engaged at the beginning of the novel. Beth is not-so-secretly jealous of Kayley for getting married first, which seems to fit into a larger pattern of other women she knows getting married before her, to the extent where she not only doubts that she will ever get married, but to talk herself into accepting her stagnant relationship with Chris. The frustration is all the more upsetting because Beth was quite popular growing up, always having a boyfriend and a date to dances. She also has a dream that she would become a wife to a rich dentist and be able to stay home with her kids, at least for their first few years. This contrasts to Jennifer, who is at first against and then ambivalent before finally excited about having children.

One indication that Beth is ready to move on from Chris is the development of her "Cute Guy" crush, the mystery man in the Courier offices who turns out to be Lincoln. Even though she plays along and humors Beth, Jennifer suggests that having a crush on someone would be awkward in her marriage, hinting at Chris and Beth's relationship and possible infidelity. Still, Beth pursues the relationship and eventually ends up with Lincoln.



Jennifer Scribner-Scrivener

Jennifer Scriber-Scrivener is a copyeditor at the Omaha Courier newspaper. She is best friends with Beth Fremont. The two women bond over office gossip and used to have more conversations in person before they were granted access to email. Jennifer is sharp-tongued, just as acerbic as Beth. She often challenges Beth, playing devil's advocate and telling her honestly when Beth was being unreasonable or morally ambiguous. For example, Jennifer tries to remind Beth that she is still with Chris while she harbors her crush on Lincoln. If Beth is more often confident and bleak in tone and content, Jennifer is more cynical and extremely critical of herself, self-deprecating to a fault. She does not have a lot of confidence or self esteem.

Jennifer had a difficult childhood, especially growing up with a mother who was critical of Jennifer, even of her weight and appearance. Meeting her husband, Mitch, a devoted and caring music teacher who was deeply in love with Jennifer, helps her feel more confident. At the beginning of the novel, Jennifer is ambivalent about having children even though Mitch is obvious about his desire to have kids. Jennifer does start to feel more excited about children, albeit with great hesitation, and begins to buy baby clothes at the local Baby Gap. Feeling like she might as well give in, Jennifer buys and follows a fertility calendar and has unprotected sex with Mitch in order to conceive. While she is pregnant, Jennifer feels conflicted, alternately excited about having a child and terrified that she would make a bad mother, primarily because she is still not sure she even wants a child. Her mother is happy for her. Jennifer begins to have sharp pains and miscarries. This experience leaves her emotionally traumatized. She feels deep guilt because she believed that she caused the baby's death due to her negative thoughts. Beth tries to help her pull out of this, but Jennifer is still sensitive. Eventually they reconnect to their old friendship and dynamics. Jennifer starts to see parenting in a new light, and she and Mitch conceive again. When Beth and Lincoln reunite in October 2000, Jennifer is already pregnant with another child.

Lincoln and Eve's Mom

Lincoln and Eve's mother is a terrific cook whose scrumptious and hearty food endears her to everyone she meets, even pulling Lincoln into living with her when he was well into his twenties partially because of her food. She is well meaning but incredibly attached to her children to a fault. After the dissolve of her marriage, Mrs. O'Neill double downs on not letting her children go. She is possessive of Lincoln and constantly criticizes his girlfriend, Sam. Although she never says "I told you so" about Lincoln's breakup with Sam, his mother's smug satisfaction lingered. Eve and Lincoln generally have different perspectives on their mother. Eve is much more bitter about her childhood, referencing how their mother would be very upset when Eve was to leave her side and guilt her into sticking around. Eve seemed permanently wounded by her mother's acute separation anxiety. For this reason, Eve develops a distaste for her mother and constantly berates Lincoln for living with her even when he could move out. Eve is not shy about this, either, and openly criticizes her mother in front of her kids and



Lincoln, blaming Lincoln's stagnant growth on their mother's inability to let him move out and become a real adult. Lincoln enjoys living with his mother and does not immediately see why he would want to move out even though he makes enough money to live on his own.

Later, Mrs. O'Neill is distraught when Lincoln moves to an apartment and did not tell her right away. She cannot understand why she is not enough for Lincoln. It is obvious that she can only see his move in terms of her and not in terms of how it would help him. She internalizes the move as a slight towards her, a rejection that she was not enough for Lincoln. Eventually she does come around, though, and helps Lincoln find furniture for his new place. She also attends his open house, making food for it and answering the door. Beth does not think Lincoln's mother liked her when they met, but Lincoln divines his mother's approval.

Eve, Lincoln's Sister

Eve is Lincoln's older sister. Eve is a few years older and had been married for several years. She has two little boys. Eve and Lincoln are close, and he looks up to her for candid advice. Eve often call Lincoln when he is on shift at the Courier, and Lincoln frequently calls her, too, since she works at a bank during the day and is free when Lincoln works at night. Eve is very encouraging of her younger brother. She is always convinced that Lincoln's life is stagnant, that he is living in a dead end by staying at home with their mother and not moving out even though he had the means (and was in his late twenties). Eve sees it as the core reason why he has not truly grown up, found a girlfriend, and became a true adult. Eve attributes all of Lincoln's anxieties and stunted growth as being a result of his living situation. To that end, Eve not only reiterates her belief that he needs to move out but also freely gives him advice about what he should do for self improvement, everything from reading through the career self-help guide, "What Color Is Your Parachute?" to urging him to join a gym. At the same time, Lincoln does not seem to trust her with relationship advice as he rarely confides in her about love, romance, or his crush on Beth. They even dance around the subject of the end of Sam and Lincoln's relationship, only referring to it in vague, abstract ways.

Eve's distaste for her mother is no secret. She holds onto pain going back to childhood when her mother had a severe form of (undiagnosed) separation anxiety. She isolated Eve and would not let her go out or play, preferring instead to keep her close. Eve also notes how their mother coddled Lincoln in particular. At one point in the story, Eve and Lincoln have lunch with her boys. When her mother complains about Eve's boys and their picky eating, this triggers Eve to become enraged at her mother and unleash a biting critique of her mother's parenting skills, losing herself so much in the argument that she freely uses Lincoln as an example even though he is in the same room. That Eve got married young, had children, and now has a steady job seems to be a reaction against her mother's parenting and the enormous guilt she felt as a child when her mother manipulated her into feeling like she had to stay close and not leave her mother.



Chris

Chris is Beth's boyfriend of eight years when the novel opens. Beth and Chris meet in college. They had a slow-building attraction. Beth was infatuated with him, her "Headphone Boy" who she saw in the student lounge and would stalk him. Finally, Chris caught on and asked her out. Chris is handsome and somewhat emotionally distant from the beginning, an obstacle Beth struggles to ever overcome. He lives with Beth but pays no rent, something Beth defends him from Jennifer's criticism by saying that she has to pay rent anyway. Chris is supposed to be working on his rock demo and make his music career happen. Chris is the lead singer and guitar player in the band Sacajawea. Their grunge rock style is popular, especially with Lincoln's friend Justin, who invites the band to play at his wedding reception. However, the band never really breaks through and makes it big. Chris's friends, in particular bandmate Stef, remain suspicious of Beth. Stef even targets Beth as a killjoy and a critic, an enemy and just about the worst thing you could be in the world. Tellingly, Chris does not stick up for Beth. Chris's ambiguity about his relationship with Beth is evident when he tells Lincoln that he lives a nice, unencumbered life since he does not smoke and does not have a girlfriend. This shows how Chris does not seem to value Beth.

Beth stays with Chris because it required little energy on her part. Chris can be amazingly present and is especially good with other people, but it is not enough for Beth since it is so inconsistent as he always seems to turn "off" around her. When she develops her crush on her "Cute Guy," meaning Lincoln, she tries to remain somewhat detached by holding onto her relationship with Chris to keep her decent. She hopes they will get married but knows that it is likely never to happen. At Kiley's wedding, Beth and Chris dance together, and he tells her that he loves her so much, but that he will never marry her because he cannot deal with the magnitude of his love for her. Beth ends the relationship at the wedding and kicks him out. When he is worried about leaving his guitar at her apartment, Chris demonstrates to Beth just how little he cares about her.

Mitch

Mitch is a music major and later goes on to become a high school music teacher and marching band coach. Mitch is Jennifer's husband. Mitch meets Jennifer in college and is instantly in love with her. Mitch is completely infatuated with Jennifer who, overweight and inexperienced romantically, feels flattered but alarmed at the magnitude of his love and devotion to her. In this way, Mitch serves in contrast to Beth's boyfriend, Chris. Whereas Chris ultimately shies away from marriage to Beth because he cannot find space for all the love he feels for her, Mitch does not need this distance.

The main point of conflict between Jennifer and Mitch is about having children. Mitch definitely wants kids, but Jennifer is much more reluctant, even though she secretly feels conflicted and contradictory feelings abouts having a child. Jennifer's mother, extremely critical of her daughter to a fault, even hints that an argument about having



kids like the one Jennifer and Mitch have was how "it" starts, meaning divorce. Jennifer ultimately decides to buy a fertility calendar and have unprotected sex with Mitch in the hopes of conceiving a child, which she does, just to get it over with since she does not want to jeopardize her relationship with Mitch. While Jennifer is pregnant, Mitch becomes interested in pregnancy and childbirth and reads up about it. He also tells her that she is beautiful, not just because of the pregnancy glow, but she is growing even more beautiful to him every year. After Jennifer's miscarriage, Mitch proves to be a rock, helping her get through the sorrow but also giving her space. At the end of the story, Mitch and Jennifer are expecting another child.

Sam

Samantha or "Sam" is Lincoln's first girlfriend. They become involved in high school. Sam has a larger-than-life personality that more than makes up for her petite size. Mercurial, outspoken, impulsive, ambitious, and manipulative, Sam falls in love with Lincoln but not to the same degree he falls for her. Still, Lincoln is completely bewitched by Sam and does whatever she wants and asks. She leaves such a mark on him that even ten years later, when Lincoln is confused about his direction in life, he returns again and again to a list Sam made of what Lincoln was good at to help him pick a major. Lincoln's mother does not like Sam and constantly puts her down, especially for her small and, to her, nonfeminine appearance. When they leave for college in California, Sam and Lincoln are imminently headed for disaster, though Lincoln does not see this right away. Sam had always hinted at life beyond Lincoln, asking him pointedly what it would be like to be with other people. Lincoln is adamant that they would get married and be together forever. He misses the frequent clues that would have tipped him off that Sam never expected they would be together beyond high school. She puts him down constantly, calling him "farm boy" and distinguishing herself from him by making new friends with people from the drama department. She avoids Lincoln more and more, and when he saw her kissing another man, Sam tries to save face or at least let Lincoln down easily. He leaves her a letter, and when they are reunited in Omaha over winter break, Sam expresses that she does not think they would be together forever.

Lincoln is devastated by their breakup and transfers to the state school back home. The demise of his relationship with Sam haunts Lincoln for more than a decade, and even late into the novel he expresses to Eve that he does not think he could ever get over Sam or have another relationship like that. Lincoln also lives with an unspoken "I told you so" from his mother, as if Lincoln should have listened to her criticism of Sam back when they were dating. Sam and Lincoln does not see each other again until late in the novel when they run into each other at a movie rental store. Sam is happy to see Lincoln, saying she moved back with her kids, and her husband (implying that he was not her first) is going to move over from Ireland to be with her. She tries to get him to go get banana ice cream, a throwback to their youth, but Lincoln says he has plans and went to the night copyeditors' New Years party instead. Lincoln throws out her business card. She does, though, call Lincoln's house again and again. However, Lincoln does not contact her again.



Greg

Greg is Lincoln's boss at the Courier. With a sarcastic sense of humor, Greg seems alternately hysterical and resigned about the world, including the Y2K issue, which even he admits that he felt nervous about. Greg is a pretty lax boss. Though he comes up for projects for Lincoln to do, he himself recognizes that they are just busy work. He wonders if the young coders they brought on are wasting their time, but he never seems serious about punishing anyone for goofing off. Greg likes Lincoln, and when Lincoln leaves his letter of resignation, Greg calls him and tries to get him back. He says that Lincoln is good at what he does and really is an integral part of the Courier since someone from Information Technology has to be there to answer questions.

Christine

Christine is Lincoln's friend Dave's wife. All three of them became friends while in college. Lincoln kissed Christine once when they were studying together. However, he did not make a move and continue their relationship. Now married with children, Dave and Christine often have Lincoln and their other friends over for Dungeons and Dragons games on Saturday nights. Christine has a maternal energy to her that extends beyond her kids. Lincoln obviously has much platonic affection for Christine as friends, though he does sometimes wonder what would have happened if he had pursued a relationship with her beyond that kiss. For example, she is the first person he confides in about his attraction to Beth and the ethical complications of reading her email. Christine is happy for Lincoln; she tells him that she has been praying for him to find happiness. She finds it romantic that Lincoln falls in love with Beth despite only knowing her through words, though she does tell Lincoln that what he is doing was probably wrong. Still, she keeps his secret. She provides an encouraging presence for Lincoln while also giving him honest advice.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Baby Gap clothes

At the start of the novel, Jennifer is ambivalent about pregnancy and for most of the story remains ambivalent, even when she becomes pregnant. Yet her feelings are not as clear-cut as they might seem. Even Beth cannot predict that Jennifer is thinking about what it would be like to be a mother in a positive way. When Jennifer reveals that she has been secretly buying girls's clothing from Baby Gap and hiding them from Mitch, Beth is shocked. Even Jennifer does not quite know why she does this, but doing so makes having a child go from some abstract concept to an idea, a future that is much more possible. The Baby Gap clothes show how Jennifer is conflicted about having children but at the same time thinks there might be a small part of her that would welcome it.

Sam's list of "Things Lincoln Is Good At"

Throughout the novel, Lincoln struggles to find some direction in life. His older sister Eve attributes his ennui as directly related to living at home. Yet even Lincoln knows that Eve is not quite right. Living at home might stunt his maturity, but in a larger sense, Lincoln does not know what he wants to do next. The job description for the Courier position had sounded more interesting, and the pay was a big draw. But by Chapter 6, Lincoln is already thinking about quitting. Lincoln returns to a comfort zone to try to get answers. When Lincoln and Sam were in high school, Lincoln had to declare a major for the college admissions process. Lincoln did not know what he was good at, so he asked Sam. Predictably, Sam's list shows Lincoln through her eyes. Lincoln is, among other things, good at "School," "Reading," and "Unfreezing computers/Untangling necklaces." But Sam's last four qualities matter the most to Lincoln: "33. Being SMART / 34. Being SENSITIVE / 35. Being KIND / 36. Being GOOD" (35). Lincoln does indeed demonstrate all of those qualities, but that does not necessarily mean he can build a career out of them. Lincoln's decision to return again to Sam's list, which he has kept religiously in its original form in its original notebook, signifies his struggle to define himself and his needs apart from anyone else's input and his continued hold on Sam. For Lincoln, Sam's word is practically God. Over the course of the novel, Lincoln begins to seize his own future, letting go of the past and the hold Sam has had over him and also forming an identity that is his own, not one that belongs to other people, not one that is defined by other people.

Mrs. O'Neill's Food

Lincoln and Eve's mother is a fantastic cook. Her meals are legendary. Fearless in the kitchen, she will try out any recipe—from Tandoori chicken to chocolate cake made with olive oil—and create something flawless. Mrs. O'Neill is often presented in relation to



food. We first meet her in her kitchen when she asks Lincoln to stir a pot. Lincoln knows that the seductive scents and delicious food that his mother makes work as a sort of anchor for him, for better or worse. It is difficult for Lincoln to detach knowing that his mother is such a great cook. Yet Lincoln does have an inkling that she might be consciously trying to keep him home with her that way. He thinks in passing that by making a dinner for him to take to work each night his mother is starting to plan out her week around what she will make for him, her grown son at 28. Food is what sparks the argument Eve has with her mother. Eve's sons are picky eaters, and Eve flies into a rage when her mother criticizes her grandchildren's eating habits. Mrs. O'Neill's generosity knows no bounds, even though she might have some ulterior motive for giving people food. Later, Mrs. O'Neill befriends Doris, Lincoln's friend from the Courier. They trade stories about Lincoln, and the two keep tabs on him.

Beth's bridesmaid gown

From the moment Beth's younger sister Kiley announces her engagement, Beth dreads the wedding and the lead-up to it. Kiley is young and by Beth's account, a pretty nice, sweet, and sincere person, and Beth does want the best for her sister. Yet Kiley's engagement underscores how Beth is still not married, that Chris still has not proposed and likely never will, and Beth's dreams—to marry someone she loves, have kids, and stay at home—are being pushed further and further away into an impossible fantasy. Throughout the novel, Beth picks apart just about every decision Kiley makes, from wanting to theme her wedding as the "New Millennium" to making thousands of paper cranes. All the while Beth—the maid of honor—knows she is being unfair. It is Kiley's wedding, and Beth does wish her the best. She has enough self awareness to know her behavior is petty and rooted in jealousy, and she hates herself for it. But Kiley's choice to force Beth to wear a strapless dress as part of the wedding party style pushes Beth's irritation to another level. Beth picks apart the color (sage green), but the issue for her is the strapless style. Beth is self-conscious about her arms, but Kiley does not let her wear a cardigan. Beth fixates on this issue again and again in her emails to Jennifer. Finally, Jennifer tells Beth she needs to let the strapless dress issue go; nobody looks good in a strapless dress. The dress is frustrating for Beth on a cosmetic level, but it also points to her underlying anger at Chris for not proposing while knowing full well that they will never get married.

The Indian Hills Theater

The Indian Hills Movie Theater is a historic landmark in Omaha. In contrast to newer theaters in the area, the Indian Hills has older seats and was a little rundown. Beth reports on the movie theater's sale and demolition. She meets a young pharmacy student who she interviews and later dates, a courtship that proves to be the last straw for Lincoln. The theater's closing signifies larger trends in America's culture and society. The novel is set at the turn of the millennium. Already the world is changing, something that can be seen most immediately in the novelty of email and access to the World Wide Web. When the Indian Hills closes, it fits into the larger atmosphere of the novel where



change is happening all over, on an individual level but also in broader strokes like the sale of a quirky yet beloved theater, one that Beth believes cinephiles from beyond Omaha will trek in just to say goodbye. The Indian Hills' demise represents the obsolescence of the past as the world evolves.

Lincoln's haircut

In her emails to Jennifer, Beth describes Lincoln as looking like actor Jason Bateman. Lincoln is flattered by the comparison and asks other people like his sister if he resembles the actor. Lincoln struggles to define himself throughout the novel, from Sam's list of things he is good at to not knowing where he fits in with his Dungeons & Dragons friends, and this is no exception. In fact, Lincoln's disconnect is so strong that he does not have any idea of his massive size and strength until people repeatedly reference those qualities. Emboldened by Beth's continued fawning over her crush on him, Lincoln goes to Great Cuts and gets a haircut. Lincoln asks for his hair to be cut like Morrissey, an English musician with an edgy style. The hair stylist is not quite sure what Lincoln means, but she gives it her best shot, and Lincoln loves it, keeping it throughout the year. This haircut symbolizes Lincoln making a choice of his own, not asking to be cut like Jason Bateman or any other actor who other people compare him to rather than him defining his look.

The New Millennium / Y2K

Looming over the early events of "Attachments" is the dawn of the new millennium when December 31, 1999, switched over to January 1, 2000. At the time, many people were convinced that because computers were not programmed beyond the final digits of the year, an economic collapse would send the world into apocalyptic chaos as soon as the clock struck midnight on January 1, 2000. This became known as the Y2K crisis. Members of the Courier staff are, like everyone, skeptical while perhaps holding private fears. Greg brought in an "International Task Force" of coders, really just young coding geniuses, to help reprogram and code the computer systems. This event is mentioned throughout "Attachments" but becomes more prominent in this section as the end of the year approaches. One way to interpret the significance of this event in the context of the story is it foreshadows each of the main characters getting a new beginning. The new year offers a fresh start for Lincoln, Beth, and Jennifer fitting into a larger symbolism of change. At the same time, the end of the year brings a finality to some of these characters' lives. For example, Lincoln admits to Eve that he is beginning to "get over things," meaning move past the hold Sam had on him. Lincoln himself finally hits "rock bottom" the night he walked out of the Courier office on New Year's Eve, furious at himself for his failure to talk to Beth, even though it was all hands on deck for the IT department. Lincoln recruits Justin and Dena to go to the Sacajawea concert, but seeing Chris makes him feel even worse. He gets drunk, and Justin and Dena have to practically carry him back to his place, where he passes out and wakes up hungover. This is definitely not normal behavior for Lincoln, and given some time and perspective he begins to realize that this rock bottom moment for him could be a positive thing:



"Lincoln thought he'd hit bottom on New Year's, and it had been a relief. Wasn't hitting bottom the thing you do to knock some sense into yourself? Wasn't hitting bottom the thing that showed you which way was up?" (222). The changing of the year and the millennium gives Lincoln an opportunity to go nowhere but up from his crash.

Body image

Each of the three main characters encounter body image issues. Jennifer's struggle with weight stretches back to her childhood and adolescence. Jennifer dismisses her late blooming start to romance by saying, "Guys don't want to kiss fat girls" (65). Jennifer's mother drives this home continually. Even into adulthood, Jennifer is concerned that her mother will tell her she looks fat if she is pregnant. Jennifer herself continually refers to herself as "fat," and even Beth seems to realize that no matter of reassuring her friend otherwise will dislodge this core belief Jennifer has. When Mitch falls madly in love with her, Jennifer cannot understand it. Her self esteem is abysmally low. So when Mitch tells her she looks beautiful and he did not realize she would look more and more beautiful to him each year, Jennifer is touched. The comment might not be enough to permanently rewire her distorted view of herself, but Jennifer feels at least for a moment like she is beautiful.

Beth also gripes about her appearance, most notably with the strapless maid of honor gown she has to wear. Beth mentions gaining weight and how she no longer fits in all the dresses she has had to wear for other people's weddings over the year. Beth is self conscious about her weight, but definitely not to the extreme like Jennifer is. Even so, Beth mercilessly picks apart Emilie the editor's appearance, diminishing whatever good qualities Emilie has by reducing her to just her petite frame and the spelling of her name. Beth, tall and a bit large, is frustrated that tall men like Lincoln always go for tiny women. Jennifer reminds her that Chris is tall and chose her, but Beth willingly ignores this. Obviously, to Beth, Chris's affection means little to nothing. It is difficult to discern the author's intent with Beth and Jennifer's conversation wherein they essentially body shame smaller women. Jennifer and Beth do not seem to have any awareness that what they are doing is unfair, that tearing apart other women's bodies is cruel, especially given that their builds are basically genetic. Yet no one censures Jennifer and Beth, so the reader must judge them on their words alone.

Finally, Lincoln has a disconnect between his image of himself and other people's impressions of him. Lincoln is tall and sturdy and is described with adjectives like massive and strong-looking and compared to the Incredible Hulk and the Brawny towel men. Lincoln does not see this at first, but eventually embraces his reputation and appearance, going to the gym more and putting on more muscle mass.

The What Color Is Your Parachute? Book

Early in the story, Lincoln realizes that he needs some kind of direction in life. The job at the Courier is going nowhere. People by and large followed the guidelines to revise their



language, and Lincoln does not have many other tasks. As a result, he faces hours of empty time. One of his favorite things to do is call his older sister Eve, and she often calls him, too. Eve always has an opinion on Lincoln's life and future, and she recommends reading "What Color Is Your Parachute?" an iconic book published every year even to this day. This book helps people define their needs, wants, and skills and assemble a strategy on how to find rewarding employment. Lincoln does not really take this book seriously, preferring instead to obsessively reread Sam's list of what he is good at. His reaction to the book is to reject planning for the long term, thinking that finding love and finding a purpose are things you cannot plan. Lincoln starts to look at planning in the short term; coming up with something to do for each day, night, week, and weekend. In the end, this plan serves Lincoln well. He finds new friends this way and becomes more comfortable around other people. He tries to let the more abstract and longterm satisfactions like love and finding a purpose just come to him. Indeed, he could not have planned that he would fall in love with someone through her emails. Eve is surprised of Lincoln's plan and disapproves of it, yet Lincoln shows signs of breaking out on his own and deciding his future. Thus, the book symbolizes Lincoln's desire to find direction in life but decision to go about it his own way and take the process in small steps. Further, the imagery of the parachute shows that Lincoln is going about finding his way without that security. He is his own safety net. This is both terrifying and thrilling. When Lincoln decides to move out, he has created a parachute in his steady income and good job as well as sound state of mind. His mother and her house can no longer be his parachute. Lincoln realizes that he has to fly—and risk falling—if he wants to go forward in his life, parachute or not.

Marriage

Marriage is a prominent motif in the novel right from the beginning when Beth's sister, Kiley, gets engaged, forcing the stagnant nature of Beth's relationship with her boyfriend, Chris, to be more visible than ever. It is no secret that Beth wants to get married and has since she was a girl. Through her conversations with Jennifer, Beth reveals she has had a fantasy for a while now of getting married, having children, and staying at home with them. Beth feels like she is owed marriage and is confused since she always had dates growing up. She does not understand why it is so hard, and that leads her to be petty and unfair with her sister. Beth knows Chris is never going to propose, she admits this to Jennifer. Still, when Mitch tells her at her sister's wedding that he could never marry her (but could maybe marry someone else), that his love for her is too big, Beth cuts things off with him. She has her answer. They will never get married. Marriage is more important to Beth than Chris's (alleged) love for her. This releases Beth from their toxic relationship and allows her to move on and eventually find love with Lincoln. Even in the final chapter, marriage is on Beth's mind. She accidentally hints at their future wedding when she is in the car with Lincoln, but he plays along with her fantasy, indicating that he is not afraid of that commitment.

Meanwhile, Jennifer and Mitch's marriage was on rocky grounds, with Mitch being insistent on having children and holding it against a reluctant Jennifer. Jennifer becomes so fearful of Mitch leaving her that she has unprotected sex so they can conceive.



Jennifer and Mitch, despite the hostility on the marriage issue, clearly love each other. Jennifer never doubts Mitch's continued, intense devotion of her. She still goes to his high school's football games to watch his marching band. She is committed to him so much so that she sacrifices her own needs in order to make him stay, terrified that he will leave her if they do not have children soon. The experience with the miscarriage seems to push Jennifer and Mitch apart at first, but ultimately they come back together whereas a loss like that could potentially splinter a couple's marriage permanently and irreversibly. Their marriage is held up as an example of how love can be undying and limitless, something that Beth wishes for dearly and finds with Lincoln.



Settings

The Omaha Courier's Office

The Omaha Courier was undergoing a major shift in communications and networking throughout the course of the story. When Lincoln was brought on board to monitor Internet security, Greg told him that they had not had Internet access until recently, and email was even newer than that. Greg had obviously weathered the storm of technology transition as best he could, but it seemed that even he was struggling to keep up. The newspaper was also migrating over to new computer code due to the Y2K phenomenon, when computers that had been operating under a certain code that ended after December 31, 1999, could potentially stop functioning, losing data and information and freeze systems that kept the world functioning.

Lincoln worked downstairs in the Information Technology department. Eventually he became more interested in the rest of the newspaper's offices, no doubt because he felt connected to Beth and Jennifer, and emerged into the newsroom. The newsroom was quite large. Lincoln tried to get a sense of Beth from her desk. In his mind, not knowing what she looked like made it more okay that he was reading her email. Lincoln befriended the night copyeditors, who also worked the graveyard shift like him.

One crucial setting within the Courier Office is the break room. Here, Lincoln became close to Doris, who stocked the vending machines. Doris was much older than Lincoln, but they had a nice dynamic. Beth and Lincoln first cross paths one night in the break room, but Lincoln did not know who Beth was and did not know who Lincoln was except for her "Cute Guy." At the end of the story, Lincoln and Beth meet up again in the break room after finally making contact in the movie theater. This was a fitting place for them to establish their relationship, in the heart of the location where they first met and worked together.

Lincoln's house

Lincoln had lived with his mother for many years at the start of the novel. The house was large and contained a lot of old furniture. At the heart of the house was the kitchen in which Lincoln's mother created delicious, hearty food, everything from chocolate cake to lasagna and elaborate meals for Lincoln to take to work for dinner.

Lincoln's home was significant mainly because it symbolized his stunted growth. According to Eve, as long as Lincoln lived with his mother, he could never truly become an adult and have a relationship. Lincoln justified staying with his mother for several reasons. For one, he did not feel pressured to leave even though he was now making an awful lot of money in his new position at the Courier. Second, he was pretty hooked on his mother's cooking and how she took care of him. He also feared offending her. Yet as the story goes on, Lincoln became more social, staying out late with new friends a



few times a week. When he fell in love with Doris's apartment, Lincoln knew he had to move out and get that apartment. It is a symbol of her (reluctant) acceptance of Lincoln's choice to move out that Lincoln's mother helped him find new furniture and helped cater his open house.

Dave and Christine's House

Dave and Christine were two of Lincoln's friends from college. They hosted weekly Dungeons & Dragons nights on Saturdays for their friends, including Lincoln. Dave and Christine were married with kids. Lincoln had always loved Christine and even kissed her once in college, though their romance never went beyond that. Christine radiated a kind of maternal energy, taking care of the friends more than participating it and later using her kitchen as a place to ask for updates on Lincoln's situation with Beth. When Lincoln slept over once, Christine and Dave made pancakes. He felt very comfortable with his friends and as peers no doubt showed a picture of what life could have been like if he had married and/or had children.

Lincoln's Apartment

Lincoln's friend Doris was moving out of her apartment around the end of the year. She asked Lincoln for some help moving a heavy piece of furniture. When Lincoln went over to her apartment, he fell in love with it despite its drafty windows and age. Right when they left with the cabinet, the last piece of furniture Doris had left there, Doris and Lincoln go to the super's office, and Lincoln puts in a deposit with the help of Doris since he did not have his checkbook. Since Doris had lived there for more than forty years, she felt like Lincoln was keeping it in the family. Lincoln loved the solitary nature of the space and for many nights went over to the apartment, sleeping there and not telling his mother about it. When his mother does find out that Lincoln had been renting an apartment, Lincoln felt bad but invited her to come over. She did and broke down in tears, hurt that she was not enough for him. It was gut-wrenching for Lincoln to leave or, in her eyes, abandon her, but she did come around, offering furniture. Lincoln's Dungeons & Dragons friends were happy for him, and so, too, was Eve. At the end of the novel, Lincoln held an open house for friends and family. Lincoln and Beth share a bed in his apartment in the final scene of the novel, representing not only how he had moved on from his relationship with Sam, but also had reached a new maturity and independence with a place of his own.

Beth's Apartment

Beth did not say much about her apartment. From her descriptions, it seemed like she was alone most of the time she was home even though she had lived there with Chris for many years. She did not force Chris to pay rent because she said that she would be paying rent anyway. However, when Beth broke up with Chris she threw him out, allowing him time to pack up and leave. Beth did not seem to spend much time at home.

She was often at the movie theater doing work or, for much of the novel, off doing various bridesmaids activities with her younger sister, Kiley.



Themes and Motifs

Love

At the heart of "Attachments" is an exploration of the theme, Love, and how this powerful emotion can be developed and sustained. Beth and Chris's eight-year relationship signifies the limits of love. Beth falls in love with Chris when they were students, drawn into his image and sexy charisma. Yet their love is not enough to sustain their relationship. Over the years, Chris, who had always been emotionally distant since the beginning, pulls away even more. Beth seems to think she loves Chris although she readily acknowledges that they will never get married. Beth refers to their relationship as "living in sin" since they are living together. Essentially they are practically married except without the formal certificate and rings. Indeed, living together is not all that different than Jennifer and Mitch's situation. Yet love binds Mitch and Jennifer while habit, convenience, and some small measure of comfort unite Beth and Chris. When Chris explains to Beth that he will never marry her because he loves her too much, she knows it is just words. Chris asking for his guitar is the final straw; Beth can no longer rationalize living with someone who does not love her. Their relationship is not worth staying in if he is not in love with her. This fits into the theme of measuring love. In the final scene, Beth cannot believe that someone loves her without needing space. Lincoln's response, that there is no air in space, hints at the boundless limits of his love for Beth. Their love stretches beyond the world, is unfathomable. Lincoln's heart is never too small for Beth. Similarly, Mitch loves Jennifer endlessly.

Mitch and Jennifer's love is tested throughout the novel. Jennifer never doubts Mitch's undying affection for her, his devotion and worship of her, something she cannot even explain. Yet Mitch is closed off to the possibility of life without kids. He makes demands and unspoken ultimatums: they must have kids. Jennifer and her mother start to worry that the marriage will end in divorce. Jennifer's love for Mitch is equally big, so much so that she chooses to conceive a child rather than lose him. When she does become pregnant, Jennifer finds her intentions might not have been the best. Losing the baby makes Jennifer blame herself, but this also opens up a chance for Mitch and Jennifer to finally get on the same page and for Jennifer to be honest with him. Lincoln is pleased to find out that Jennifer is expecting by the end of the story. It seems that Jennifer has found a balance between her wants and Mitch's needs. Their perseverance through tragedy demonstrates how strong their love is and symbolizes how a successful marriage is rooted in love. Love can withstand hard times and heal. When Beth fantasizes about marriage, Jennifer shows her that marriage can be difficult but that ultimately when love is limitless, a couple can overcome anything.

Identity

At 28, Lincoln is still struggling to define his life and the passions that will guide him forward, a journey that speaks to the novel's theme of Identity. When Lincoln goes over



to be with his Dungeons & Dragons friends, he has a hard time figuring out who he is if someone else is the "Intense One" or the "Serious One." This is indicative of a larger question, something that has plagued him for more than a decade, stretching back to high school when he viewed his life strictly as it relates to Sam. It is telling that when Lincoln tries to find a direction and purpose, he returns to Sam's list of things he is good at. Sam's list is both vague and specific. Lincoln is good at math and good at "ravishing" her. It is no shock that the composite picture Lincoln gets is confusing; he is only seeing himself through the eyes of another person, a deeply flawed person with questionable judgment.

Lincoln is given the opportunity for a fresh start in his job at the Courier. Beth labels him her "Cute Guy" and with Jennifer compares him to the Incredible Hulk, the Brawny towel man, Clark Kent, Harrison Ford, and so on. Essentially, Lincoln is very attractive and, he is pleased to discover, strong and well-built, sturdy and even "massive." That Lincoln is oblivious to his physique until he reads or hears others' description of him speaks to how little self-awareness he has and a shaky sense of identity unless it is defined by other people.

At the close of the novel, Lincoln has more of a defined identity. One way he shows this is through making choices out of his own agency. He keeps his Morrissey haircut, an edgy look that fits neither what Beth want or what anyone else expects. When he runs into Sam, he has the power to throw her business card out and walk away from it. He also turns down her offer to go get banana ice cream. Sam represents his past, and his future is at the party with the editors and, in a more abstract sense, able to be single and form a social life he chooses.

Friendship

At the very heart of Attachments is an exploration of the concept of Friendship, one of the dominant themes of the novel. The main friendship in the novel is that of Beth and Jennifer's, told through their emails. Both women work at the Omaha Courier, Beth as a film critic and Jennifer as a copyeditor. It is never explained how Beth and Jennifer first met, nor how long they have known each other, yet they have both an easy familiarity while still capable of surprising each other with secret confessions and revelations. This demonstrates how a friendship can be self-sustaining on both the old and the new. Jennifer and Beth are still somewhat new to each other, and they remain that way. Friendship can be both very intimate, with Beth and Jennifer anticipating how the other will react and respond, while still retaining an element of surprise. The epistolary format of emails allows the author to show how friendship can migrate online with the ability to communicate without speaking and a level of accessibility unlike ever before.

A good friendship is built on love, as Jennifer and Beth show in their affection for each other. This means that sometimes the candid honesty that two friends have can lead to hurt that can be overcome. Beth's remark about a cosmic lesson from Jennifer's miscarriage would be to not descend into pity but rise up offends Jennifer. She says later that she will never forgive Beth, but just hours later keeps the email going by



asking about Beth's sister's wedding. Jennifer loves Beth unconditionally, which is why she knows that Beth might have been right and did not intend to hurt her. Similarly, Jennifer dislikes Chris and finds Beth's situation with her crush on Lincoln not quite morally sound. She hints at these issues, but Beth does not ask her to stop even when Jennifer hits a nerve.

Lincoln explores new friendships in the novel. All of his friends at the beginning of the story are from college or high school. At 28, Lincoln has some distance from that era. When he makes friends with the night copyeditors, Lincoln tests his limits and finds he enjoys these new friendships. The more people Lincoln has to talk to, the more he learns about himself and about the world. Thus, Lincoln enjoys the somewhat eccentric lifestyle of the night copyeditors and the sage wisdom of Doris, who is a senior citizen.

Attachment

Attachments, the title of the novel, reveals a deeper theme of attachment, including how people can become linked to others to an irrational and even dangerous degree. One obvious interpretation of attachment would be a reference to email attachments, yet the author seems to be hinting at something more, especially given that the characters do not, in fact, ever include an email attachment.

Lincoln's mother is one example of attachment. Her issues with being parted from her children stem back at least as far as Eve's childhood. Eve was traumatized by her mother's frantic attempts to avoid leaving her children. Mrs. O'Neill seems to have mellowed out over the years. However dramatic Eve experienced her mother's separation anxiety, Lincoln does not seem to have it as bad. Sure, Mrs. O'Neill sometimes gets anxious when Lincoln leaves the house, but overall she lets him come and go. Eve's reference to not even being able to say goodbye to her mother when she was a kid speak to a more exaggerated version of their mother. While Mrs. O'Neill is attached to Lincoln, Lincoln is likewise attached to home and his mother's cooking. Throughout the novel, Lincoln rationalizes staying with his mother and ultimately leaves. He is able to break his attachment to her knowing that he needs to live his own life. Still, like his mother says, Lincoln will always be a part of her, and likewise she will always be a part of him.

Lincoln also displays an attachment, one that crosses moral lines. Lincoln knows early on that reading Jennifer and Beth's emails, and then continuing to read them without sending a warning, is morally ambiguous at best and potentially illegal at worst. But Lincoln is hooked on Jennifer and Beth and even admits to himself that it is pretty pathetic that his only connection to romance is through reading about the love lives of strangers. Lincoln comes close to talking himself out of reading the emails several times but always comes back to it. Soon this attachment turns into love. Christine recognizes the moral issue, but Lincoln cannot let it go. It is especially hard for him to sever this attachment because he knows that he has difficulty talking to Beth. Even when he pieces together that she has a huge crush on him, Lincoln fails to take it offscreen.

However, Beth's grip on him lingers long after he left the job. Similarly, she is attached to her crush. They move through their awkward situation and into love.

Communication

Attachments explores the theme of Communication in several ways, taking a look at how communication has changed, what it looked like at the dawn of the millennium, and the timeless stumbling blocks with love.

That part of the novel is told in emails speaks to the novelty of the Internet and changing patterns in communication in the late nineties. Through email, Jennifer and Beth are instantly accessible to each other. They sit in different areas of the newsroom, yet through email they are closer than ever. Even Jennifer remarks on how things have changed since the time when they used to have sneak gossip sessions in the break room. Yet despite the cozy familiarity and rapid replies, Jennifer and Beth's communication is not ever like it is in person. Beth and Jennifer feel confident to criticize each other in written text, but Beth might not have found the courage to give Jennifer her honest take on her attitude toward pregnancy in person. Similarly, through communication in emails, some of the context gets lost since people cannot hear the other person's tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language. This is one reason why Beth continues to apologize to Jennifer after hurting her feelings even though Jennifer insists that she is fine. In person, Beth likely would have picked up on that.

Beth admits to Lincoln that she is good at writing, but she is not as good with words and speaking. Indeed, when Lincoln meets Beth, the snarky, quick-witted woman he fell in love with through her email does not come through, or at least presents a watered down of someone who could always take five minutes to craft a snappy, articulate reply. The author suggests, then, that dialogue through email does not translate as easily to live, in-person conversations. Lincoln also struggles to communicate with women. His inability to start a conversation with Beth prevents them from starting a relationship right away. Lincoln's struggles with communication might stem from his relationship with Sam. He felt comfortable expressing himself with Sam, but right from the minute they met in class, Sam guided the conversation. Lincoln's ability to grow more comfortable around new friends helps him feel more confident to track down Beth after seeing her at the theater. He wants her, and he will risk losing his words rather than let her get away.



Styles

Point of View

The novel alternates between two points of view. First, Lincoln O'Neill's chapters are written from the third person limited perspective. In this point of view, a narrator describes the events through third person but the thoughts and emotions described are limited to Lincoln. For example, the author writes: "But Lincoln wasn't sure he even wanted to move out" (28). Yet the reader never discovers what other characters in Lincoln's world, such as Eve, feel and think. Crucially, this allows the author to signify the distance between Lincoln's ideas on something and other characters. Lincoln's relationship with Sam is indicative of this strategy. Through the narrator's point of view, the reader is immersed in how Lincoln feels about Sam. Lincoln romanticizes Sam from the beginning while overlooking some of the clues that she wants to break up or at least is not very serious about him, certainly not as serious as he is about her. We never have a window into Sam's mind. The reader has to take everything Sam says at face value. Her dialogue is the only way we can understand what she thinks and feels. Everything else about her, including her actions, are filtered through Lincoln's point of view. Even so, reading between the lines of Sam's dialogue makes it pretty obvious that she is ambivalent about the relationship. Lincoln, however, misses these clues because he is blind to the subtext, choosing instead to think she loves him when her words say otherwise.

The email conversations between Beth and Jennifer are pieces of correspondence. Objectively, they are from neither character's point of view because they contain their dialogue without any commentary from Beth or Jennifer. In fact, Beth and Jennifer's emails would never be seen at all if they were not flagged. The reader sees them because Lincoln does. Again, the reader only knows Beth and Jennifer from the surface, at least not until the end when Jennifer and Lincoln cross paths in the parking lot and in the novel's closing chapters when Lincoln and Beth finally meet. Then Lincoln—and the reader—gets to see the people whose lives he has known only through their email live and in person. Still, Beth and Jennifer are only seen through Lincoln's point of view.

Language and Meaning

"Attachments" is set in 1999 and 2000. In Beth and Jennifer's shorthand, rapid-fire conversations, there are many references to relevant current events at that time, including Y2K, President Bill Clinton, Jerry Springer's talk show, the new millennium, and popular culture, such as the movies "Babe," "Titanic," and "Pokemon." The author effectively situates the story in this time period through these references and their corresponding plot points. Beth and Jennifer's ease in picking up on each other's cultural, political, and historical references speaks not only to how clued in they are to the larger world around them but also hints at the intimacy of their relationship. When the friends spell words out to avoid being flagged, they demonstrate how Internet



security was important at that time, but in the early days of email it was not clear what was and was not offensive content and vocabulary. As a result, even Lincoln gets confused sometimes. "Porn" is definitely a flagged word, but is "menstruation," Lincoln wonders. Lincoln's friend, Justin, uses a great deal of profanity that characterizes him as someone who is informal and more of a relaxed party guy.

The author's prose style in Lincoln's passages is simple and straightforward. The sentences are not overly complex, nor is the vocabulary. Rowell frequently mixes up the sentence structure. For example, "If you asked Greg, it was all going pretty well. If you asked anyone in upper management, it was chaos" (10). Here Rowell splits up two sentences that could be combined, but she does it for dramatic effect, adding rhythm to the structure.

The author was a reporter at the Omaha World-Herald for many years, a background that no doubt influenced her highly conversational style and subject matter. Often characters will discuss something, and the dialogue is not attributed to anyone. In fact, Beth and Jennifer's emails contain almost exclusively dialogue; they are literal conversations written down. Email, then, migrates conversations online to a written format; Jennifer even references how she and Beth used to meet up in person to talk before they had email. This contrasts to Lincoln, who has difficulty expressing himself around women, becoming tongue-tied. One of the great ironies for Lincoln is that Beth admits that she is a great writer, but she is not as good at talking live in person.

Structure

"Attachments" is an epistolary novel. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines "epistolary" as: "written in the form as a series of letters." Epistolary novels have been popular stretching back at least to the 18th century with classics like Samuel Richardson's "Clarissa" (1749) and "The Moonstone" by Wilkie Collins (1868). The style remains popular even now with contemporary epistolary novels like Helen Fielding's "Bridget Jones's Diary" (1996) and Jeff Kinney's "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" series (2007). Whereas an early epistolary novel might have been limited in form to letters or wedding announcements, today communication has evolved enormously. In "Attachments" the primary form is emails, but one could imagine a novel incorporating social media statuses, blog posts, and newsletter articles.

The author no doubt chooses email at this particular point in time (1999-2000) in order to illustrate not only how communication has changed but also the unique status of communication at that time. Lincoln's job at the courier is symptomatic of how email was still new and managers were uneasy about access to the Internet in case it was a loss of company time or was taken advantage of for unsavory means, like viewing pornography. Lincoln's work dies down very early on because the warnings he issues are taken seriously. Beth and Jennifer's emails also show an update in the original epistolary format of letters. The author, then, argues for the relevance of the epistolary novel in contemporary times; the epistolary novel is still an effective style, but the means of communication have shifted. The reader might sometimes overlook that Beth

and Jennifer's emails are only presented in the novel because they were flagged. In other words, we are just reading a selection of the emails Beth and Jennifer send. We are only privy to the ones that fall into the WebFence folder.

Structurally, Lincoln's chapters in prose provide an insight to the novel's plot and emotional core. Lincoln's chapters allow for the plot to be taken out of just the newsroom setting. Additionally, though the novel's main characters are Beth and Jennifer, the story really belongs to Lincoln as his chapters allow him to explore memories and thoughts about the future whereas Beth and Jennifer are essentially components of Lincoln's larger character arc. The emails have momentum in them; Jennifer and Beth mature and change over the course of the story. Yet the author also knows that it is difficult to force a plot into correspondence that can be, at times, trivial in subject matter since essentially the emails are presented in the normal flow of the workday. Lincoln's chapters help frame Beth and Jennifer's journey so there is some kind of commentary on the friends's lives.



Quotes

He didn't mind living with his mother, but there are [i]degrees[/i] of living with your mother.

-- Narrator (chapter 6)

Importance: Whether or not Lincoln should keep living with his mother is an issue that comes up repeatedly, especially when Lincoln talks with his sister, Eve. Eve is convinced that Lincoln needs to move out in order to start his life. Lincoln is ambivalent. He enjoys living at home, where he has a whole floor to himself and can always get some delicious food from his mom, not to mention live rent free. But there is a part of Lincoln that realizes that it is perhaps time to move on. Although Lincoln never reaches a true breaking point with his mother, quotes like this one early on suggests that moving out is an idea he works toward following his own pace.

Of course I understand you, Lincoln,' she replied. 'I'm your mother. No one will ever you like I do. No one will ever love you like I do.' Sam had proved his mother wrong. And then had proved her right.

-- Mrs. O'Neill, Narrator (chapter 8)

Importance: Lincoln's mother tells Lincoln something that he feels to be overbearing. Sam, he thinks, loves him more than his mother does. Lincoln was blind to Sam's faults. It is pretty clear from her conversations with Lincoln that she is stringing him along even though she does not really believe that they will be married, like he does. Lincoln feels that his mother's dismissal of Sam is just jealousy, though there is some truth to it. Mrs. O'Neill sees through Sam, and she realizes that Sam will probably hurt Lincoln. When Sam proves her right, Mrs. O'Neill is careful not to say, "I told you so," though they both feel it. Thus, the failure of his relationship with Sam is embarrassing for Lincoln, who so much wanted to prove his mother wrong.

That's how it starts. You better watch yourself.

-- Jennifer's mother (chapter 15)

Importance: Jennifer's mother has always been critical of her. Growing up, she would focus on her daughter's appearance, such as her weight problems. Jennifer's parents split up when she was growing up. She has a fear of divorce, one that her mother plays on in this quote. Jennifer had gotten into a fight with Mitch about children. Her mother suggests this is how divorce starts. If Jennifer had more confidence in herself, she might realize that Mitch would never leave her because he loves her madly and is devoted to her. Their marriage could probably sustain a decision not to have children. But when Jennifer hears her mother's tone of voice, she realizes that she might lose Mitch. This impacts her decision to try to conceive a child so they can stay together.

Like when we first started talking on the phone, he would always be the one who got off first. When we kissed, he always pulled away first. He always kept me just on the edge of crazy. Feeling like I wanted him too much, which just made me want him more.



-- Beth (chapter 15)

Importance: Beth is describing the early days of her romance with Chris, whom she fell in love with in college. When she describes this to Jennifer, Beth seems to gloss over the issues here. Chris is emotionally distant not just eight years into their relationship, but from the very start. Still, Beth was hooked on that feeling, which she later describes as "excruciating and wonderful." Beth seems addicted to Chris's moody and changeable personality because the good times make it worth it. This quote signals that Chris has always been this way with Beth so that her later descriptions of his aloof nature show that he has never changed, if anything has gotten worse.

Then who was Lincoln?

-- Narrator (chapter 20)

Importance: Lincoln's struggle to find himself fits into the novel's theme of Identity. This quote is taken from one of Lincoln's Dungeons & Dragons games. He looks around the room and tries to figure out who each person is. Dave is the Intense One, Larry was the Serious One, and so forth. Lincoln did not know which "one" he was. This passing thought demonstrates how Lincoln was unsure of himself, both who he fits into in a group and what quality could be used to define him. Later in the novel, Lincoln decides he might be the Funny One.

I wonder that because I already know what it would be like to be with someone else.' 'How do you know?' she said. 'I just do.' 'Then, what would it be like?' 'It would be less,' he said.

-- Lincoln and Sam (chapter 24)

Importance: In this conversation, Sam tries to find out if Lincoln has ever considered being with someone else. Lincoln says it would be less. This idea of measuring love in terms of quantities is a recurring idea throughout the novel. Mitch's love for Jennifer seems to be limitless whereas Chris's love for Beth is extremely limited. He cannot budget for the magnanimity of his love for Beth, which might even be just affection. Chris shies away from this big feeling while Lincoln embraces it with Beth. This quote is also notable because the conversation is telling of Sam's feelings toward Lincoln, that she has thoughts of being with other people and has considered life "beyond" Lincoln.

You're never done raising your children,' his mother said. 'You'll see. You're not done until you're dead.

-- Lincoln's mother (chapter 31)

Importance: Lincoln's mother and Eve get into a big fight about parenting. As usual, Eve focuses on how Lincoln is still living at home, openly insulting him and talking about him even though he is in the same room. Eve's parenting style is to detach from her children early on. Eve seems to think that once her children grow up and move out, she is done parenting them. Lincoln's mother, predictably, disagrees. Mrs. O'Neill's statement sounds dramatic and certainly goes along with her attachment to Lincoln.



While Eve seems to operate under the extreme opposite point of view, she might come around to agree with her mother once her boys are older.

Then I decided I needed to start thinking like a mother with a child to protect."
-- Jennifer (chapter 50)

Importance: Whatever Jennifer's initial misgivings about becoming pregnant and having children, once she is with child she begins to transform her feelings. In this quote, Jennifer starts to see the child becoming a part of her. She feels possessive of the child and begins to look at herself as being responsible for its well being. Later, Jennifer will see her miscarriage as a failure on her part to take care of the child, in fact to openly root against it and wish it ill will. In this case, she is referring to disagreeing with Mitch about the child's name. Earlier she did not feel like it was her place to challenge him on a name like Cody. But Jennifer sees she has to protect her child from a bad name, but also nurture and defend in a general sense, too.

No cigarettes, no girl, you're living an unencumbered life, my friend.' 'That's one way to look at it,' Lincoln said, looking hard at the man across from him and wishing for some kind of Freaky Friday miracle right there, right then.
-- Chris and Lincoln (chapter 64)

Importance: Lincoln encounters Chris at the Lincoln Inn diner the night of the rehearsal dinner. Later, Lincoln will read of how nice and friendly Chris was to Beth's family and friends. Here, though, we see a candid picture of Chris when he feels he is free to be off the cuff and unload his frustrations. The idea of Lincoln being "unencumbered" by a woman (and cigarettes) fits with the novel's theme of attachment. Whereas Chris feels that being attached to Beth in a relationship is a burden, something that restricts and binds him, Lincoln would welcome that intimacy.

If you're determined to see what happened as some sort of universal justice, consider that the lesson here might not be to retreat into cynicism, even if that's where you feel most comfortable. Maybe the lesson is, rise up.
-- Beth (chapter 75)

Importance: After Jennifer's miscarriage, the friends do not speak through email for a few weeks. Lincoln wonders where they have gone. Only gradually do the best friends return to their easy intimacy from before. Jennifer has always had low self esteem. Barely an email goes by without her saying some kind of insult to herself. Here, she blames the miscarriage on herself. When Jennifer gets into a mood where she wants to complain about herself, she is nearly relentless, often trying to coax Beth to join in. Beth is always honest with Jennifer, but here her observation goes too far. Jennifer is hurt and cuts off communication (for a few hours, anyway). Eventually, the friends overcome this, though there is some harsh truth to Beth's statement. Beth recommends Jennifer work on her resilience when faced with an obstacle, rather than dissolve into cynicism. Beth's advice is hard to hear, but Jennifer forgives her anyway, stung likely because she realizes it is true.



You can take the couch from the sun room,' she said when he walked in, 'the brown one. There's too much furniture in that room already.

-- Lincoln's mother (chapter 78)

Importance: Lincoln's mother has trouble with Lincoln's decision to move out into an apartment. Lincoln knew that she would be upset and avoided telling her for weeks. Introducing her to the apartment provokes tears and confessions of long-held anxieties and pain. Yet ultimately Mrs. O'Neill comes around. Offering him a sofa is the first step she takes toward acknowledging her son's choice. Moving some of the furniture from his old house into his apartment will help Lincoln stay connected to the home he lived in for almost his entire life. This gift is a way for Lincoln's mother to demonstrate how she has matured and changed throughout the novel.

There's no air in space,' he said.

-- Lincoln (chapter 89)

Importance: The author closes her novel with this final line. Lincoln is answering Beth's remark about how she does not know how someone can love her and love her and love her without needing so much space. Lincoln plays off the word "space" to reference outer space. His love for and with Beth brings Lincoln to a whole new level. He is deliriously happy. This sentiment also plays into the novel's theme of love being something someone can measure. For Lincoln and Beth, there is limitless love, as infinite as the space in the universe.