

Airhead #2: Being Nikki Study Guide

Airhead #2: Being Nikki by Meg Cabot

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Plot Summary

"Airhead #2: Being Nikki" is the story of Em, an average girl whose brain has been transplanted into a supermodel's body. She learns how to navigate the duties of "being Nikki" such as modeling, juggling school, work, and boys. In addition, Em also has to figure out exactly why her brain was used to replace Nikki's and what "crime" that Nikki committed against the corporation she worked for, Stark. At the same time, Em tries to duck Nikki's ex-boyfriend, the son of the head of the Stark Corporation, and reunite with her old friend, Christopher, who doesn't realize what's been going on.

Em is safe until a man claiming to be her brother shows up at her apartment. He tells her that their mother has disappeared and been gone for three months - exactly the amount of time that has elapsed since Nikki's accident. Steven, the brother, doesn't seem to believe entirely the official story about Nikki having amnesia, though it takes him some time to confront Em about this. Em then tells him the story in the best way that she can, still resolving to help him find his mother.

Christopher and his cousin, Felix, are the best computer hackers that Em knows, and will help Em and Steven find Mrs. Howard on the condition that Em/Nikki helps give them access to the Stark website, so that they can bring it down to avenge Em's death, as Christopher has still not realized what really happened to Nikki. While Em balances their search with modeling for the "Stark's Angels" lingerie fashion show, she is harassed by another model who claims that Nikki has been emailing her boyfriend.

When Em and her roommate Lulu give a party, everything comes together. Christopher realizes that Nikki is really Em and they reunite happily. The model's boyfriend shows up with proof that "Nikki" actually has been emailing him, and Felix communicates that he's traced Mrs. Howard to the home of Dr. Fong, outside the city. The group goes to investigate and finds not only Steven and Nikki's mother, but Nikki herself - transplanted into a decidedly dowdier body. Infuriated that someone else has "her" body, Nikki attacks Em, but is stopped by the rest of the group. When Em steps out to check on Brandon, Nikki's ex, he pulls her aside and tells her he knows everything, including the fact that Nikki - whom Stark wanted dead - is still alive. To protect everyone, he makes her break up with Christopher, then taking everyone else to his private island, claiming that he will tell his father if they don't comply.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

The "Airhead" series tells the story of Emerson, an average girl, who had a freak accident and whose brain has been transplanted into the body of supermodel Nikki. In "Being Nikki," the second book in the series, Em tries to figure out exactly what happened and why Stark, the company for which Nikki works, has an interest in keeping her alive, but with somebody else's brain. The book opens in the midst of a photo shoot, as the photographer tries to capture the perfect shot while Em struggles in the cold water. Brandon Stark, the real Nikki's boyfriend and now her ex, watches from shore. Em wonders how bad it would be to actually die, but worries about who would take care of Nikki's - and now her - dog, Cosabella. In the end, though she plunges into the icy water, they get the shot and she is able to stop for the day.

Back in her hotel room, Em gets a call from her roommate, Lulu, who says that a blond man came by to see her. Since Stark has explained Nikki's disappearance and reappearance in terms of amnesia, nobody close to Nikki thinks it's strange that her personality has changed since the operation. Neither Lulu nor Em is sure who the man is, but Em hopes that it is her former best friend, Christopher, who believes (as everybody but Em's family does) that Em has died. She thinks back to when they used to play video games, and particularly one called JourneyQuest, together. Meanwhile, Brandon is still trying to re-seduce Nikki, and manages to kiss her. However, he pulls away when he finds the scar on the back of her head, which was of course caused by the surgery he doesn't know about, and Em/Nikki uses the excuse to explain that she needs to go home, back to New York, rather than staying with him on the island.

While taking a private jet back home, Em's sister Frida texts her about a seeming emergency. However, when Em calls her, she finds out that the only "emergency" is that their parents won't allow Frida to go to cheerleading camp over Christmas break, as their feminist mother thinks it is demeaning to women. Em finally arrives back in New York to find the blond man waiting for her. It is not Christopher, though, but somebody else, who claims to be Nikki's brother.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

For those unfamiliar to the Airhead series, Chapters 1-3 provide all of the necessary background to follow the story's trajectory. They provide character information, and demonstrate the incongruities between "Nikki's" outside and "Em's" inside. These incongruities alone would be enough to drive the story forward; however, the author immediately presents other obstacles for the heroine, as well. First of all, Brandon, who wants to reunite with Nikki, disgusts Em. However, as the heir to the Stark Corporation, he is important and could be dangerous under the wrong circumstances. The appearance of Steven, as well as the mystery of "their" missing mother, also provides

dramatic tension to move the story along. Finally, the tension between Em's former life and her new life, demonstrated by her visit home, her feelings for Christopher, and her relationship with her little sister, foreshadow the characteristics that will create obstacles in resolving the problems that "Nikki" faces.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Shocked that Nikki has a brother she didn't know about, Em brings Steven, the brother, up to the apartment, where Lulu flirts with him. However, Steven has more somber news, and is very upset with "Nikki": their mother has been missing for three months, and Em has ignored all of Steven's messages, because of all the fake relatives who have tried to contact her after her amnesia was made public. Steven talks about their former life and is horrified that Nikki has hidden or denied so much of it during her new life in New York. Suddenly suspicious, Em asks if he can prove that he is her brother. He pulls out his wallet and shows her several family photos of Nikki at various stages in her life.

One of these is a photo of Nikki during an awkward phase, convincing Em that he really is related to the supermodel. She offers to hire private detectives to help find their mother, as the police have been no help. Meanwhile, Lulu starts talking about a party that they'll be throwing soon, and invites Steven to stay with them. Surprised, Em reiterates the invitation, and Steven accepts.

Lulu reveals her crush on Steven to Em immediately after he leaves. Aware that they are being spied on through various bugging devices in the house, Em hasn't been able to tell Lulu anything about her suspicions about the surgery, but Lulu has justified the changes in her roommate by thinking that the accident caused some kind of "soul swap." Determined to help her real family, Em takes Cosa for a walk to her parents' house, but as she does, she gets a call from her agent, Rebecca, who has what she considers great news: Em/Nikki has been chosen to be the lead in the Stark's Angels fashion show, modeled off of the Victoria's Secret fashion show. This annoys Em more than anything, and she hangs up as she reaches her parents' apartment.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The issue of family comes to the forefront in Chapters 4-6. Nikki, of course, is not expected to remember anyone; however, her brother knows her so well that he doesn't know what to make of her new personality. Moreover, the understanding if slightly ditzy Lulu seems to understand Em/Nikki better than anyone around her, making her a sympathetic character despite her glamorous outside. This reinforces the interior/exterior duality that Cabot plays upon throughout the narrative. Furthermore, Chapters 4-6 reinforce the discomfort that Em feels with her new life. She is not at all pleased about being chosen as an "angel," and is more concerned with Steven's missing mother than the real Nikki would have been, though the recent events of her life have caused her to be more suspicious of people than she was before.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

Em returns home, bearing a huge bag of gifts for Christmas that she can now afford, due to Nikki's generous salaries and enormous bank account. She tries to convince her mother to let Frida go to cheerleading camp, but her mother stands firm, wanting them to have a family Christmas in Florida with their grandmother. Em is sure that this apartment is also bugged, and uses a device she's purchased to confirm this, though she doesn't share it with her family. She returns to the conversation to realize that she is not invited to spend Christmas with their grandmother, because the grandmother necessarily thinks that Em has died. Distraught, Em runs outside into the snow and cries beneath her sunglasses, even though it is night. Suddenly, however, Christopher approaches her.

Despite some hints that Em has given him over the past few months, Christopher still doesn't realize that it is Em, and not Nikki, to whom he is speaking. He offers her an umbrella, and she accepts. They go up to Christopher's apartment together, which she finds is also bugged, and she is touched to see an old school photo of herself dominates his room. He asks her why she was crying, but she can't immediately think of an acceptable answer.

Eventually, in the next chapter, Em/Nikki explains that her mother is missing, and uses this as an excuse for her earlier tears. Christopher says that he knows someone who can help, and turns on his computer. They chat with his young cousin, Felix, who is such a good hacker that he has been placed under house arrest for work that he did earlier. To find Nikki's mother, they will need her Social Security number, which Em of course does not have immediately handy. In return, though, they want access to a username and password for the Stark mainframe website. When Em asks why, Christopher tells her that they are planning to take the site down.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Though readers may have begun the book envious of Em, who now seems to have it all, Chapters 7-9 drive home the tragedies and setbacks associated with her new life. To begin with, she is not supposed to have contact with her real family, with whom she is extremely close, and the separation from which makes her very upset. Though she has seemed accepting of her fate to this point in the narrative, the news about Christmas drives Em over the edge. It is in this state that she meets Christopher again, reinforcing the importance and support he offers her - even though he doesn't know who she really is.

Secrets are also revealed as Em goes into his apartment for the first time since her surgery. There, she realizes that he did have very strong feelings for her, romantic or

not, by his featuring her photo in his bedroom and his desire to "take down" Stark. He's also shown to be a good guy, as he doesn't hit on Nikki at all and tries to help her with her struggle to find Mrs. Howard, even though she does, to a certain extent, represent the evil Stark for him, as the face of the Stark Corporation.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

Em goes back to school in Chapter 10, where she is very jealous of a girl called McKayla, who has become close to Christopher in the months since Em's "death." However, the more Em considers the situation, the more she realizes that Christopher wants to crash the site as revenge for her death, which pleases her. In the meantime, Em runs into Frida, who pulls her into a broom closet and tells her that the entire family has been so upset since she stormed out the other day that they are willing to compromise and stay in New York for Christmas. However, Em is suspicious of this, because she knows that Frida just wants to be invited to the party Em/Nikki and Lulu are having.

In class, Em's former nemesis Whitney has started sucking up to her, which Em takes pleasure in, though she still can't stand her former bully. During class, the students have to give oral presentations, and Christopher's name is drawn at random. He does his presentation on Stark Corporation, listing and describing the many ways that it is evil, treating its employees and the communities it belongs to very badly. Meanwhile, Em gets a frantic text from Rebecca, telling her that the Stark Angels rehearsal is going on and demanding where she is.

In the following chapter, Em makes it to the rehearsal and is embarrassed to find herself wearing a bra made entirely of diamonds, though this is supposedly the show's biggest honor. Frida texts her a sad apology, which Em ignores, as a famous young singer, Gabriel, has written a song for "Nikki" and sings it as Em makes her entrance onto the catwalk for rehearsal. Before she steps out, though, another model called Veronica ferociously tells her to stop pursuing Justin, her boyfriend. Em writes her off as crazy, not knowing what the girl is talking about, and takes her turn behind her to practice. At the edge of the catwalk, however, she slips on something that she thinks is feathers, and plunges off the platform.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Thus far, readers may have forgotten that Em is still a teenager and still has to go to school. McKayla acts as a replacement for the previous incarnation of Em: a good student, a hard worker, and now very annoying to Em as she fears McKayla will take her place in Christopher's affections. It is only her memory of his apartment that reassures her.

These chapters also foreshadow a later issue that Em will have to face, though it is not yet clear what this obstacle is: however, Veronica is convinced that Nikki has been in contact with her boyfriend. Though Em knows this is not possible, as she has become Nikki, these emails will ultimately hold the clue to finding out the "real" Nikki's fate.

The theme of appearances versus reality is further underlined in this section by the fabricated romance between Gabriel and Em, who has hardly ever met him before; yet he has written her a love song and supposedly pines for her.



Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary

Em awakes in Chapter 13 in the Stark medical center, where Dr. Higgins is giving her a checkup. The doctor not only discusses "Nikki's" physical condition with Em, but also lectures her on contacting her old family and friends so much, confirming Em's earlier beliefs that she has been being bugged. She asks about Nikki's mother, Mrs. Howard, only to have the doctor tell her that Mrs. Howard was always an unstable mother, a drug addict who drank, a very bad mother, and Em realizes that the doctor will be no help with the search. The doctor's words, however, do cast some doubt on Em's earlier belief in Steven. As Em leaves the hospital, Gabriel is there waiting to take her to dinner. In the car, he confesses that it is all a press stunt set up by their agents; nevertheless, the two do have some kind of connection, and at dinner, Em and Gabriel kiss.

Back at her apartment, Em finds Steven waiting, wanting to talk to her. He has realized that she is not Nikki and wants to know what has happened. She gestures to the bugging equipment and creates enough ambient noise to tell him as much as she can. They realize that his mother disappeared around the same time as the accident. Now on her side, Steven (a military officer), tells her that her bug-detector equipment is junk; meanwhile, Em, thinking of Felix and Christopher, tells Steven that she knows who can find his mother.

Em takes Steven and Lulu, who insists on coming, to her high school, where they grab Christopher. Em tells him that she has a password for him, and they decide to go to Felix. Though Em sees Frida in the hallway, she tells her to go to class, and Em and the others take a taxi.

Chapters 13-15 Analysis

In this section, the narrative returns to the medical center, where the reader gets a view of the kindly, although misguided, doctor who oversaw Em's surgery. This goodwill is nevertheless worn away by the doctor's insistence that Em stop associating with the people in her former life. As the reader has now spent enough time getting to know these characters, such a proposal is very offensive and can be seen as almost impossible to follow. In addition, the doctor's characterization of Mrs. Howard rings somewhat false, casting some doubt on her reliability.

The body/mind duality upon which the narrative is based is reinforced here by Em's dinner with Gabriel. She kisses him, feeling that it is Nikki's body, and not her mind, taking over and taking action. She described her experience with Brandon, earlier, in similar terms.

Steven and Em become closer as the truth becomes clearer in Chapter 14. He is the first character to realize that something is wrong that cannot be explained away through

the facile explanations the Stark Corporation has offered. As such, he becomes a trustworthy ally for Em. In turn, he trusts her as well, even as she takes him to Felix, a young teenager, to find out the truth about his mother.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

In the cab, Em is embarrassed to tell Steven that they are relying on high school students to help them find out where his mother went. He, in turn, is very doubtful. Lulu insists on talking about party preparations as they drive, and again invites Steven to the party. Finally, the group arrives at Christopher's Aunt Jackie's house, where they find Felix in the basement. Only a young teenager, Felix nevertheless says that he can help them. Em gives him the username and password of the Stark doctor who treated her earlier.

In exchange, Felix gives them all the information he has found with Mrs. Howard's Social Security number, which is exactly nothing. She has not used credit cards or her bank accounts, no bodies have been found remotely matching her description, and cell phone records may be a dead end. He does know, however, that when she left the house, she took her dogs, signaling that she ran away, rather than left against her will. At that moment, Frida descends the stairs into the basement.

Later, as Em gets her makeup done, she explains to Frida about Steven. Gabriel arrives shortly thereafter, as does Brandon, who is accompanying his father. His father, the head of Stark Corporation, is handing out new computers, and gives one to everyone present. In a burst of bravery, Em asks Stark about her mother, but gets no response. Frida later throws a fit as she finds out that Em had dinner with Gabriel, who Frida has a crush on, and because she is still upset about Christmas. After Frida leaves, Veronica again approaches Em about emailing Justin, but Em responds sharply, saying that she will have Mr. Stark take care of Veronica if she keeps harassing her, and Veronica backs off.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

The narrative's conflicts build during Chapters 16-18, as the characters who have now been established must follow their quests to the end of the road. Mrs. Howard's disappearance takes center stage here, as the group works to figure out what happened; however, all they have found at the moment is a series of dead ends. Felix is clever enough to see that these dead ends in and of themselves might be indicative of running away, rather than a kidnapping. The increasing truthfulness that penetrates the book builds again when Em confronts Stark, though she is not rewarded for this, and similarly when she confesses to Frida about her dinner with Gabriel. However, Em is learning to control the power that her new position and body have given her, and is able to shut down Veronica's cattiness when she is threatened before the show.



Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 Summary

In the midst of preparation for their party, Em has to think about her grades for the semester, which have been very bad. She rationalizes however that she's had a lot going on. Meanwhile, Steven gives her an acoustic noise generator and an audio jammer to block the bugging in their apartment. The party starts and everyone is having a good time; Lulu and Steven dance intimately together. Em is shocked to see Frida dancing with Brandon Stark, as well as seeing Christopher. Christopher pulls her aside, into her room, and kisses her. As they are making out, he says her real name, and explains that he knows. However, Em is immediately upset that he only likes the "new" her and didn't like her before; they get into an argument, and argue about a variety of things, including Nikki's mom. Christopher apologizes and says he'll take care of everything, just as Brandon enters the bedroom.

Brandon tells Em that's she needed outside, and Em goes to find Frida with Gabriel, being sick. Meanwhile, she finally sees the messages to Justin that she's supposedly been sending, as Justin arrives at the party. There are indeed emails from "Nikki." When Justin speaks dismissively about Nikki, Christopher puts him in a chokehold to make him apologize. Then, Christopher tells them that Felix has sent them a lead, to a Dr. Fong living in Westchester.

Using Brandon's car by ditching the driver and leaving Brandon passed out in the back, Em, Christopher, Steven, and Lulu go to Westchester, ditching Gabriel and Frida along the way. When they arrive at Dr. Fong's house, they finally get the doctor to confess that he couldn't simply dispose of a healthy brain during the transplant, and that he had a duty to see that it was used properly. Mrs. Howard comes downstairs, while the "real" Nikki, now in someone else's body, comes out of another room and slaps Em.

Chapters 19-21 Analysis

Chapters 19-21 lead the narrative to its climax. Many important plot points emerge during these chapters, as Christopher realizes that Nikki is really Em, as Brandon sees that Em is in love with Christopher, as the group tracks down Dr. Wong. Later, the two great mysteries of the novel emerge in human form, as Dr. Wong's house produces Mrs. Howard and the real Nikki. The explanation that the book gives for Nikki's survival can be traced to Dr. Wong's sense of ethics, as he refused to dispose of a perfectly healthy human brain. However, the "doubling" of characters that the book has hinted at to this point becomes real, as the two Nikkis face each other in the same room for the first time, leading to conjectures about the future. How can two girls survive when they are both the "same" person?



Chapters 22-23

Chapters 22-23 Summary

The rest of the group separate Em and Nikki, as they search for more explanations. Dr. Fong had to work on his own, without the company knowing, which begs the question: why did Stark want to kill Nikki? Nikki inadvertently reveals that she'd found out some big secret about one of the corporation's new video games, but is scared to find out that they found her simply through her emails to Justin. Going to check on the car, Em gets grabbed by Brandon, who has now awoken and heard almost everything.

In the final chapter, Brandon tells Em that he's taking her to his private island, or he'll tell his dad everything. The real Nikki still wants him, though he is dismissive of her. Brandon will take the others with him as insurance, but before they go, he makes Em break up with Christopher. She is distraught, but does so to protect everyone involved.

Chapters 22-23 Analysis

Unlike many traditional narratives, "Being Nikki" ends on a cliffhanger, rather than with a resolution. This hints at the third volume in the trilogy that will follow. Here, the book does so by forcing the characters into their most extreme situation yet: one in which they are basically held hostage by the young Stark, unable to escape and unable to get what any of them desires. Since the narrative has carefully crafted these characters and their desires, the reader is encouraged to follow-up with the third volume to find out how these desires are satisfied or disappointed.



Characters

Emerson (Em)

Before her accident, Emerson was a strong student, raised as a feminist by her professor mother, who spent most of her time outside of school playing video games with her best friend, Christopher, on whom she had an unrequited crush. However, three months before the actions in the book take place, Em was in an accident outside of a Stark Megastore, where her body was crushed by a television display. Her parents were offered the choice to have her brain, which was still functioning, transplanted into the body of Nikki Howard, who they were told had suffered brain damage, and they accepted. Now, several months later, Em has learned how to cope with her new job, as she is a quick learner. She has a hard time letting go of her old friends and family, though, and still visits them despite warnings that she shouldn't. She insisted on a transfer to her old high school, where she keeps an eye on her sister, Christopher, and others. Em's personality is inquisitive, quick, and sarcastic. She is much more intelligent than Nikki was, but the Stark corporation has explained everything to the world by saying that Nikki has suffered amnesia. Therefore her inability to remember most people and places in her life is understandable. Still, Em's personality can't help but lead her into a deeper investigation into what happened, especially as she realizes that Christopher has been trying to avenge her death. At least in this volume, her curiosity and persistence lead her into danger, as she eventually has to enter a trap that Brandon Stark, Nikki's ex-boyfriend, has set for her.

Nikki Howard

This is the supermodel whose body Em now occupies. Throughout the first novel in this series, as well as for most of "Being Nikki," Em believes that Nikki is dead, and discovers a lot about her personality simply by gauging the reactions of those around her. Apparently, Nikki was spoiled and self-centered, and had declared herself an emancipated minor at the age of sixteen, though her brother Steven shows Em that they actually had a pleasant mother and childhood, just not a very glamorous one. Nikki has lied to everyone and told them that she comes from New York, when she in fact comes from a small town. She has done everything she can to put her past behind her. When she heard Mr. Stark discussing confidential secrets about his new video game, however, her scheming side took over and she tried to blackmail him. Rather than fall to her demands, though, Stark simply had her brain replaced by Em's. The doctor who performed the surgery, Dr. Fong, realized how unethical his work was and placed Nikki's brain into another body. In a frumpier form, Nikki is furious when she meets Em and wants her old body and her old life back.



Christopher

An old friend of Em's, Christopher demonstrates several sides of his character in "Being Nikki." The first is the friendly, laid-back guy that Em knew when she was still in her old body. He is good-looking geek who loved to play video games with her. However, as the novel progresses, he reveals what Em thinks of as his "supervillian" side. This side emerges when he is being protective of Em and specifically when he is trying to avenge her death. He has planned to do this by using his strengths and hacking into Stark Corporation's website to bring the company down. Though it takes him some time, Christopher eventually catches on to all of the hints the "new" Em is sending him, and realizes that she is still alive, just in the form of Nikki. Nevertheless, he's completely willing to help her solve the mystery of Mrs. Howard's disappearance, and continues to investigate with her. Therefore, he is shocked and confused when Em breaks up with him at the end of the story, on the same evening when they've finally gotten together, in favor of Nikki's ex, Brandon.

Frida

This is Em's little sister, from whom she has a hard time separating. Frida was initially the target for Em's accident, but Em saved her by pushing her sister out of the way and taking the fallout herself. Frida adores her older sister, and is even more fascinated by her new lifestyle, including her new best friend, Lulu. Though only fourteen, Frida wants to act like her older sister and is very envious of the lifestyle Em can now lead.

Steven

This is real Nikki's brother. A military officer, Steven instigates the investigation into his mother's disappearance. Over the course of the novel, he has a budding romance with Lulu.

Lulu

This is Em/Nikki's "celebutante" (celebrity/debutante) roommate. A party girl who nevertheless is very sweet and loyal.

Mrs. Howard

This is Nikki and Steven's mother, who has disappeared, taken by Dr. Fong to nurse her real daughter back to health.



Felix

This is Christopher's cousin, who helps the group hack into the Stark website and also provides information as to Mrs. Howard's real whereabouts.

Dr. Fong

This is the doctor operating on Nikki, who decided to transplant her brain into a new body rather than dispose of it because of ethics.

Dr. Higgins

This is the doctor who operated on Em. She still works for Stark Corporation. It is her username and password that Em steals to give to Christopher.

Brandon Stark

This is the son of Mr. Stark; Nikki's ex-boyfriend.

Mr. Stark

This is the head of the Stark Corporation and the mastermind behind the plans for the "full-body transplants."

Whitney

This is Em's former nemesis at her high school.

McKayla

This is the high school girl Em fears is taking her place in Christopher's affections.

Em and Frida's Mother

This is a feminist professor who tries to keep her daughters living lives of integrity.



Objects/Places

New York City

This is the center of most of the novel's action. Here, there are "two" New Yorks, Emerson's and Nikki's. The first is mundane and intellectual while the other glamorous.

The Stark Center

This is the site for the operations on Nikki and Em.

Full-Body Transplant

This is the medical name for the procedure undertaken on Em and Nikki.

Felix's Basement

This is the place where Felix researches and hacks the internet.

Christopher's Room

This is the place where Em realizes how much she meant to him, as demonstrated by the enormous picture of her he has.

Bugs

Most of the locations and apartments in the novel are bugged by the Stark Corporation; only Steven knows how to block them.

Cosabella

This character is also known as "Cosa." Nikki, and then Em's, dog.

The Loft

This is the apartment that Em/Nikki shares with Lulu.



Brandon's Private Island

This is the place to which Brandon insists on taking Em/Nikki at the end of the novel.

JourneyQuest

This is the video game that Em and Christopher played together before her "death."

Themes

Interior Versus Exteriors

Appearances versus realities are only one of the many forms in which this theme appears in "Being Nikki." However, the theme is by far the most important in the series, as the girl on the "inside" - Em - is not the same as the girl on the "outside," Nikki. Moreover, when the real Nikki was still in her first body, she had a nasty personality. She was self-centered and narcissistic, which did not at all match the beauty of her outer form. This coincides with the Stark Corporation, which appears to provide useful products in beautiful packages, but actually manufactures cheaply-made products using unethical business practices. Part of the book's narrative is to reconcile appearances with realities, as the "good" Em gets to be in the beautiful body, while Nikki is now in a dowdy form more consistent with her unappealing personality. Other, smaller, details reinforce this theme throughout the novel. These include the opening scene, when the reality of being a model is shown to be less than its glamorous appearance, and the relationship Em as Nikki has with her former enemy, Whitney, who was once cruel to her but is now fawning.

Family

Several families come into the fold in "Being Nikki." The most important of these are, of course, Em's and Nikki's. Em suffers acutely from missing her own family; in fact, her refusal to stop visiting and seeing them is the biggest complaint that Stark Corporation has against her towards the beginning of the book. This is made worse by the family's attempts to comply with the corporation's demands, such as by leaving Em behind and going to Florida to celebrate Christmas. Nevertheless, Em's relationship with her sister Frida, though tense, is solid and loving, and the two look out for each other. Frida does envy her sister's new lifestyle and wants to partake in all of the activities being a model requires, but as the book goes on, it becomes clear that she is also supportive of her sister, as she tries to help her track down Nikki's real mother. It is perhaps the solid family background that Em grew up with that compels her to help Steven with his search for his mother. Even after it becomes clear to everyone involved that Em is not, in fact, the real Nikki, she still has enough family feeling that she helps Christopher pursue his family.

Ethics

Most directly embodied by Dr. Fong, ethics (or the lack of them) are called into question in nearly every aspect of the book. The largest ethical question is posed by the premise of the book itself: as plastic surgery, and medicine in general, advances, what is to stop surgeries such as the one performed in the book from taking place? The implications of these procedures are teased out in various forms, and Cabot demonstrates the

procedure's potential for misuse by corporations, the conflict it creates within families, the sense of individuality, community, and other ruptures that the book pictures. Medical ethics are demonstrated by Dr. Fong, who cannot bring himself to throw away a viable human brain, no matter what the personal consequences are for him. The book leaves several moral questions open at the end, perhaps to be resolved in the next volume, including to whom "Nikki's" body really belongs to. Is it Em, who now inhabits it or Nikki, who originally had it?



Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated in the first-person perspective of Em. This serves several purposes. Most importantly, it allows for strong reader identification with Em, and helps to create a sympathetic protagonist. If Cabot had written in the third-person perspective, for example, the glamor of being a model might still seem tempting to the average reader such as the lifestyle, the paychecks, and other perks. However, by witnessing how Em suffers on nearly every level - social, familial, and romantic - the reader can follow the narrative tension that Cabot creates and understand Em's motivations better. This is particularly important on a romantic level, as she kisses not only Christopher, her true love, but also Brandon and Gabriel. Similarly, her narration helps the reader to understand exactly why she decides to help Steven, and how she can justify the many risks she takes throughout the book. Finally, the use of a first-person and reliable narrator allows the reader to experience events simultaneously with Em: for example, when she discovers that Nikki is still alive in a different body, the reader discovers it at the same time.

Setting

As befits a novel about the life of a supermodel, the setting varies in "Being Nikki" from New York to exotic islands, from high schools to runways. However, being the feminist "everygirl" who was implanted in Nikki's body, Em can appreciate these settings while longing for her old life. Even though she now has access to anywhere in the world, she's distraught over the fact that she can't spend time with her grandmother over Christmas in her dumpy Florida apartment. The locations matter less to Em than the actual experiences. She prefers to be in class rehearsing the Angels fashion show, for example. Importantly, each sphere of her life is associated with certain locations: her family with their apartment, her sister with school, Lulu with their loft, and so on.

Though the medical procedure that changed Em into Nikki is not currently possible, every other detail of the book suggests that it is set in the present day. Various activities and items in the book make reference to contemporary events and objects, such as Stark's new laptop computer, or the Angels fashion show.

Language and Meaning

"Being Nikki" relies on a combination of language that encompasses both Emerson's former life and the new role she must play. On the one hand, Em is a bright girl and a good student, who has a complex understanding of the world and a quick wit. On the other, she has to be a model - a role which is, by its nature, speechless, whether she works in print ads or on the runway. The combination of speech and silence reinforces the earlier themes of appearance and reality, as well as ethics. Although Em is smart

and the narrator of the book, the language is still simple enough for the average high-school student to follow.

Structure

The book is structured traditionally in a series of chapters. These chapters are all approximately the same length, and allow for an even pace that leads from the beginning, where Em is relatively untroubled during a slightly uncomfortable fashion shoot, to the end, in which she must follow Brandon to his private island. The narrative structure throws various obstacles in her way, starting with Christopher, adding Steven and his problems, the Stark Corporation, the other model's possessiveness, and climaxing with the continued survival of the "real" Nikki and her mother, as well as Brandon's kidnapping of the group. This structure does not provide the narrative closure that a traditional novel would, but rather ends with a "cliffhanger" to encourage readers to continue to the third installment in the trilogy.



Quotes

"The fact was, I was being forced to work for a corporation I was pretty sure was responsible for turning America into one endless, soulless strip mall" (Chapter 1, p. 9).

"'Seriously,' he said. 'That's what you're going to go with? The amnesia thing? You really think that's going to work on me? ME?'" (Chapter 3, p. 41).

"I didn't think I was being paranoid about feeling as if I was being spied on. Pictures of me doing the most innocuous things were popping up all over the place" (Chapter 6, p. 67).

"He hadn't understood what he'd had in me until I was gone. Except that I wasn't gone" (Chapter 9, p. 94).

"...weirdly, everyone was wide awake, and paying total attention to Christopher. This, of course, only fed into his rant" (Chapter 11, p. 129).

"Gabriel Luna, a guy I'd met maybe four or five times in my life, loves me? Yeah. I don't think so" (Chapter 12, p. 145).

"'You know we'd like you to limit visitations with people from your past,' Dr. Higgins went on" (Chapter 13, p. 152).

"I honestly don't have the slightest idea who you are. Because you're not my sister" (Chapter 14, p. 167).

"';How would I know where your mother is, sweetheart?' Robert Stark was grinning as if I'd said something hilarious" (Chapter 18, p. 214).

"It's all right. I know. I know you couldn't tell me. I know you tried. But I'm here now. Everything's going to be all right. You know I always loved you" (Chapter 19, p. 239).

"'I took an oath,' he said wearily. 'They told me to throw Nikki's brain away. But to o that when there was nothing wrong with it...that would have been murder'" (Chapter 21, p. 274).

"'I'm with Brandon now. I...I love Brandon. And I'm going with him. So...Goodbye. Goodbye, Christopher'" (Chapter 23, p. 299).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the duality of "interior/exterior" that Cabot uses in "Being Nikki." How is this visible symbolically as well as in the characters themselves?

What ethical implications, other than those mentioned in the book, might be involved in a full-body transplant? Explain.

The conflicts in "Being Nikki" stem from conflicting character motivations. Discuss three examples of characters with conflicting desires, and how these drive the plot.

Compare and contrast the characters of Nikki and Em. Are there any ways in which the transplant might be read as successful?

Compare and contrast "Nikki's" two love interests, Christopher and Brandon. What makes her prefer Christopher? How does this contribute to the dialogue between the interior and the exterior mentioned earlier?

Cabot makes use of heavy foreshadowing throughout the novel. Based on concrete passages from the text, what might you assume will happen in volume three of the trilogy?

Discuss Frida's role in the book. In what ways is she a stand-in for the reader? How does she contribute to the narrative's themes?