

Back in Black: An A-list Novel Study Guide

Back in Black: An A-list Novel by John Meaney

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Plot Summary

"Back in Black" is part of the A-List series, several books that describe the lives of a group of wealthy and beautiful teenagers at a Los Angeles High School. In "Back in Black," this group (the eponymous A-List of the subtitle) decides to forgo the senior class trip to Washington D.C. in favor of a private trip to Las Vegas. However, their vacation will reveal secrets about everybody as the story continues.

Recounted mainly from the perspective of Anna, a recent addition to their group, the narrative begins with Anna and her friend Sam (Samantha) at the Oscars. Sam's father has been nominated for an award. When he doesn't win, the family is disappointed, but Sam's growing discomfort with her stepmother, stepsister, and even her own body becomes increasingly evident. It doesn't help that her friend Dee, a young girl with New Age beliefs, has become friends with Sam's stepmother, Poppy, and leads her and her friends in a mother-and-baby meditation.

Relieved to escape from her family situation, Sam takes her friends on her father's private jet and they set off for Las Vegas. The group includes Sam, Anna, Dee, Cammie, Adam, and Parker. Everyone is rich except for Parker, who worries about how he will pay for the trip. When they land, he immediately heads for a slot machine and, incredibly, wins \$20,000. However, the casino worker realizes that his ID is fake and that he is not old enough to gamble. Parker must forfeit the prize.

Anna's friend from New York, Cyn, shows up with her boyfriend Scott, who Anna has always had a crush on. However, she is still pining for her ex-boyfriend Ben, who is away at Princeton. As their trip progresses, the imperfections beneath their perfect surfaces begin to show, but don't totally emerge until the group gets hypnotized during a performance at their hotel. There, Cammie and Adam admit that their relationship is cooling down, Anna admits that she's always had sexual feelings for Scott, and Sam watches on in amazement. The group would never find out what happened, except that Cyn unknowingly buys the DVD and shows it to them, creating several rifts within the group. In the end, Scott and Cyn break up, Cyn and Anna retain their friendship, and Adam and Cammie re-discover their feelings for one another. Sam ends up discovering Parker's secret, and pays his way for him without his knowledge.

The group must reunite as a whole when Dee is found at a mental hospital. Feeling excluded, she broke down and started babbling New-Age mysticism to a group of gamblers at a casino - wearing nothing but her underwear. The girls decide to get her home and begin the drive to the airport when Anna spots Ben, who she called several times only to receive no response. She lets the others leave without her as she spends a few more days with Ben who is in love with her, but admits that he has a girlfriend back at Princeton. The book ends on a hopeful note with Anna and Ben at the hotel together.



Glitterati, Outside. . . , Crushed Velvet

Glitterati, Outside. . . , Crushed Velvet Summary

"Back in Black" is a novel about a group of friends at Beverly Hills High School who blow off their school trip to Washington D.C. in favor of a private trip to Las Vegas. The novel begins with "Glitterati," in which Samantha (Sam) and Anna are preparing to go to the Academy Awards. Sam's father is a famous actor, and has been nominated for an award this year. The girls watch all of the stars walk by on the red carpet, and Anna, who is beautiful, is mistaken for a star by a group of teenagers.

The following chapter provides more background for the character of Anna. Anna grew up in New York City. While she is wealthy, it is a different kind of money than her Los Angeles friends have. In New York, her family was "old money," while in California, everyone seems to be obsessed with stars. Anna thinks back to her best friend in New York, Cynthia (Cyn), who is wilder than she is, and she tries to picture what she might be doing at that moment. Anna also remembers a boyfriend she loved the year before, Ben. She met him on the plane to L.A. and immediately fell for him; however, he left at the end of the year for Princeton, and they broke up. Meanwhile, the girls are cleared at the security tent.

Sam and Anna enter the theater only to run into one of their friends from school, Parker. Parker is an aspiring actor who has gotten a job at the event filling seats when a celebrity or invited guest leaves his or her seat, Parker sits in it so that no empty seats appear in the televised version of the event. While they are waiting for the Oscars to start, Parker and Sam start talking about the upcoming trip to Las Vegas. Anna is confused, as the school trip is to Washington D.C., but Sam thinks this is funny and tells her that the A-List always calls in sick and then goes to Las Vegas instead. The awards start and finally, Sam's father's category comes up, but he loses to a blind British actor.

Glitterati, Outside. . . , Crushed Velvet Analysis

The first three chapters serve to situate the reader in the world of the A-List. They do this with one of the most glamorous possible events: the Academy Awards. Shown mostly from Anna's perspective, the novel has the advantage of depicting the events as an outsider would see them, for as the narrative continues, it is revealed that Anna has only been in Los Angeles for several months, and is originally from old money back in New York.

Though not all of the characters are presented in these chapters, the major ones (Anna, Sam, Parker, Cyn) are. Most importantly, the major plot point has been introduced, as Parker and Sam discuss the upcoming trip to Las Vegas. The first dilemma of the novel, whether or not Anna should go, also presents itself here.



Dr. Nose Job, Quite the Hot Couple, The Rock on Steroids

Dr. Nose Job, Quite the Hot Couple, The Rock on Steroids Summary

After the awards ceremony, Sam and Anna head to the Governor's Ball, a traditional event that takes place to celebrate the awards. They feel that they have to go to show support for Sam's father, even though she is quite upset that he has gotten re-married and recently had a baby with a woman not that much older than herself. At the ball, Anna runs into a plastic surgeon called Dr. Birnbaum. This is Ben's father. She is surprised to see him; he recently had trouble with gambling addictions and debt, and tried to commit suicide. Nevertheless, he confesses to her that he is now in Gambler's Anonymous. Part of his program is to be unrelentingly honest about everything in his life, so he tells her that Ben is still in love with her and that she should call him at Princeton.

The girls leave the Ball to go on to an after-party at Morton's. However, in the throng of people outside, Sam can't find her driver, and she forgot her cell phone back at home. Anna tells her what just happened with Dr. Birnbaum, and Sam tries to persuade Anna to call Ben. They end up getting a taxi and arrive at Morton's in "The Rock on Steroids." There, they have trouble gaining entry, even though Sam is clearly on the list, because so many people want to enter. The bouncer finally identifies Sam, and lets them in. Once inside, the girls see their friend from school, Camilla (Cammie). Cammie and Anna obviously have some tension between them; this is because they always go after the same boys. After spending some time at the restaurant, Sam runs into her father and he offers to take her and Anna home, which they happily accept.

Dr. Nose Job, Quite the Hot Couple, The Rock on Steroids Analysis

This section provides those new to the series with a glimpse into Anna's past, providing the salient elements of her back story needed to understand the rest of the novel. By running into her ex-boyfriend's father, she now has an excuse to contact Ben. Her character is partially revealed in her hesitancy to contact Ben. After this prompting, Anna is much shyer and more discreet than many of the people around her.

These chapters also confirm Sam's father's importance in Hollywood, as she and Anna bypass a long line of people on the list to get into the party. Finally, they introduce Cammie, who presents yet another challenge for Anna to overcome. Cammie was Ben's girlfriend before Anna, and there is still tension between the two girls.



Seven Deadly Sins, Four-Inch Red Heels, A Deep Thinker

Seven Deadly Sins, Four-Inch Red Heels, A Deep Thinker Summary

Back at school, the friends all gather for an assembly. They have a new principal this year, whom none of them respect. At the assembly, several friends join Anna, Sam, and Cammie: Dee, who is into mysticism and talks about it constantly, Cammie's boyfriend Adam, a generally nice guy, and Parker. Parker starts flirting outrageously with Anna, but when she calls him on it, it emerges that he's up for a part in a television show in which he would play a nice guy who flirts with everyone. Later, thinking about her friend Cynthia, Anna calls her. She's always had a small crush on Cynthia's boyfriend Scott, and doesn't like all of the detail Cyn insists on giving her. However, hearing about Cyn's wild life, Anna tells her that she's about to go to Las Vegas, to make her own life seem more interesting.

In the following chapter, Sam starts to pack for the trip. She is slightly heavier than the other girls, and quite self-conscious, making packing more of an ordeal for her. She thinks about her boyfriend, Eduardo, who is currently living in Paris. They have always had a long-distance relationship, and she wonders about the seriousness of it. When Sam goes downstairs, she realizes that the magazine InStyle has arrived to cover her step-mother's mother-baby meditation circle, which is led by Dee. Though she's invited to take part in the activities, she declines, finding them ridiculous. The others arrive later to pick Sam up to go to the airport. Cammie reveals that her father, who is agent, has secured the television role Parker thought he was going to get, for one of his own clients. Therefore, Parker will not be in the series.

The next chapter underscores Parker's situation, as he ponders his finances. He is actually poor, and going on the trip with less than a hundred dollars in his pocket. His mother is a cocktail waitress, and he's had to work for everything that he has. Nevertheless, he's studied the habits of the rich and can fit in well with them. When his friends ask him to open a bottle of champagne on the private plane, he's able to do so correctly. The narration then switches back to Anna, who finally works up the nerve to call Ben. However, Ben doesn't pick up his cell, and she ends up leaving him an awkward voicemail.

Seven Deadly Sins, Four-Inch Red Heels, A Deep Thinker Analysis

These vital chapters set up the remaining challenges for the protagonists of the novel. Notably, Parker's money situation will somehow have to be resolved, or he will end up



sponging off of his friends - if they even allow him to. This serves a dual purpose, both of making the character more relatable to the average reader, who does not have as much money as the rest of the group, and introducing another conflict to be resolved later on.

Dee also takes on a more important role here, as she spends time with Poppy. Though the other characters' conflicts have been more or less established by this point, Dee's is not yet apparent, though her quirky "weirdness" here, in New Age form, will eventually prove to be the downfall that leads her to the mental institution. This mental break was also established through her exclusion from the other girls; thus, her willingness to make friends with a grown woman who has a child can also be seen as symptomatic of these problems.



Nothin' but Lobster, All Tease and No Please, Voodoo Economics

Nothin' but Lobster, All Tease and No Please, Voodoo Economics Summary

The group arrives in Las Vegas. Parker is still preoccupied with how broke he is, and so when they arrive, he is happy to find slot machines in the lobby. Though the others discourage him from playing, he puts in more and more money, trying to win. He finally does, with his last few dollars, and wins \$20,000. Because it is such a large amount, he has to see the attendant. She scans his driver's license and finds out that it's fake. Therefore, he has no claim to the money, as he is not 21 and too young to gamble. Disheartened, he goes with the others.

Meanwhile, Cammie is getting tired of Adam. In the past, she's always dated bad boys, and this is the first time she's had a boyfriend who is such a good person and so nice to her. After all this time, though, his behavior is starting to make her uncomfortable, but she hasn't yet decided what to do about it. The group is driving around the city, and the girls mock the trashy fashion choices they see women wearing. Cammie then comes up with an idea for a Vegas fashion contest. The girls will all go shopping and try to find the most "Vegas"-style outfits to wear, to be judged by the boys that evening.

The group finally arrives at the hotel, where they see another casino. This upsets Parker, but Cammie tells them not to worry: she knows a place that allows underage gambling, and she'll take them there later. The rest of the chapter describes the hotel itself, including the upscale club, the casino, and the shopping centers that are all part of it.

Nothin' but Lobster, All Tease and No Please, Voodoo Economics Analysis

In "Nothin' but Lobster," Parker's problems are seemingly all solved for one moment, but then made even worse by the fact that he doesn't receive the money and also receives a ticket for underage gambling. His lack of money again makes a more relatable character, and his false victory is thus made all the more sympathetic, as the narrative creates a space for the reader's sympathy. Though the story is often preoccupied with markers of class, it is not necessarily dismissive of those who cannot afford them, and in fact treats Parker in a favorable light.

Cammie's attitude towards Adam will be no surprise for readers familiar with earlier books in the series. However, the novel here seems to foreshadow a break-up that never happens. Rather, her feelings are presented in order to later thwart expectations



and present a deeper vision of the character. For the moment, however, Cammie's suggestion for a fashion show seems only to reinforce the apparent shallowness of her character. She also helps to foreshadow later conflict in introducing the possibility for more gambling later on.



Hey Baby, Baby Voice, In a Tacky Vegas Kind of Way

Hey Baby, Baby Voice, In a Tacky Vegas Kind of Way Summary

Cammie breaks away from Sam and Anna, who decide to go shopping for their Vegas clothes. In the shop they find, Anna is more intrigued by the literature the store assistant is reading than in the clothes themselves, but ultimately gets into the spirit of things. Sam is upset because she feels like she looks fat no matter what she wears. Sympathetic to her friends feelings, Anna points out an Eastern-inspired outfit that will show off Sam's stomach and hide the areas she's more concerned about. Grateful, Sam tries it on, and the girls end up buying outfits for the evening.

Meanwhile, Dee has gone to explore other hotels, and ends up at a Venetian hotel. There, a performance is going on with a singing gondolier. She calls out "gnocchi" at the end, thinking she is thanking him; however, another spectator informs her that she's just called out the name of a kind of pasta. On her own, Dee feels lonely and as though she is not truly part of the group. Suddenly, she thinks she can hear Ruby, Sam's baby sister, though she doesn't see her anywhere.

That evening, the group convenes at the bar to show off their outfits. Cammie shows off by stripping down on stage to show her perfect body. However, while the other girls seethe, Anna's New York friend Cyn shows up with her good-looking boyfriend, Scott. Cyn does her own dance and outshines Cammie. The two girls immediately dislike each other, mostly because Cyn is Anna's friend, and Anna "stole" Ben away from Cammie the year before.

Hey Baby, Baby Voice, In a Tacky Vegas Kind of Way Analysis

Sam's body issues take center stage in the first chapter of this section. Just as Parker appears to have it all but is actually broke, Sam has everything except the perfect body and a boyfriend who is actually present. However, the kindness of other characters, notably Anna, help Sam to mitigate these issues, if not overcome them.

Dee's strangeness and isolation are also developed as important characteristics with her tour of the Venetian hotel. Again, though they are presented in a humorous and initially harmless light, the sudden auditory hallucination she has of Ruby foreshadows the darker events that will take place later in the book.

Cyn's arrival also makes the characters' situations more complex. Now, not only must Anna fight with her desire for Ben, who she's not sure she can have back, but also with

her attraction for her best friend's boyfriend. The addition of two more New York characters also tips the balance away from the Californians, as evidenced by Cyn's outshining Cammie on-stage.



Sugar Daddy, Between Lust and Love, Flexing Her Sexiness

Sugar Daddy, Between Lust and Love, Flexing Her Sexiness Summary

Though both Cyn and Cammie have danced for the audience, another girl wins. Cammie and Cyn share some venomous remarks, but Cyn eventually returns to Anna so that they can catch up more. She shares a lot of information about her and Scott's sexual exploits, which makes Anna uncomfortable. Not only is Anna naturally more reserved than her friend, but she also is jealous of her relationship with Scott, which is painful to hear about. Meanwhile, though, Cyn states that she's getting tired of Scott; Scott, talking to the boys, says more or less the same thing. On both sides, their relationship is becoming lukewarm.

Dee tries numerous times to reach Poppy, Ruby's mother, and leaves her increasingly urgent voicemails, as she believes that she can hear that something's wrong with the baby. Unable to reach her, Dee goes to Sam to tell her that something's wrong. However, Sam dismisses her friend's fears, saying that they have plenty of staff and that she would have heard if something had gone wrong by now. Finally, Dee gets a call back, but it is from one of the baby's nurses: she tells her that Poppy has instructed that Dee not call again. Despite these instructions, Dee keeps trying Poppy's cell phone. At the same time, in her own room, Anna tries Ben's phone again, only to have her message go to his answering machine again.

At the club, Adam and Cammie are dancing together. They seem to have made up from before, but he pushes her to share more with him. Annoyed by his demands, Cammie gets angry once again, and storms out of the club. The chapter ends as she rings somebody's doorbell and an unknown man welcomes her in.

Sugar Daddy, Between Lust and Love, Flexing Her Sexiness Analysis

The characters' hurdles are all increasing in these chapters, as they try to retain the status quo and enjoy themselves in the face of numerous obstacles. Though new to the scene, Cyn and Scott are already on the verge of breaking up, which challenges Anna as she tries to decide what to do regarding Ben, who is still not answering her phone calls. At the same time, Dee's antics have stopped being humorous, and are bordering on the obsessive as she calls Poppy many times, convinced that there is something wrong with the baby. This urgency, as well as the dark nature of her premonitions themselves, embodies her spiral into mental illness. Finally, though Adam and Cammie initially seem to have resolved their problems, they end up fighting even more so than

before, seemingly driving Cammie into the arms of another man. Though the characters' problems seem to have reached their peak in this section, they are still building up to their greatest challenges of all, when they will have to confront their issues head-on.



So Damn Sexy, Lime Green Heels, Cammie's Mystery Destination

So Damn Sexy, Lime Green Heels, Cammie's Mystery Destination Summary

Anna wakes up before anyone else the next morning, with a slight hangover. She decides to go for a swim. At the pool, she runs into Cyn's boyfriend, Scott. They have a good time talking, and challenge each other to a race. In the deep end, their legs get tangled up, and Anna is confused about her feelings for him. She knows they are being too flirty and feels guilty, because he's Cyn's boyfriend. They order some breakfast, but Cyn shows up and Anna leaves, embarrassed.

That evening, Parker is at the bar trying to pick up a girl rich enough to cover his expenses for the trip. He meets an average-looking girl called Kendall, but flirts with her enough that she believes he's forgotten his wallet. He invites her to come see a hypnotist with him and his friends, and she agrees. The hypnotist works on the audience, starting out with a few small physical hypnoses, then inviting those he affected to come up on stage. Kendall goes, but the hypnotist sends her away, saying that she is more drunk than anything. Meanwhile, Cammie, Adam, Scott, Cyn, and Anna are all up on stage. Sam, who is unaffected, watches as they all come on to one another, under the hypnotist's orders. Then, they start to confess. Adam tells Cammie that he's had feelings for other girls, while she tells him that he's been boring her. Finally, the usually reserved Anna says that she's wanted to have sex with Scott since the moment she saw him.

After the show, nobody remembers what they said or what was said to them. However, it was recorded on DVD, which Cyn buys before Sam can stop her. Cammie takes them to the place where they can gamble while underage. A luxurious place, it turns out to be organized by an old friend of Cammie's, Brock. There, the group gambles and drinks, finally stopping to watch the DVD. Of course, the DVD enrages both Cammie and Cyn.

So Damn Sexy, Lime Green Heels, Cammie's Mystery Destination Analysis

The DVD both incarnates and represents the literal presentation of the characters' deepest secrets into the world. Anna's early swim with Scott turns out to not be a big deal at all, in comparison with the intensity with which she confesses her attraction to him. Parker is more or less prostituting himself to try to find a woman who will pay for his stay in Vegas; hence, his earnest (though, as the reader later learns, faked) confessions of love to Kendall. The greatest rift appears between Adam and Cammie, who finally confess their issues with each other. The novel does not lose its light tone

here, even though the deepest secrets of the characters are laid bare; the hypnotist, for example, has made each character thank the other for the information provided. Finally, it is notable that it is Cynthia, the outsider, who makes the truth apparent by showing them all the DVD, though she doesn't know what's on it.



Secret Knock, His Famous Megawatt Smile, Thorazine

Secret Knock, His Famous Megawatt Smile, Thorazine Summary

Anna is further humiliated when Scott approaches her and tells her that even if he were single, he's not attracted to her and would never date her. She is embarrassed, never having been rejected before. Adam, meanwhile, goes after Cammie, apologetic despite the fact that she also said negative things about their relationship. When he catches up to her, though, she admits that she wanted to find Brock because he was present right before her mother died - a situation that Adam knows little about because Cammie rarely talks about it. Feeling closer than ever, the pair makes up. Finally, Anna goes to find Cyn in the sauna. She expects Cyn to be furious that she's coveted her best friend's boyfriend this whole time, but instead, Cynthia is angry because Anna never told her about her feelings. Cyn questions how close they can actually be if her best friend would hide something like that from her. The two of them make amends.

Back at the bar, Parker is working on picking up another woman to pay his bills when Sam runs into him. On the spot, he tells her what he's doing, and she realizes he was only pretending to be under hypnosis earlier, when he confessed to loving Kendall. This convinces her of his true acting talent. Just in case, she secretly pays his bill on her way out. When she returns to her suite, she receives a call from a psychiatric hospital, saying that Dee is staying with them.

The girls go to the hospital, but Dee cannot leave until the following day, when a doctor checks up on her. She was caught trying to "help" people in the baccarat room, wearing only her underwear. Though disturbed, her friends argue for her release, but to no avail.

Secret Knock, His Famous Megawatt Smile, Thorazine Analysis

In these chapters, the problems of the characters begin to resolve themselves. Anna could not have Scott even if she wanted to date him, as he doesn't want her, resolving her issues and convincing her more than ever that Ben is the right one for her. Moreover, Cyn is not mad about Anna's attraction itself, but only about what that means for their friendship. After a lengthy discussion, this too is resolved. Adam finally understands Cammie's motivations, drawing them closer together than ever, and Parker's confession to Sam ensures that his trip is paid for, though he doesn't realize it. The only remaining problems are Ben's absence and, more urgently, Dee's admittance into the mental hospital.



I Wanna Be Sedated, Stratosphere

I Wanna Be Sedated, Stratosphere Summary

The next day, Dee is released, but must seek psychiatric care back in Los Angeles. Cyn leaves, after a long and heartfelt good-bye with Anna. She and Scott have broken up, and she is all the happier for it. As the rest of the group returns to the car to go to the airport, Anna screams for them to stop. She jumps out of the car, seeing Ben at the entrance of the hotel.

in the final chapter, Anna and Ben spend time together, kissing and explaining themselves. They go to dinner, and spend time in Ben's hotel room. However, all is not perfect: Ben has started seeing someone at Princeton, Blythe. He makes it clear that he feels much more strongly about Anna, and that he wants to be with her. She reciprocates his feelings and tells him that she wants to be with him as well.

I Wanna Be Sedated, Stratosphere Analysis

Though the last chapter seemingly resolves the two remaining problems (Dee's mental issues and Ben's absence), it also makes these problems more complex in ways that will inspire the reader to read the next installment of the series. The problems are only partially resolved, after all. Ben is present, but has a casual girlfriend; he will eventually have to choose, but makes no move to do so during this book. Meanwhile, Dee will supposedly be getting help back in Los Angeles, but has not yet done so, casting doubts on her future as well.



Characters

Anna

The novel originates from Anna's experience of the Academy Awards. Transplanted from New York to Los Angeles, Anna is classier and more demure than her friends. She is described several times as "old money" and as being a "WASP" or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The differences in her character can be seen through her actions. She does not make a move on her friend Cyn's boyfriend, even when he seems to want her. She hesitates to go on the trip to Las Vegas, not pleased to be skipping the class trip. However, as with the other characters in the novel, she is also defined by what she wants: here, this is Ben, her ex-boyfriend who goes to Princeton. Anna is further characterized by her intelligence, as she has been accepted early-decision at Yale. Finally, she is distinguished by her clothing. Rather than the skin-hugging and flashy clothes her friends wear, Anna prefers a more understated look, with blazers and jeans, tending to be far more covered than her friends.

Sam

The daughter of a famous movie star, Sam has grown up with many privileges. However, she has a hard time overcoming the areas of her life that are not perfect: her weight, and her love life. Though the novel does not make her out to be obese, Sam certainly weighs slightly more than her friends do. Nevertheless, she is an attractive girl, and can often find clothes that hide the areas of her body that she is embarrassed of. Unlike some of the other characters in the book, who are more static, Sam grows as a person (or at least believes she does) in becoming more generous and aware of others as the novel progresses. This is most evident when she pays for Parker's stay without him knowing. Her second concern, her love life, comes into play in the form of her boyfriend, Eduardo, who is only present through long-distance telephone calls. This makes her feel excluded from the group, as she is surrounded by couples or people in the process of falling in love.

Cammie

A beautiful, young, and rich girl, Cammie at first seems to be the most unpleasant of the main characters. However, as the novel develops, it turns out that her mother died in a mysterious and unfortunate accident, the circumstances of which haunt Cammie. Therefore, her initial feelings of being "over" Adam, her nice-guy boyfriend, turn out to be far more complex, as she hesitates to share the darkest problems of her life with someone for the first time. By meeting up with Brock and hearing what she has to say, Cammie in fact allows herself to be drawn back into a healthier and more open relationship with Adam.



Dee

This is a new-age inspired girl who feels excluded from the rest of the group. Though she is as pretty and wealthy as the others, Dee is searching for deeper meanings, but she doesn't know where to look, and draws upon several disparate sources to create a set of beliefs to guide her. Nevertheless, when she is put under pressure (such as being left alone or excluded from group activities), she begins to mentally break-down, leading her to believe that she is psychically communing with Sam's baby step-sister. Her future is uncertain at the end of the book, as she is taken away from the mental hospital and back to Los Angeles.

Adam

This is Cammie's boyfriend and an all-around nice guy confused by his girlfriend's behavior.

Cyn

This is Anna's old friend from New York. Wilder than Anna, she makes a spur-of-the-moment trip to see her old friend.

Scott

This is Cyn's boyfriend, who turns out to be self-obsessed.

Jackson Sharpe

This is Sam's father and a famous movie star who has just lost out on the Oscar.

Ruby

This is Sam's new step-sister.

Poppy

This is Sam's step-mother.

Kendall

This is a girl Parker meets at a bar and tries to seduce in the hopes that she will pay for his stay at the hotel. However, she is sent away by the hypnotist.



Parker

This is a member of the A-List group who has far less money than they do. Also a talented actor, Parker has lately been struggling to get roles.

Brock

This is an old friend of Cammie's who helps her start to solve the mystery of her mother's death.

The Hypnotist

This is the performer who gets the group to confess their secrets to one another.



Objects/Places

Los Angeles

This is the home base for the members of the A-List; Anna has only recently moved here.

Las Vegas

This is the vacation destination of the group.

Beverly Hills High School

The high school all the major characters (except Cyn and Scott) attend.

New York

This is Anna's hometown. This is also where Cyn and Scott currently live.

The Academy Awards

This is also known as the Oscars. The ceremony that opens the book, where Sam and Anna attend.

Morton's

This is a restaurant that hosts an after-party for the Oscars.

Private Plane

This is Sam's father's plane and the group's means of transportation to Las Vegas.

Brock's Place

This is the site of the underage gambling, as well as the DVD viewing.

Swimming Pool

This is the hotel swimming pool where Anna thinks Scott is flirting with her.



Phone Calls

Anna makes many of these to Ben, while Dee obsessively calls Poppy.

Meditation Circle

This is the group exercise Dee leads in front of the magazine InStyle.



Themes

Deceptive Appearances

The driving narrative force in "Back in Black" is the secret or hidden nature of each character. As they try to protect their secrets, or to cope with them, their behavior creates conflict that becomes apparent to those around them. In a world with very little parental supervision or interference, the rest of the group is the only safeguard many of these characters have. Appearances are most deceiving in the case of Parker, who seems to be as rich as his friends; however, just beneath the surface is a boy who has very little money and who has earned everything that he does have. He covers this very well, because of his experience as an actor. Similarly, Anna and Sam, who appear to have everything, are suffering beneath the surface: Anna with her feelings for her ex-boyfriend, as well as her friend's boyfriend, and Sam with her weight, as well as her familial problems. Dee, the beautiful and quirky sidekick, suffers from feelings of exclusion and possible mental illness. All of these problems are covered up to some extent throughout the novel, but appear out in the open at the narrative's climax, the hypnotist's show and subsequent events. Note that this theme is reinforced by the constant discussion of brand names and luxury goods, which highlight the glamor and perfect surfaces the characters live with, while hiding or diverting attention from the problems in their lives.

Friendship

The A-List series distinguishes itself from similar young adult series by its focus on friendship. Though the characters are rich and glamorous, they rarely stab each other in the back or act in a catty way. When there are tensions, they are apparent to all, and usually have some rationale behind them, such as the tension that exists between Anna and Cammie. The novel presents several different visions of friendship, as fun, supportive, and necessary. The fun side of friendship is embodied in the relationship between Anna and Sam, who attend awards shows together, go away together to Las Vegas, and generally enjoy themselves while still being aware of the others' vulnerabilities. The supportive side of friendship emerges between Anna and Cyn, who is horrified when she realizes that Anna's had feelings for Scott - not because she is jealous, but because she would have wanted to support her friend and not put her through the agony Anna's experienced over the past year. Finally, Dee represents the necessity of friendship for these characters. On their own in a world without adult supervision, in Las Vegas, nobody notices Dee's breakdown. However, once they have noticed it, they must go support her at the hospital and eventually make sure that she gets the help that she needs. Whether or not she will on their return to Los Angeles has yet to be determined; nevertheless, the importance of her friends' support has already been established.

Inclusion

The name-brands, exclusive locales, and celebrities who populate the pages of "Back in Black" take the reader into an exclusive world they might not otherwise be able to access. The consequence of this is the highlighting of those who are "inside" and those who are "outside." Sam and Anna, for example, are clearly "inside" as Sam's father has put them on the list for a variety of exclusive events. However, Parker, who appears to be on the inside, is only there to a certain extent: he can never be totally included, lacking the connections and, most importantly, the funds. The theme of inclusion is most poignantly illustrated in Dee's plight, as the young girl is so obsessed with belonging that she begins to hallucinate communications from her friend's baby sister. Still, the friends all support each other no matter what, making them, in some sense, always included - even the outsider, Anna, who has only recently joined them.

Style

Point of View

The novel takes a traditional approach to narration with a third-person and limited point of view. What makes the point of view different, however, is its inclusion of a variety of different views in different sections, leading to a more omniscient view. Though each character's thoughts are not available for every episode, the reader sees particular episodes through one character's point of view at a time, leading to an overall objective view of the experiences. For example, while Sam may think about how fat she is and how much she hates her body, this is mitigated by Anna's thoughts that she looks good in certain outfits, or is too hard on herself. Because of the variety of story lines that the novel contains, the book switches back-and-forth among characters. If one person can be said to be the novel's "heroine," it is probably Anna, as she is the first character to provide her perspective, and the character around whom the action centers, with her friends arriving from New York, her ex-boyfriend coming to meet her, and the sheer volume of pages dedicated to her story line. Overall, the perspective of the other characters contributes to a more balanced narrative.

Setting

The novel is set in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, in the present day, approximately 2012 (though the novel will quickly show its age due to the plethora of cultural references contained within it). Los Angeles is shown in contrast to Las Vegas as being slightly more sedate and actually glamorous, rather than simply showy, as in the case of Las Vegas. This is ironic, given Anna's remembrances of New York an actually classy and understated location. Within Los Angeles, the girls go from the Academy Awards to various afterparties, and then to Beverly Hills High School. Some of the action also takes place at Sam's father's home, as she packs for their trip, and then later on her father's private plane. In Los Angeles, the major action takes place at the hotel, though trips to other hotels, casinos, and locations along The Strip, including some glitzy boutiques where the girls shop for their fashion show. In fact, the only non-glamorous location that the group goes to is the mental hospital that is holding Dee, foreshadowing darker times (perhaps in later volumes). At the Las Vegas hotel, the group all has separate suites; when Ben arrives for Anna, though, he takes only a simple double room, demonstrating how his presence is more important to Anna than the location herself.

Language and Meaning

For a novel with a young-adult target audience, the characters speak surprisingly naturally, without too much slang or other language that would date the novel too much. They, and the exposition, do use more complex words than the average teenager might



(such as "magnanimous"), which will help students wishing to build their vocabularies or studying for the SAT. However, the language is still simple enough that younger readers could understand it, though the sexual and alcohol content of the book make it less appropriate for younger readers. Much of the book is written in dialogue, allowing the reader to feel immersed in the group without too much extraneous exposition. The remaining exposition often works to explain individual characters' thoughts. This lends an intimate, yet accessible tone to the entire narrative.

Structure

The book is structured into a variety of short, episodic chapters, which divide the characters' storylines into various sections. This has the effect of keeping the novel dynamic, as the reader keeps going to find out what has happened to characters they've just read about, and varied. The chapters are short and titled, which make the experience of reading the book quick and easy to parse for the reader. This has the added effect of showing how the characters might conceptualize their own lives, as each chapter usually deals exclusively with the perspective of one character. The kind of self-narration this implies complexifies the Hollywood setting, where reality television and celebrities abound.



Quotes

"Now you, you bitch goddess, look like a young Grace Kelly" (Outside the Well-Bred-East-Coast-WASP Box, p. 15).

"She'd never, ever feel about a boy the way she'd felt about Ben. Still felt about Ben" (Dr. Nose Job, p. 33).

"Right now, I'm at a celibate life stage. Sort of like the Essenes around the time of Hillel" (Seven Deadly Sins, p. 61).

"Parker Pinelli was a man with a plan: Get in with the innest of the Beverly Hills High hip crowd" (A Deep Thinker, p. 86).

"And the truth was, bad boys were just so much...juicier" (All Tease and No Please, p. 113).

"It reminded Dee of what Jim Carrey saw at the end of The Truman Show: how it all looked real but wasn't" (Baby Voice, p. 138).

"You know how I have this cosmic connection to Ruby, and it's telling me that something isn't right" (Between Lust and Love, p. 178).

"This particular Kendall appeared to be the kind of insecure rich girl who had to advertise her money" (Lime Green Heels, p. 206).

"On the count of three you will be fully awake and aware, no longer hypnotized" (Cammie's Mystery Destination, p. 221).

"Vegas isn't interesting," Sam quipped. "To quote Dee, it's sound and furry, signifying nothing" (His Famous Megawatt Smile, p. 260).

"Evidently she was harassing the gamblers, telling them to repent and blessing them in Hebrew. In her underwear" (Thorazine, p. 269).

"There were no guarantees. They were alone in a city that neither of them knew. Just him, her, this moment, the truth" (Stratosphere, p. 294).



Topics for Discussion

Though the characters themselves seem obsessed with glamor, how does the narrative as a whole present this concept? Are there any discrepancies in its treatment of the concept?

The novel goes back and forth between several points of view. Who are the major heroines and heroes?

Compare and contrast the kinds of glamor offered by Los Angeles and Las Vegas. What are the advantages to each? What are the disadvantages to each?

Though the characters all seem blessed in many ways, each one has a flaw or problem he or she is working through. Compare and contrast these. Discuss their final resolution.

How is femininity presented in the book? How is masculinity presented in the book? Does the author provide alternate views of either construction?

What role does chance, or fate, play in the book? Discuss three characters and their experiences with luck.

What is the significance of Dee hearing Ruby's voice? How might this make other story lines more complex?