

Autobiography of a Face Study Guide

Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Grealy

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Plot Summary

Lucy tells of her years as a hand for Diamond D Stables when she worked with her friend, Stephen. By the time she begins work there, she has had several surgeries, and her face is oddly shaped, invariably attracting attention. Lucy says that she got the job as a result of calling on the phone and not mentioning her disfigurement; she remains there four years. Arguably, the time she spends with horses is among the happiest of her childhood, though she says that she comes to be comfortable in the hospital as well.

Lucy, a tomboy, is terrible at organized sports, and it's a bump during a game of dodge ball that first alerts her family to the fact that there's a problem. She's first thought to have a cyst, but doctors eventually diagnose Ewings sarcoma, a deadly form of cancer with a five percent survival rate. At the time, Lucy doesn't realize the danger she's in but spends her time focusing on the reality of painful surgeries to remove the cancer - including a section of her jawbone. Next she undergoes two years of radiation therapy and chemo treatment, followed by another six months of chemo. Then there are a series of surgeries to reconstruct her facial features with the first several being abysmal failures.

Through it all, Lucy deals with a mother, who is afraid for her child's life and faces it in her own way - by showing no fear to Lucy. She encourages Lucy to do the same, and Lucy valiantly tries not to cry, feeling a sense of failure whenever she does give in to the emotions or tears. Back in school periodically over the three years of treatments and surgeries, Lucy is tormented by other children. She withdraws and works to convince herself that she doesn't need a boyfriend. Even into adulthood, she admits that her life is on hold as she waits for a new face - the face she deserves - to be achieved by the doctors.

Lucy misses a great deal of school but continues on through college, initially planning to attend medical school but eventually settling for poetry. She "finds herself" somewhat in college but continues to feel that the lack of a boyfriend and sex, is a gaping hole that makes her life incomplete. She does eventually meet someone, but the relationship ends abruptly and coincides with another failed reconstruction attempt.

After college, she spends some time abroad, taking advantage of the time to write and to come to terms with herself. She locates yet another plastic surgeon, and this time the process meets with more success. It's only then that she realizes that she doesn't have to continue to have her life on hold. She realizes that society tells us to be and look like someone else, but that isn't necessary.



Prologue, Chapters 1 and 2, Luck and Petting Zoo

Prologue, Chapters 1 and 2, Luck and Petting Zoo Summary and Analysis

Lucy tells of her years as a hand for Diamond D Stables when she worked with her friend, Stephen. By the time she begins work there, she has had several surgeries and her face is oddly shaped, invariably attracting attention. Lucy says that she got the job as a result of calling on the phone and not mentioning her disfigurement; she remains there four years. While she loves being with the animals, she endures the pony parties - birthday events where she is responsible for walking the ponies around the yard with a child in the saddle. She says that each of the stable hands has to take a turn at the pony parties and that no one - even her boss, Ms. Daniels - seems to think that having her around children wasn't a good idea. While the kids are invariably excited about the ponies, the parents begin dragging out cameras. Lucy then stands still, though with her face out of camera range as much as possible.

Lucy is an abysmal athlete but a daredevil at anything else in the neighborhood, regardless of danger. She is smart, reading and spelling better than anyone in her grade. One day, the class is playing dodge ball. Lucy knows the ball is hers, though Joni Friedman is trying to steal it. Lucy stands her ground and when their heads collide, Lucy is sent to the ground in a wave of pain in her jaw.

That night, Lucy is reminded of the pain in her jaw and tells her mother that she has a toothache. The next morning, she can hardly open her mouth - not from the pain but says her jaw is "stuck." Lucy is taken to the doctor, where she's told that it's probably fractured - the first of many incorrect diagnoses. The x-rays reveal it's not a broken jaw, but a cyst, and she's scheduled for surgery.

She relishes the experience of the hospital during that first surgery, falls asleep reluctantly and wakes nauseated, finally answering a nurse's questions so that they'll leave her alone to sleep. About six months later, Lucy's face is "swollen and hot," disputing the doctor's insistence that a knot on her jaw is only a bony growth, though Lucy's mother continues to insist that it isn't normal. Then Dr. Canton agrees that Lucy's situation is serious, that it's an infection and schedules emergency surgery - a term Lucy says makes her heart leap with anticipation, though she's disappointed she won't be transferred to the hospital in an ambulance.

Lucy watches her parents as they are questioned about her infancy. She says her parents look normal and that she isn't accustomed to seeing them confer with each other and defer to authority. She then recounts the reason they are in America. Four-year-old Lucy, her twin, her older sister, her two brothers and her parents had immigrated to America from Dublin when her father was offered a job with a news



syndicate. She says that her brothers remembered Dublin as home, while she and her twin remember little other than America and know of life in Ireland only through the memories of other family members. She notes that she and Sarah were "born too late" to have lived in those more pleasant times and that she's nostalgic for it, though she has no first-hand knowledge of that time. Lucy says she knows that her family is "in some ways superior" to their neighbors though there are also "oddities," such as her brother Sean's schizophrenia and long hair made him different from other boys in the neighborhood. Besides these things, the family is constantly facing money problems, and Lucy says these things that make them different are now starkly pushed aside as her parents seem so much like other parents of children on the ward.

Then Lucy's parents learn that she's to have a bone marrow test and after an explanation of the procedure, they prepare to leave. Lucy says she asks if they weren't going to stay, and they respond that there's no need because they're certain she isn't afraid. She says it's at that moment that she realizes that she's "in this alone." The test goes smoothly, and Lucy settles into life at the hospital, saying that it's a relief to be absent from the tension of home. She meets a boy named Derek - a "handsome boy with a serious case of asthma." She later learns that the doctors keep him in the hospital more than might have been necessary because he's from "an unstable home." Most of the time, she and Derek slip around the hospital getting into mischief.

Lucy says she becomes adept at hiding her face from children behind a curtain of her own hair, as soon as it grows in after the chemo. She often hears the adults tell the children not to stare, but it's interesting that she notes that not once was she asked what happened. It's likely that most people would believe that asking about the deformity would bring attention to it, and that it might hurt Lucy's feelings. Lucy, however, seems to know that everyone has seen it, noticed it and wondered about it and takes it as a deeper offense that no one asks. During the time of her fight against the disease, her face becomes the most important thing in her life. But when she calls Ms. Daniels to ask for a job, she claims that she didn't think to mention her face. She also admits to a great love for the horses with their intelligent eyes. It seems likely that she was so caught up in the possibility of working in this environment where the horses wouldn't judge by her looks but by her actions, that she did forget that it might matter to the people.

Lucy says that pain of that blow in the playground was unexpected, then details the difference. She says that pain that's forthcoming is the pain one suffers from, and that bump on the head playing dodge ball was to be her last instance of unadulterated, unexpected pain. It recedes quickly, leaving her to think it was only what it appears to be - a bump with a classmate while playing a game.

Lucy knows that telling her mother that she has a toothache will make her mother angry. In retrospect, she seems to understand that her mother is angry at the situation, but to Lucy as a child, it's impossible to distinguish the reasons for the anger. It's interesting that these first days and initial procedures and examinations are quickly covered in Lucy's account without examining too much of her thoughts or feelings. It's unclear whether she simply hadn't yet realized the severity of the situation or doesn't really remember her reactions.



Chapters 3 and 4, The Tao of Laugh-In and Fear Itself

Chapters 3 and 4, The Tao of Laugh-In and Fear Itself Summary and Analysis

By the time Lucy has had three operations leading into the major surgery to remove the majority of her jawbone, she's come to dread pre-operative injections but hasn't fully comprehended what's about to happen. The nurse she likes best is Mary and at least part of the affection is because Mary doesn't say that the coming injection isn't going to hurt. Instead, she laughingly tells Lucy that "it's not going to hurt me a bit." Mary tries to tell Lucy about her upcoming surgery, but Lucy doesn't listen. When she wakes in recovery, she's hurting all over and finds she has had a tracheotomy, meaning she can only talk by covering the tube with her finger. As soon as she's up walking, Lucy discovers that she limps - bizarre since she had nothing done to her legs. Lucy has around-the-clock nurses, has trouble drinking enough to satisfy the requirements and says that saying just a few words is a major ordeal that she'd prefer to skip.

Lucy left home "an absolute normal nine-year-old" but is an emaciated shell of herself when her family comes to visit on her birthday. Time passes and she gradually improves, until there comes a day when her favorite nurse, Mary, announces that Lucy is to be moved to another ward. She's moved into a ward with a group of teenage girls, who Lucy will later learn are anorexic. At the time, she knows only that they're giggly teenagers and skeletally thin. She doesn't make friends on this ward and knows that her body is strengthening and preparing for home.

For the next two years, Lucy and her mother drive into New York City every day for radiation and chemotherapy treatments, followed by another six months of weekly chemo. She says the radiation treatments are "a breeze," with the only requirement to hold her breath for the duration of the treatment. Then she and her mother return to the car to go home. The exception is Fridays when Lucy has chemo. She says they are always forced to wait for a long time; her mother can't smoke, which makes her insane. Lucy undergoes treatment from Dr. Woolf, who is always on the telephone and carrying on multiple conversations.

She says that the first seconds of the first chemo are almost pleasurable, but then her stomach revolts. She vomits so hard that her sinuses swell and ache, though Dr. Woolf doesn't diagnose that problem. During the ride home, Lucy often throws up in the mixing bowl kept in the floor of the car for that purpose. At home after her first treatment, she eats ice cream at the insistence of her parents and feeling that she could control the nausea. She immediately throws it up and begins to cry, and her mother soothes her, telling her she "mustn't cry." The second week of chemo was exactly like the first, except that she goes directly to bed once she gets home, refusing to even try to eat anything.



Lucy now finds that she's often alone during the day and says she enjoys the time wandering around in the house, sometimes considering what life is from the perspective of other family members. Tuesdays are best because she's past the worst of the nausea and Friday isn't yet that close. But eventually Friday comes around, and her family begins calling it "D-Day." She says that she's known about pain already but now she understands dread. On days when her father takes her for the chemo, he leaves the room the minute she's told to take off her shirt. Lucy says that as an adult she wonders how he could have left her there but at the time it was a relief. Her mother insists that she be brave, leaning beside her and urging her in a whispered voice not to cry. The fact that neither of her parents is with her means she can react as she pleases and that there's no need to put on a front.

It seems that Lucy becomes dependent on the drugs during this time in the hospital, simply as a way of escaping the reality of recovery. Her interest in her treatment is interesting, and she says she is fed through a gastrointestinal tube. At mealtimes, she's fed "liquidated everything" and asks to smell all the food before it's poured into the tube. She admits that while she's lying around willing to just slide through the days without making any effort on her own, the smell of the liquefied food begins to revive her.

She comes to some interesting conclusions about those who visit with her. For example, she says that there's a gap between the person in the hospital and the visitor - the two are not the same and it seems as if she's indicating that they are from different places. The hospitalized person is now a part of the hospital routine while the visitors have "paused" to become a peripheral part of that for a moment. Soon, both will go back to their own parts, but they don't belong together for the long-term. She calls her mother "Visitor Extraordinaire." When her mother arrives, she immediately begins offering up pieces of information about Lucy's condition, then sits down to knit. Lucy says that her mother understands that her presence is what's necessary. Her father was not her favorite visitor. She says he sometimes resorted to putting on the surgeon's mask and making a bad "Dr. Dad" joke. She says that both she and her father know that the visiting time is difficult and one day, recognizing his gait down the hall during his lunch time, she pretends to be asleep. He writes a note, and she says she knows she's spared him this one visit, but the afternoon stretches out in front of her.

Lucy says that she's been acquainted with the idea of death since she was six when a family pet - a gerbil - died. As she and her sister were about to bury the animal, Lucy asked if people could die as well. Her sister frightens her, but Lucy says she doesn't blame her for that because at six, she was an "easy mark." With this rather flimsy understanding of death, Lucy wonders more about life. The television show "Laugh-In" features a recurring skit about a man who climbs a mountain to ask a guru for the meaning of life, always with some other joke as the punch line. Lucy says she then became obsessed with finding a way to seek out that guru for herself. By the time she is faced with a serious illness some three years later, she's forgotten the gerbil and never associates what's happening to her with the possibility of death. But as a teenager, she finds a book on oncology and discovers that there's a five percent survival rate for victims of Ewing's sarcoma - the disease Lucy battled.



Lucy's mother asks why she began to cry even before the initial chemo treatment was well underway and Lucy can't explain. Her mother says that crying is only because she's afraid and that she must be brave. Lucy says it's at that moment that she realizes that her mother is afraid for her and that she doesn't know how to beat it and so she wants Lucy to put on a brave front. Lucy resolves "to never cry again." Lucy does come to understand that her mother fears Lucy's tears because it's a mirror of her own tears and fear. Lucy says that she feels she's failed her mother and that failure means she "didn't deserve to be comforted."



Chapters 5 and 6, Life on Earth and Door Number Two

Chapters 5 and 6, Life on Earth and Door Number Two Summary and Analysis

Lucy creates a "kingdom" near the garage in what she calls "a small island of grass between the sea of driveway asphalt and the front walk of cement." Here, she uses her stuffed animals and imagination to fill some of the long hours. Lucy leaves the animals outdoors at night despite the fact that her mother thinks they would be better cared for inside. Lucy says that she loves to listen to the stormy weather, knowing her animals are outside as animals were meant to be. She takes comfort in the fact that they're outside, even if she's too sick to get out of bed. On Fridays, she feels sad that she can't be as brave as her mother wants. When she's alone, she tries to rationalize the situation and is sometimes so weighted that she can hardly lift her hand. Often, she finds herself delighted at being alive.

Then Lucy begins to notice sores in her mouth, though she initially attributes them to bad tomato soup. She loses weight and will later compare her youthful looks to other girls her age. During one period, she forces herself to eat every fattening thing she can find, though her sister, Susie, and Susie's friends are constantly on some new diet. She says that she feels even eating a boiled egg to be an act of heroic effort, that fruits and acidic foods are "out of the question," and people continually push her to eat more.

Then Lucy, quite by accident, learns that she will skip her chemo treatment if she's sick. She has pneumonia once, caused by inhaling some vomit, and later sets about trying to inhale bathwater in an effort to get pneumonia again. Despite her resolve to do so, she can't bring herself to breath in. One night, she goes outside during a rain storm, hoping that getting chilled will make her sick but it doesn't. She drinks dish washing liquid but says it just makes her feel ill, but she's not sick enough to miss the treatment. She even scratches herself with rusty nails, thinking tetanus would be preferable to the chemo treatments. One summer day, she wraps herself in a blanket and sits outside, hoping for heat stroke. She does miss a treatment because her blood work is off and expects that it's going to be fun, but she is kept in isolation and finds herself bored with nothing to do.

Lucy's father loses his job with ABC and it's some time before he goes to work for CBS, meaning her insurance is changed. She says that for a brief period, her chemo medications have to be stored at home in the refrigerator and that the sight of the vials in the butter dish is a constant reminder of her situation. During that time, the insurance that won't pay for some things but does pay for transportation to the hospital for treatment, and so she goes every week by ambulance. When the insurance from her father's new job begins, she's relieved - both that there's no more ambulance rides and no more storing the drugs in the refrigerator.



When Lucy's hair begins to fall out, she cries, and her mother reminds her that she'd known it was going to happen. Lucy says that knowing it hadn't truly prepared her, and she's now also upset that she's crying, making her cry harder. The next morning, Lucy's mother gives her a white sailor's hat and Lucy wears it continually until the chemo is completed and her hair grows back. Her mother's co-workers begin giving Lucy wigs, but Lucy never considers that she'll actually wear one. When her mother is asked about it, she says only that the wigs that have been given to Lucy don't fit and someone makes an appointment for a fitting. Lucy and her mother go and after the appointment Lucy's mother says that the wig is very expensive, but if Lucy wants one she'll buy it. Lucy is perplexed because the family is always short on money, but Lucy later hears her mother talking on the phone with someone, saying that while Lucy was being fitted for the wig was the first time Lucy had smiled in some time.

Then one day, Lucy takes a careful look at herself in the mirror and is appalled. She isn't certain if it's a recent change or if she's looked like that for awhile; at any rate, she's horrified that she might have been walking around looking like that without knowing it.

Lucy says that, looking back on that time, she felt happy in the hospital and that for the rest of her life she felt somewhat nostalgic about hospitals in general. Through it all, Lucy finds that she believes the illness and the side effects are somehow deserved, and she feels guilty for "inflicting" the pain of her illness on her family - especially her mother. As a younger child, Lucy wanted to be special and she now wonders if she's the "creator" of her situation.

Lucy begins receiving letters and cards from people who urge her to be strong and promise to be praying for her. She says that she wants this "peace" people are talking about but doesn't know how to find that belief. She says she asks for a sign from God but only partially believes that she'll get one and then wonders if her lack of faith is what keeps her from seeing a sign.



Chapters 7 and 8, Masks and Truth and Beauty

Chapters 7 and 8, Masks and Truth and Beauty Summary and Analysis

Lucy has missed most of fourth and fifth grades and begins to show up "periodically" during the "vacations" from chemo during the sixth grade. The boys tease her unmercifully, often telling her to "take off that mask" and then laughing when they seem surprised that she isn't wearing one. Another favorite jeer is to tease some boy about being Lucy's boyfriend. Then come Halloween and Lucy - with her face concealed - becomes her old, bubbly self. She dresses as an Eskimo and when they're done, she gives Sarah all the hard candy, which Lucy can't eat.

She then starts junior high and finds that the boys are very cruel. She tries to ignore them, but the teasing gets worse. She then starts chemotherapy again and says that she almost welcomes it for the time away from school. Halloween rolls back around and safe behind a plastic witch mask, she goes trick-or-treating with her friend, Teresa. Then her mother reminds her that there's only six more weeks of her chemo, and Lucy is afraid of the change, though she admits that she doesn't want to continue the chemo. She says that when the final shot is over, she waits with Hannah - the cleaning lady in Dr. Woolf's office. This waiting with Hannah has become a ritual, but this time Lucy cries, having become able to control her crying through the treatments.

Lucy then begins a series of dental surgeries to try to save her remaining teeth. She says that having time away from school and the taunts of the boys is all she cares about. She's often stared at in public and makes a game of trying to catch adults looking at her. She consoles herself with the knowledge that few people could have withstood the pain she's been through.

Lucy is friends with a girl named Jan. They share a love of horses, and Lucy is envious of Jan's riding lessons - a frivolity her family can't afford. Then Lucy gets a job at Diamond D and her family is pleased that she has a healthy activity taking up her time. Lucy goes there right after school and stays as late as she can. As Lucy observes the actions of the other teenage girls working at the stables, she comes to the conclusion that she'll never have love. She vows to learn about love and says that if she had a beautiful face like the girls in her class, she'd never cover it with makeup. The teasing from boys at school continues.

Then comes the day when plans for reconstructive surgery begins. Dr. Conley examines her and proposes the "pedestal" method, which means a flap of skin from her stomach will be cut partially free and grafted to her hand, remaining also attached at its original place, until the skin begins to grow. Then the skin would be cut free of her stomach and grafted to her face. This would be the first of a series of operations to rebuild her face;



the process would be complete in about ten years. She looks the procedure up in a book and finds herself completely without hope. Then Lucy is referred to another surgeon, Dr. Baker, who proposes cutting skin from Lucy's hip and grafting it to her jaw. She opts for that surgery and hopes that the operation will "fix" her.

Lucy talks briefly of her friend, Teresa. One day, Teresa asks if Lucy is dying, saying that all their classmates believe it to be true. Lucy wants to ask, but when she arrives home her mother has turtlenecks for her to wear during the summer, explaining that the higher neck will help hide some of the scarring. Lucy doesn't ask about Teresa's comment.

With her face hidden behind a mask, Lucy wonders how anyone without her deformity can ever be sad. She says she doesn't understand why other people complain so much and that they should be happy with their lives. She notes being in the hospital with a girl who'd been injured in a boating accident, saying the girl had lived and was making too much fuss over what would be a short-term problem. After trick-or-treating, she slips back into depression and says she deserves nothing else. It's interesting that Lucy becomes so unsympathetic of others as she faces this crisis. It's also interesting that she tends to believe that it's wrong of her to want something other than her situation.



Chapters 9 and 10, World of Unknowing and The Habits of Self-Consciousness

Chapters 9 and 10, World of Unknowing and The Habits of Self-Consciousness Summary and Analysis

It's while Lucy is considering her reconstructive surgery options that her friend Kelly moves away and gives Lucy her horse, Sure Swinger. Lucy spends lots of time with the horse and sometimes slips into his stall while he's lying down, careful not to spook him, and lies down on top of him. Then Swinger develops an infection and soon dies.

Lucy says that as a young child, she and Sarah would always rush to the door when her father came home from work. As they began to age, the greetings were less enthusiastic. Then Lucy has a premonition that a day will come when her father will no longer be there for her. She says that after that revelation, she always made it a point to greet him, even when she didn't feel like it. Then Lucy's father becomes ill, and what was to have been a short hospital stay, turns out to be where he remains until he dies.

Lucy goes to New York Medical Center for her first reconstructive surgery and is shocked to see that the other patients are having plastic surgical procedures such as nose jobs and face lifts. After her surgery, she meets a boy named Michael, who has injured his back jumping from a second-story window into a pool. Lucy notes that if they were at school he would be among those boys tormenting her, but that here, in the hospital, he wouldn't be mean. That thought makes her feel a bit triumphant. She also compares her situation to Michael's. She says that he's going to be paralyzed for the rest of his life because of a stupid stunt. After she leaves the hospital, she wonders if he ever pictures himself standing above the water and planning to make the jump. She says that she thinks about it.

Lucy doesn't look too closely at her face while she's in the hospital and her appearance later isn't much of an improvement. She says that to protect herself, she works at becoming uncaring of what others think. Toward this end, she begins carrying around thick books of poetry and her classmates - now a bit more mature - mostly leave her alone.

Lucy begins showing horses for her boss, Hans, from the Diamond D. She says she has to put her hair up, meaning she can't use it to conceal her face. She puts that off until the last minute, though she knows no one at the shows would say anything mean to her about her appearance. She says the point is that she no longer needs anyone to say anything to her because she's capable of beating down her self-esteem all by herself. As she continues to battle through operations aimed at reconstruction, she pins all her hopes on the face she believes she'll have someday.



Lucy visits her father only once during his hospital stay, and she later says she isn't sure why they stayed away. Lucy says that she dreads the call that will alert them of her father's death because she can imagine the reactions of grief among her family but when the call does come, the family experiences a huge sense of relief.

Lucy develops a crush on a classmate named Danny, who has a crush on a girl named Katherine. Lucy says that she knows Danny will never return her affection and so it's alright that he should want Katherine. She says she can even be glad of her face because it makes the "error of earthly desire" evident. She can hold onto this deep thought for a short time, then admits that she's just plain depressed.

It's during this time that Lucy comes to realize and accept that what's happened to her isn't any sort of punishment. She does come to wonder if everything she loves dies - a thought fueled by the loss of Swinger. It's also during this time that she realizes just how much she misses her father and what a gap his death has left in her life. She says that the grief she felt for the horse was pure and uncomplicated but that which she feels for her father is much more complex.



Chapters 11 and 12, Cool and Mirrors

Chapters 11 and 12, Cool and Mirrors Summary and Analysis

Lucy begins school at Sarah Lawrence with trepidation but is quickly hooked on poetry and becomes known among the best poets on campus. Lucy wants to be a doctor, but her mother urges her to take writing classes and Lucy, thinking that a fiction class would be too difficult, takes poetry, where she excels. She says that she often pulls someone aside, reciting some piece of poetry she's read and expecting that it's going to hold as profound a meaning for that person as it does for her.

Meanwhile, she hopes that she'll meet someone who can see past the lack of beauty and who can love her anyway. She says there's little chance of that because the female-male ratio is three-to-one, and many of those boys are, for one reason or another, unavailable. It's during the end of her freshman year and the following summer that some changes take place. Lucy's mother has to leave her job in the nursing home, which means Lucy no longer has insurance and has to sign up for Medicaid. Her mother also sells the house and takes a small apartment, prompting Lucy to often spend vacation times with friends rather than returning home. With her new status as a Medicaid patient, she and Dr. Baker put off her next surgery until the following summer. When the time comes, she finds that Dr. Baker, though insistent that he will remain her primary doctor, cites a lack of time and passes her off to two other doctors for the surgery. She says she wants to know if it's because she's on Medicaid and wants to tell him of her fears, but doesn't.

When she wakes in St. Vincent following the surgery, she discovers that she has a tracheotomy - which she hadn't expected - and that she has a long row of staples at the graft site on her hip - which she also hadn't expected. She says the site of the staples made it appear that they had "sawed off" her leg and reattached it with "an office stapler." She is soon having trouble breathing and has to rely on written notes to ask for help. One doctor checks the oxygen level in her blood and then, doubting the low reading, checks it again before ordering her sent to ICU to be put on a respirator. The nurse and intern transporting her get lost, and once there, people talk strangely to her, which she eventually learns is because they believe her to be deaf.

Through all this, she's had little time to think about her appearance and after she's released from the hospital finds that the graft this time stretches from ear-to-ear and is horribly swollen. One day a beggar asks for money, looks at her, hands her a dollar and walks away. She says her self-esteem at that point sinks as low as she can imagine. That graft is also absorbed, leaving her with nothing to show for the operation and recovery time. Next, they take a piece of her hip bone, grind it to form a jaw bone, and graft it into place. Unlike the skin grafts, the bone doesn't swell and the improvement is immediate. Lucy says she feels better about her appearance, but the self-consciousness doesn't drop away as she'd always thought it would.



As a college graduate, Lucy remains a virgin. Lucy is unable to see sex as happening because of a lack of opportunity. She tries to convince herself that she'll replace this need for a lover with poetry and begins the MFA program at the University of Iowa, where she meets Jude. Though she doesn't believe she's in love with him nor he with her, she says the relationship is sexually charged. At his urging, she dresses differently and eventually begins to see herself as a woman. She says the dressing up becomes an obsession and that she even dresses up to go to the supermarket. Then Jude breaks up with her, and she takes a long look at herself in the mirror, realizing what she's been ignoring - that her bone graft is "going the way of the other grafts." Lucy spends hours working out, seeing her body as the one thing she has control over.

Lucy meets with Dr. Baker regarding what to do next but finds that Medicaid won't pay because of an array of issues, ranging from the fact that she has a teaching fellowship to the fact that she now doesn't live in the state where the surgery is to be performed. Dr. Baker sends her to another surgeon at the University of Iowa hospital. Here, Lucy would have to incur the bills, then submit them to find out if the Medicaid system would pay. The surgeon wants to use the pedestal system and promises she can remain in the hospital for the six weeks her hand would be attached to her face. She meets a patient in the process of having a nose rebuilt by this system, is repulsed and ashamed of her reaction, and is told she can pay off the bills at one-hundred dollars a month until she's forty-two. She promises to think about it but knows she won't do it. She spends some time thinking that she's tired and seems on the verge of simply living with the situation, but then applies for funding in New York, and Dr. Baker performs another graft. It's the same routine - a few months of looking horribly swollen, a short time of looking acceptable and then noting that the graft is being reabsorbed.

It's after this failed graft attempt that Lucy decides to go to Europe. She works and saves to buy a trip to Berlin, where an old college friend lives. There she applies for jobs teaching English, starts working at learning the language, and cultivates the art of getting lost as a safe adventure. With no job offers, she moves to London with her sister, Susie. London is like high school all over again with young men, usually drunk, following her and whistling until the sight of her face prompts cruel jokes.

Then Susie visits a plastic surgeon, Dr. Oliver Fenton, who practices in Scotland. She fears another failure but spurred by the continued jeers of men and the fact that the surgery would be free, she agrees. The plan is to insert a balloon under the skin of her face, reconstruct the jaw bone, then pull the extra skin down to cover the surgery. The operation takes longer than expected, and Lucy is paranoid when she wakes - a situation that doesn't wear off for several days. Then, probably due to the radiation treatments all those years ago and aggravated by the long, stressful surgery, Lucy's other jaw begins to deteriorate. She is faced with another surgery, and it takes a lot of careful consideration for her to decide that she will have the surgery. She moves to Scotland to be nearer the hospital and goes through the balloon process this time as an outpatient.

With this surgery completed, Lucy says that she's disappointed with her face. Through an inheritance from her grandmother, Lucy has enough money to travel a little and to



live independently. Then one day she is sitting in a café with an attractive man, and she realizes that in the movies a dead person sometimes doesn't realize they're dead until they can't see themselves in the mirror. Lucy now realizes herself that society dictates that everyone must look like someone else. She says she wants to tell this man of her discovery, but that he's caught up in a thought of his own, and she doesn't want to interrupt. Instead, she looks into the window behind him, "to see if I could, now, recognize myself."

While Lucy has begun wearing the shabby clothes as part of her new "artist" look, she does admit that there's some deeper thought going on. However, she admits that she's believes her manner of dress means that she's "beat others to the finish line" by making it evident that she already knows she's ugly. Though she's come to a point where her peers are no longer teasing and mean, she's not yet past expecting cruel teasing to happen or at least conscious that others think of her as ugly. It's also interesting that through her budding understanding of poetry, she's come to learn that her attitudes during the years of chemotherapy - that simply being alive was a good thing - were acceptable.

Lucy, having spent so much of her childhood without true friends, longs for someone to love her. She eventually comes to believe that the fact that she has so many friends but no lover means that she is unworthy, unlovable, and ugly. Just as Lucy had hid her fears behind her shabby "artist" attire, she now begins to dress provocatively, prompted by Jude. She says that once she starts, she can't stop, though she admits this is a way to hide "her fear of being ugly."



Characters

Lucy Grealy

The author of the story. At age nine, Lucy is diagnosed with cancer, though it's years before she associates her illness with cancer. The name of the disease is Ewings sarcoma and the result is that she's forced to undergo surgery to remove a section of her jaw bone. She then spends two years having daily radiation treatments and chemotherapy every Friday. Through the radiation and chemo and subsequent surgeries, Lucy waits for the facial reconstruction to be completed and to have the life - and the face - she's supposed to have.

As a child facing these major treatments, Lucy learns some important things about herself and her family. The first is that she's "in this" - meaning the situation - alone. She says that even though her mother is worried and feels helpless to do anything to change the danger Lucy faces, her mother can't undergo the treatments for her. She comes to learn that her father also feared for her life, though he shows it differently. The support of her family is vital, but in the end it's Lucy who has to withstand the rigors of the treatments and then deal with the stares and teasing of other children. The taunts grow more serious as Lucy ages and the boys' tease each other about being her boyfriend. Though Lucy makes friends and finds herself much more accepted in college, she feels there's something missing from her life because she hasn't had a lover. She comes to equate the lack of sex in her life with the lack of love. Later in life, she moves around the world, undergoes more cosmetic surgeries and finds herself coming to terms with her appearance and her situation.

Lucy dies in 2002, of an apparent heroin overdose, perhaps brought on by the years of prescription painkillers she needed after the numerous surgeries.

Mrs. Grealy

Lucy's mother. Lucy doesn't go into great detail about her mother's thoughts and actions regarding Lucy's illness. There are indications that she's worried. For example, Mrs. Grealy goes to the hospital every afternoon while Lucy spends an extended stay in the hospital. Lucy says that her mother is the "Visitor Extraordinaire," taking a few minutes to talk about Lucy's health and then sitting quietly. While it might seem Lucy would have rather to be entertained, she says that she wishes other visitors would be more like her mother.

Arguably, the most interesting point about Lucy's mother is that she seems to mask her fear for Lucy's life during the illness by urging Lucy to be brave. It seems evident that she deals with fear by refusing to seem afraid. Toward that end, she also wants Lucy to show no fear. After the second chemo treatment, Lucy goes directly to bed. Her mother tells her that she has to be certain of the reason for going to bed. She seems to want to



be sure that Lucy reacts only to the real symptoms of her illness and that she doesn't show any fear. In some ways, Mrs. Grealy may seem cold, but Lucy talks of her mother's whispered comfort during a particular chemo. Mrs. Grealy touched Lucy and whispers to her daughter not to cry.

Mr. Grealy

Lucy's father. He is in the news business and seems much less involved in Lucy's treatments than her mother, but Lucy notes that her father and mother put aside their typical bickering to answer questions as she goes into the hospital for the first surgery. Lucy notes that he sometimes talks to her and seems to want her to reassure him that she's alright. He dies after the worst of her danger is past, and she notes that it's some time before she comprehends the depth of the loss.

Evan

Lucy's friend from the neighborhood. Lucy and Evan are playing an "intricate game of jungle" in Evan's living room when his father comes in and talks to her briefly about chemotherapy. Lucy notes that Evan's mother had died of cancer and that it must have been difficult for her father to see a child with the same disease, the same prognosis. He doesn't pursue the conversation and Lucy - herself unaware of what's going to happen during the process - tells Evan that her hair will "turn green" and further embellishes her story with the suggestion that her eyes will turn purple. Lucy says that Evan's father was the second person who offered her a bit of information and that she again turned away from knowing.

Derek

The boy who is on Ward 10 during some of Lucy's stay. He has asthma and Lucy counts on him for entertainment during many of the long days spent waiting for her treatments to begin. She says that she later learns that Derek lives in an unstable home, and the doctors keep him in the hospital more than might otherwise have been necessary for this reason.

Mary

The head nurse who tries to talk to Lucy about her upcoming surgery. Lucy says that Mary would never lie to her about the intensity of an upcoming shot. She says other nurses would say that it wouldn't hurt much or that she should rub it until it was better. Mary would joke that the shot "isn't going to hurt me at all," letting Lucy know that she understood the upcoming pain and sympathized, but couldn't do anything to eliminate it. Lucy appreciates this tactic much more than those who promise it won't hurt.



Dr. Woolf

The physician who oversees Lucy's weekly chemotherapy treatments. Lucy says that Dr. Woolf scares her, but her mother says that the doctor is rude. Lucy says that she supposes he is rude because he is almost always on the telephone and talking to the nurse. He seems to seldom pay any attention to Lucy, but he does talk to her mother.

Hannah

The cleaning lady in Dr. Woolf's office. Lucy sits with Hannah after chemo each week as her mother goes to get the car. Each week Hannah offers Lucy a cup of tea. Lucy tells Hannah that her nose hurts and says Hannah is the only one who believes her. On Lucy's final day of treatment, she cries and Hannah does make her a cup of tea.

Jude

Lucy's first sexual partner. Lucy says that there's no love between them but that the sex is intense. It's at Jude's urging that Lucy begins dressing in a very provocative manner. She says that she enjoys it because it takes emphasis from her face. Lucy has problems with her graft and says that's the reason Jude breaks up with her.

Michael

The young man who is in the hospital when Lucy is recovering from a major surgery. He is paralyzed, having jumped from a second-story roof into a pool. She notes that he refuses to take his medication and argues with the hospital staff. She wonders if he spends as much time thinking about his accident as she spends thinking about his accident.

Joni Friedman

The girl who bumps heads with Lucy, first bringing the problem of her cancer to light.



Objects/Places

Diamond D Stables

A rather dilapidated stable where Lucy worked for several years from the time she was fourteen.

Rockland County

Where Diamond D Stables were located.

Pascack Valley Hospital

Where Lucy spends the first night in the hospital, awaiting what they believe to be a minor surgery.

The Strang Clinic

Where Lucy and her parents go for treatment by Dr. John Conley.

Columbian Presbyterian Hospital

Known as the "Babies Hospital," this is where Lucy is to have the emergency surgery performed when her family first learns of her illness.

Ward 10

The ward of the "Babies Hospital," where Lucy spends much of her time over the early months of her illness.

Recovery

The hospital rooms set aside for patients recovering from surgery and where Lucy wakes after her major surgery to find that she has a tube in her throat.

Ewings Sarcoma

The cancer Lucy has.



The Queen Mary

The ship on which Lucy and her family come to America.

Chicken Chops

The nickname Lucy's mother calls each of the children when they're sick.

Sarah Lawrence

The college Lucy attends. She says she feels as if she belongs and that it's "an unusual, curious feeling."

The University of Iowa

Where Lucy earns her MFA in poetry.



Themes

Courage

Though Lucy's level of courage can largely be attributed to her mother, there's no doubt that she does withstand a great deal of pain and suffering and seems to do so generally without complaint. Even at a young age, Lucy is aware that what she's withstanding isn't normal and draws comfort from that fact. For example, when children are teasing her or adults are staring, she sometimes draws strength from the fact that she has undergone painful surgeries and treatments that most other people couldn't have withstood. Her knowledge that this is so seems to come from her mother.

From the very first trip to the hospital, Lucy's mother tells her that she's brave and reinforces the idea that crying is shameful. Her mother says that Lucy's sister would not have been so brave. Just as Lucy is to undergo a bone marrow test, her parents prepare to leave. Lucy asks if they are really not going to stay with her, and they ask if she's afraid. She says that it's at that moment she realizes that she's "in this alone."

There are several times that Lucy pulls on her endurance to reassure her parents. When her mother believes that Lucy wants a wig, she says that she'll buy it - despite the expense. Lucy overhears her mother say that it's because she believes the wig might make Lucy happy, prompting Lucy to assure her mother that she's happy and that there's no need to spend that money.

Acceptance

Lucy struggles to accept her situation throughout her life and seems always to be seeking a way to bring herself to a point where her appearance doesn't matter. She does succeed in this to a certain degree through an array of methods. For example, as a young teenager, she convinces herself that her face has brought the "error of earthly" desires to her attention and that she can now focus on the deeper meaning of life, love and beauty. She admits that she becomes "pretentious," carrying around thick books that she only sometimes reads. It does seem likely that it's through this pretence that she first begins to develop a love of the written word, especially poetry. That poetry becomes another method of accepting her situation in college. Having taken a poetry class at her mother's urging, she finds that she enjoys reading and writing. She sometimes finds a particular passage with a meaning so intense that she needs to share it.

Lucy continues to believe that what others think of her is what makes her less than whole. Though she spends some time with one particular lover and then goes through a series of one-night stands, she admits that anyone who might love her becomes someone she doesn't want to be with. Though she seems to recognize this, she can't seem to come to terms with herself to seek out a life that will make her happy. While it's



easy to get caught up in the fact that many other people don't accept Lucy, it's important not to overlook the fact that Lucy also doesn't accept herself.

Fear

Lucy's story is a story of overcoming fear, but there's no doubt that fears play a huge role in her life. Though she is very young when she's diagnosed, Lucy does understand that her mother and father are afraid for her. She comes to this knowledge unexpectedly and doesn't really seem to fully grasp why they are afraid, though she probably understands better when she discovers that the survival rate for her type of cancer is only five percent. Lucy's mother deals with her fear by urging Lucy to put on a brave front. It seems her father deals with his by teasing her, though Lucy doesn't go into detail on this point.

It's perfectly understandable that Lucy would fear rejection, but there's no doubt that this fear controls much of what she accomplishes in her life. Perhaps it's easiest to see this fear in its rawest form - that she uses her hair as a screen to hide her face as much as possible, even when she's in a situation in which she knows no one will tease or torment her about her looks. Lucy herself goes through extensive surgical work and treatments before she looks carefully in the mirror. While she doesn't define it as fear, she does say that she intuitively knew she couldn't handle what she was going to see. She spends so much of her life avoiding her own reflection that as she draws the story to a close, she wonders if she can recognize herself in a café window.



Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person from a limited point of view. Because this is actually an autobiographical sketch a part of Grealy's life, the first person limited view is the only possibility. This does leave some holes, and some readers may be distracted by the lack of details on some points. For example, Lucy's mother is introduced and there are a few passages that talk about her actions and reactions to her daughter's illness, but these descriptions are superficial at best. There are no details about Lucy's relationship with her mother or other family members. She briefly mentions a brother's problems but then moves on, leaving the reader to wonder or guess about the larger dynamics of this family.

Tone

Grealy's book describes her life, focusing largely on her diagnosis of and subsequent treatment for cancer at age nine and going through a series of reconstructive operations lasting into adulthood. While the book may seem to be about her life, the afterward - written by Grealy's friend Ann Pratchet - cites Grealy's indication that she never meant it to be such. Pratchet cites a book event in which Grealy is said to have told fans that she wanted her book judged on its literary merit rather than as a sad story about a tragic event. With that in mind, it's easy to find qualities and faults with the writing. While some readers may be able to get to that point in evaluating the book, there's no doubt that the storyline will be what most readers remember. The story is tragic but most readers will find it inspirational. However, with the knowledge that Grealy died at age thirty-nine of an apparent drug overdose, readers may find it more difficult to find inspiration in the book and may see more of the tragedy of Grealy's life - not of the cancer itself but of the subsequent search for acceptance. The ending of this story is not the end of Grealy's life. The book has an epiphany ending that presents an ideal of acceptance.

The storyline focuses on Grealy's life as she faces cancer and reconstructive surgeries. However, the reader can gain almost as much insight into her life by the details that seem to be omitted. For example, Grealy has a twin sister and the tie between twins is typically very strong, even though the two girls had vastly different childhoods because of Grealy's cancer. But Grealy talks little of her sister and never mentions that usual bond between twins. The omission could be made in an effort to spare her sister the notoriety or it could be that in this case the bond simply wasn't there. Either way, the omission seems to speak volumes on this point.

Structure

The book is comprised of twelve chapters of roughly fifteen to twenty-five pages each. The chapters are titled "Pony Party," "Luck," "The Petting Zoo," "The Tao of Laugh-In,"



"Fear Itself," "Life on Earth," "Door Number Two," "Masks," "Truth and Beauty," "World Unknowing," "The Habits of Self-Consciousness," "Cool," and "Mirrors." Though the titles are indicative of what's included in that chapter, the meanings are typically not to be understood until after the reader is well into (or even finished with) that chapter.

There is also a prologue written by Grealy herself and an afterward written by her friend and colleague, Ann Pratchet. The prologue offers a look at a specific time of her life. The afterward provides some information about Grealy, including that she died in 2002, though Pratchet gives no details of her friend's death, saying only that it wasn't cancer but sadness that caused the loss.

Quotes

"I was accorded a certain amount of respect in my neighborhood, not only because I once jumped out of a second-story window, but also because I would kiss an old and particularly smelly neighborhood dog on the lips whenever asked. I was a tomboy par excellence." Chapter One, Luck, Page 15

"Or perhaps that knock set in motion a chain of physical events that created an opportunity for the cancer to grow which it might not otherwise have found. Sometimes it is as difficult to know what the past holds as it is to know the future, just as an answer to a riddle seems so obvious once it is revealed, it seems curious to me now that I passed through all those early moments with no idea of their weight." Chapter One, Luck, Page 28

"There were definite problems to face here, but to me they seemed entirely manageable: lie still when you're told to, be brave. It didn't seem like so much to ask, really, considering what I got in return: attention, absence from school, occasional presents, and, though I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone even if I could have articulated it, freedom from the tensions of home." Chapter Two, Petting Zoo, Page 38

"Bizarrely, after they removed half my jaw, I limped. It was my first day out of bed, and I was going to traverse the entire four feet to the bathroom. This required a certain amount of preparation, of disconnecting tubes and wires. 'Why are you limping? They didn't do anything to your legs, Chicken-Chops.'" Chapter Three, The Tao of Laugh-In, Page 56

"Every swallow left me breathless, two swallows exhausted me, three and then four made me feel I should be congratulated. Instead they made an embarrassing chart and pinned it on the door, a Magic Marker record of every cc I consumed. They thought threat to never take out my IV would impel me, but they misjudged. I gladly would have spent the rest of my life on an IV if they would just leave me alone." Chapter Three, The Tao of Laugh-In, Page 56

"I quickly learned to judge food not by what it tasted like in eating but how it tasted when I threw it back up. Vanilla pudding was best though it turned an unfortunate color, making me opt for chocolate for purely aesthetic reasons." Chapter Four, Fear Itself, Page 79

"The only time I was ever completely myself was on Fridays. There was no way to escape the pain. Yet with each successive visit to Dr. Woolf's examining room, my



feelings of shame and guilt for failing not to suffer became more unbearable." Chapter five, Life on Earth, Page 90

"I knew I was going bald, I knew I was pale and painfully thin, I know I had a big scar on my face. In short, I was different-looking, and I knew my face had an effect on other people that I could sometimes use to my advantage. But I was keeping myself ignorant of the details of my appearance, of the specific logic of it. My intuition must have known it was better this way." Chapter Six, Door Number Two, Page 104

"I felt secure in that office, but I also felt lonely, and for the first time I definitively identified the source of my unhappiness as being ugly." Chapter Seven, Masks, Page 126

"I barely remembered what like had been like before. No more shots, no more Dr. Woolf, no more throwing up. I was afraid, and I was afraid that I was afraid. Why wasn't I happy, the way I was supposed to be? What was wrong with me? I didn't want it to continue, did I? No, I knew I didn't, but life after chemo seemed unimaginable." Chapter Seven, Masks, Page 136

"If he were at school, would he be one of the boys who made fun of me? I stole sideways glances at him, his long wavy hair, the stubble on his chin and upper lip, and thought that, probably, ye, he would be. Yet here we were lying next to each other, both of us in a lot of pain, and I knew that here he would never dream of saying anything mean to me." Chapter Nine, World of Unknowing, Page 173

From across the parking lot outside my window I could hear a Herman's Hermits song blaring out, 'Something tells me I'm into something good.' I took it as an omen. For days beforehand I'd been a nervous wreck, but suddenly I felt I belonged. It was an unusual, curious feeling" Chapter Eleven, Cool, Page 191

"I became convinced that anyone who wanted to have a real relationship with me was automatically someone I didn't want. It was the classic Groucho Marx paradox: I didn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Chapter Twelve, Mirrors, Page 208

Topics for Discussion

How is Lucy's cancer diagnosed? What does she later say about that initial incident that prompted the diagnosis? When does Lucy realize she had cancer? Why is she "brave?" What comfort does she take in this?

Describe Lucy's attitudes about hospitals in general? About Ward 10?

What does Lucy know about the impending chemotherapy sessions? Who tries to talk to her about this? What does she say about her decision to ignore the details?

How does Lucy deal with her facial deformity? With the loss of her hair? Why does her mother take her to be fitted for a wig? Why does she offer to buy it? What is Lucy's reaction to the possibility of a wig?

How do children react to Lucy's illness and changed appearance? How do adults react? How does Lucy handle taunts and stares? Is it ultimately effective for her?

What is Lucy's reaction when faced with the "pedestal" reconstruction process? What does she choose instead? Why? What are her expectations? Are they met?

Lucy spends her entire life waiting for the day when her face will be reconstructed. Why? What happens when she's finished with the process? Do you believe Lucy has anything to live for once she's finished the surgeries?

Who is Derek? Mary? Michael? Jude? Sarah? Dr. Woolf? How do each of them impact Lucy's life?