

Ball Don't Lie Study Guide

Ball Don't Lie by Matt de la Peña

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Plot Summary

Published in 2005, "Ball Don't Lie" is the first of four young-adult novels by Matt de la Peña. The book is a gritty coming-of-age story of a troubled throwaway named Sticky (his real name, Travis Reichard, is rarely used). Now seventeen, Sticky bounces from one foster home to another as repeatedly as the dribbled basketball that is his talisman and ticket out of the ghetto. The boy suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder that was spawned by a traumatic incident he witnessed as a seven-year-old: his birth mother's suicide when she slashed her wrists in their apartment's bathtub. Since then, Sticky has bottled up his feelings, except for indulging his passion for basketball, haunting the hoop courts at Lincoln Rec, a squalid public gym in the bowels of East Los Angeles. There, in the homeboy camaraderie of pickup ball games with its marginalized but likeable denizens, Sticky finds his only true purpose and transcendence—even though he is the only white boy among the people of color who inhabit the novel. Street-smart and resourceful, the boy routinely engages in shoplifting and petty thievery to get by, until his life is turned around by the one person who believes in him, his sixteen-year-old sweetheart, Anh-thu (also known as "Annie."). Anh-thu, a half-Vietnamese girl whose mother abandoned her at the age of six, is a smart and sensitive girl who befriends Sticky when he tries to shoplift some jeans from the clothing boutique where she works.

The action mostly takes place during the six-month period of Sticky and Anh-thu's relationships, but the narrative is frequently interspersed by flashbacks to Sticky's boyhood and his succession of foster homes. Anh-thu provides the only tenderness Sticky experiences during a period divided between the basketball courts of Lincoln Rec and the brutal streets of East L.A. Sticky and Anh-thu have sex in various public locales—under a highway bridge and in a public restroom—resulting in her becoming pregnant, but this is presented only as a minor episode. Thanks to her gentle presence, Sticky begins to reflect on his life for the first time and resolves, though without success, to stop his life of petty crime and obsessive-compulsive behavior. He is selected for a prestigious basketball camp, but just before he goes, he reverts back to his criminal behavior in order to buy a birthday bracelet for his girlfriend. Sticky goes to an ATM and robs a man at knife point, netting \$400. The man, a drug dealer, catches up with Sticky as he sat nearby counting the bills over and over and over again. A scuffle ensues, and Sticky is shot in the wrist of his ball-shooting hand. As he recovers in the hospital, with Anh-thu at his bedside, Sticky is able to cry and let out his feelings for the first time since his mother's death a dozen years earlier. The cathartic experience is profound, causing Sticky to finally settle into his body and accept himself for who he is.



Chapter 1 to 4

Chapter 1 to 4 Summary

The beginning of "Balls Don't Lie" is an introduction to the world of Lincoln Rec, the public gym that does double duty as a basketball court and a homeless shelter. It has a "court that accommodates the fearless" and another one that "houses the homeless". Throughout the novel, Lincoln Rec is portrayed as a kind of idyllic basketball paradise, where the same bunch of idiosyncratic though likeable characters gather to indulge their passion. Sometimes they get into fights and scrapes, sometimes the place feels squalid and nasty, but it's one of those all-male preserves where guys treat each other with a tenderness and affection despite their external toughness. Sticky emerges as a unique character, a troubled youth whose OCD requires him to repeat various motor activities like tying his drawstrings or spitting. Through flashbacks to Sticky's childhood, we learn that Sticky has been exhibiting this kind of behavior since childhood, when he lived with his birth mother, Baby. Other characters introduced include: Dreadlock Man "with his fierce fists and suspect jump shot"; Dante, "slick with both the rock and his mouth" and the best player in the gym; and Hawk, a big black man who wears shades and baggy shorts. The scene shifts from Lincoln Rec to the more upscale world of the Third Street Promenade, where European tourists and Japanese businessmen share tables with teenagers who often get into arguments with each other while hanging out at the food court. The scene of Third Street Promenade reoccurs several times during the novel, establishing it as the very opposite of the gritty, ghetto-like world of Lincoln Rec. But Third Street Promenade is a ghetto of its own, catering to the affluent movers and shakers in a world that Sticky and his friends find an impossible dream. Anh-thu is introduced as a smart and confident girl who defuses conflicts and raises the general tone of the young people's interactions. At this moment, however, she breaks down crying and refuses to tell her friend Laura what is bothering her. (This puzzle is resolved later in the story when Anh-thu confesses to Laura that she is pregnant with Sticky's child.) Laura gives Anh-thu a toy camera where she can keep pictures of Sticky, who has been her boyfriend for several months. Laura also reveals her fantasy, to land a guy from UCLA, in her words. She reveals that on weekends she and her friends use their fake IDs to get into Westwood bars where they can flirt with the Bruins from UCLA. . In this chapter, girl talk predominates as Laura and Anh-thu confide in each other about their romantic liaisons and hopes for the future. Laura emerges as an assertive, powerful figure as she persuades some unruly Mexican kids to stop bothering the girls, even when one of them displays a knife.

Chapter 1 to 4 Analysis

These chapters introduce the major characters and setting for this episodic novel, which is not told in a traditional narrative arc from past to future. Three major settings are described in this group: the gritty, ghetto-like public gymnasium called Lincoln Rec; Sticky's current foster-care home; and the upscale Third Street Promenade, including



Millers, the store where his girl-friend Anh-thu works. Sticky is introduced as a disadvantaged white kid who feels most at home playing basketball with the mostly black and Latino denizens of Lincoln Rec. He is described as a kid with no real family, shunted from one foster-care situation to another. These opening chapters give a brief glimpse of Sticky's early life, when he was brought to Los Angeles at the age of six by Baby, his birth mother. We learn of Sticky's obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which requires him to obsessively repeat certain actions. This foreshadows situations later in the novel, where his OCD behavior nearly costs him his life. The chapters on Lincoln Rec and Third Street Promenade present the stark contrast between the two worlds that frame Sticky's existence as a white kid striving to leave the ghetto by making use of his considerable basketball skills.



Chapter 5 to 8

Chapter 5 to 8 Summary

Georgia, Sticky's current "foster lady," celebrates his seventeenth birthday by putting three candles on a Hostess Cup Cake. Probably unbeknownst to her, Sticky acquired his name at the age of six when he and his birth mother, Baby, lived over a wholesale bakery and he used to enjoy eating cupcakes, letting the frosting stick to his lips. Sticky keeps information about his birthday to himself, not revealing it to anyone until later that day when he and his friends are stopped by the police and frisked for weapons. But no one felt like celebrating, since they were arrested and cuffed and brought to the police station for questioning. Sticky plans a trip to the mall to shoplift some clothes, rehearsing the confident attitude he must have when walking out of a store with a bunch of clothes slung over his arm. Though he has followed this routine in the past, he changes his mind after meeting Anh-thu, who gives him the attention he sorely lacks. It is surprising to Sticky that a store clerk lavishes so much attention on him, as if he sincerely mattered to her as a customer and a human being. Moreover, he admits to himself that he has some kind of a crush on Anh-thu, whose green eyes always make his stomach drop. He recalls the liaisons he had had with several girls in the past, who paid attention to him only because they were sluts in the grip of infatuation. Sticky remembers that there was never any emotional connection in any of these encounters. But Anh-thu is different. Suffering an OCD because of his anxiety that her attention triggers in him, Sticky repeatedly buttons and unbuttons the jeans he plans to steal, but gives up the attempt. He decides not to steal anything out of respect to this Vietnamese girl who is causing him such emotional tension. Flashback to his first meeting with Georgia, who accepts foster kids only because she can get money from the state. He was sixteen, and promised to "try harder" this time. Before leaving the foster center to go home with Georgia, Sticky plays a game of foosball with Julius, his counselor. Sticky ponders his addiction to the game, and how his prowess at the game gave him one of the few sources of pride in his life. After losing to Sticky, Julius takes him outside for a game of basketball, a kind of revenge for him because Julius beats Sticky, but this only prods the boy on to try harder, and he eventually becomes a hot-shot basketball player. It is while the two are playing basketball that foster lady Georgia drives up to take Sticky home. Back at Lincoln Rec, a hard-fought basketball game creates dramatic tension. The game is described in vivid, fast-paced detail, with Sticky awes his fellow players and spectators with his skillful plays, even though he is the center of an altercation over a disputed play. For the first time, the other players single out Sticky's race, celebrating his prowess with comments such as "That white boy can ball, huh, Heavy?" The players have a diehard sense of fair play, arguing out of principle over what they consider to be bad calls by the referee. During the game, a spectator names Fat Chuck comes down and intervenes in a dispute between Carlos and Rob. Later in the novel, Fat Chuck will try to initiate sexual activity with Sticky.



Chapter 5 to 8 Analysis

These chapters introduce the human, interpersonal relationships that Sticky has, most notably with the two women who at this point play a significant role in his life: Georgia, his current "foster care lady"; and Anh-thu, the Vietnamese teenager who becomes his sweetheart and redeemer. Georgia is portrayed as a rather insensitive woman who is interested in Sticky only because he provides more income for her. Anh-thu, on the other hand, is portrayed as a mature and sensitive young woman who takes a special interest in Sticky, even though he originally comes to her store with the intention of shoplifting. Anh-thu thus emerges as a major character, one who will definitely have an impact on Sticky as the novel progresses. The section also includes a chapter on a basketball game at Lincoln Rec, to underscore the importance of ball to Sticky's self-identity. At Lincoln Rec, Sticky earns the respect of all the other players for his skill and commitment to the game.



Chapter 9-12

Chapter 9-12 Summary

The scruffy environment of the gym is described in great detail, as a place "full of its own funky politics and stratifications" - a place where "there are a hundred different ways of talking and a thousand uses of the word motherfucker. Long lists are offered of why all the dudes hang out at Lincoln Rec: to play the game, to watch the game, to talk trash, to "throw their bodies around down low." Despite its seedy appearance, the rec center is loved by its regulars because it is the only place in their lives where they have any control over anything: "Some feel like they're part of something. Like a book club or church." But "no matter who they are, or why they come, every one of them squints their eyes when they step foot out of the dark gym and back into the bright world that waits outside." Flashback to Sticky at the age of six, with Baby his birth mother and Mico, her live-in boyfriend. Baby tells Sticky conflicting stories about the identity and fate of his real dad, stories that included him in combat, in a drug bust, in a suicide attempt on the Golden Gate Bridge. Baby dresses up like a street hustler to turn tricks on the weekends, leaving Sticky in the care of Mico, who abuses him in order to "make a man out of him." One night, after an OCD episode, Sticky accidentally spills Mico's stash of marijuana. Enraged at the boy, Mico burns Sticky's ear with his cigarette, causing him to be removed from their custody and placed in foster care. The scar from the wound will remain with Sticky for the rest of his life, both physically and psychologically. There follows a chapter-long monologue in which Sticky tells Anh-thu how much he wants to play professional basketball. He revels in a fantasy of being in the bright lights of a professional arena, with the announcer repeating his name over and over. He tells her that God has placed him on earth for a reason—to play ball—and that she is an inspiration to help him achieve this. He talks fervently about his dream to eventually make it into the NBA. This is Sticky at his best, idealistic and committed to achieving his goals with persistence and passion. Flashback to Sticky at the age of nine, when he is taken in by Francine, the first of his "foster ladies." A widow with grown children and grandchildren, she takes in Sticky to assuage her loneliness. She dresses him up in his first suit and tie and takes him to an upscale restaurant for the first time in his life, where he sees other more privileged children around him for the first time. There, Francine teaches him table manners and says grace, both of which are new experiences for Sticky. Though he doesn't understand the Bible passages and religious talk she spouts, "he liked that her words were aimed at him and nobody else." Soon afterwards, she is diagnosed with terminal cancer and has to give Sticky up. He learns of her death only by overhearing a counselor talking about it. When he is told officially a few days later, he pretends he doesn't know anything—another example of Sticky's practice of bottling up his feelings when confronted with trauma or abandonment.



Chapter 9-12 Analysis

These chapters offer more detailed descriptions of Sticky's past life, which help explain his present situation and his OCD behavior. In this section, we are introduced to Baby, Sticky's biological mother, who tried to raise him in a fatherless household while supporting herself as a street hooker. A crucial scene from Sticky's sixth year is described, when he is abused by Baby's live-in boyfriend, Mico, who burns Sticky's ear with a cigarette, leaving a scar still visible years later and that flares up when he is under stress. We also learn of Sticky's second foster-care home, with an elderly widow named Francine, who was the only foster-parent who sincerely loved the boy. Another chapter describes a first-person narrative in which Sticky vows to Anh-thu that he will persevere because of his obsession with basketball.



Chapter 13-16

Chapter 13-16 Summary

Back at the Lincoln Rec gym, Jimmy (the manager, whose general anxiety causes him to stutter under pressure, as in this situation) shuts down the center after a dispute erupts among the players. But the guys settle it themselves and soon go back to playing ball after demonstrating they are only doing what they love best. However, several incidents of fighting on the courts have taken place in the weeks prior to this.

Afterwards, Sticky returns to the clothing store where Anh-thu works in the hope of shoplifting some jeans again, but once again gives up the idea when the girl again pays him some of the attention he is starved for. When he realizes that she actually watches him play basketball at school, he is so flattered that he accepts her invitation to go out for a walk. This "date" results in their first sexual encounter, a quick and furtive incident under a nearby bridge, surrounded by unromantic squalor. After making love, Sticky tells himself for the first time that he really feels happy. The narrative fast-forwards to Sticky's seventeenth birthday, when a ball game is in progress between Venice (his school) and their arch rivals, Dominguez Hills. Though he has OCD episodes during the game, as when he repeatedly picks up and throws down his warm-up jacket, Sticky becomes the stand-out hero of the close-fought game, which is described as a psychological battle of wit and strategy. To celebrate their victory, Sticky and his friends drive out to Santa Monica in a '67 Impala. Flashback to when Sticky first joined his school basketball team. At the time, he got into a fight with Sin, a Puerto Rican teammate who had provoked him. The coaches lecture both boys, who promise to stop fighting, but the teammate attacks Sticky out in the parking lot after practice. After first taunting Sticky for being in foster care, Sin tells the boy (with a knee in his chest) that he doesn't care how many homes he had been in. They bond in the shared honesty of the moment. As a result, Sticky is able to relax and develop a closer friendship with Sin.

Chapter 13-16 Analysis

This group of chapters describes more vividly the polarized world in which Sticky is experiencing his adolescent years, torn between the ghetto-like world of Lincoln Rec and the upscale world of the Third Street Promenade. Lincoln Rec is a totally masculine world where no women ever appears. Third Street Promenade, on the other hand, is a more refined and "feminine" world, one presided over by his girlfriend Anh-thu, who works in one of its clothing boutiques. The chapters also describe in greater detail the conflicts and struggles Sticky undergoes in the every-man-for-himself world of pick-up basketball. It is a passionate game, one that erupts into brawls and confrontations. Here, Sticky is portrayed as a flesh-and-blood character like all the others, but with a persistence and conscientiousness—inspired in no small part by Anh-thu—that enables him to overcome his station in life and grow as a character.



Chapter 17-20

Chapter 17-20 Summary

Flashback to Sticky's second foster-care parents, Carmen and her husband Ruben. Ruben and Sticky play baseball together obsessively, and watch horror movies while eating popcorn. But from behind their closed bedroom door, Sticky overhears Carmen complain that Sticky creeps her out and that he's just a stray and not a real part of the family. Ruben and Carmen seem to be divided over their loyalty to the boy. After a week, they return him to the foster-care agency. During the ride back, Ruben confesses to Sticky and Carmen that he witnessed his own father moving out when he was a kid, something that was eventually for the better. Ruben realized that he really didn't need his father, he tells Sticky. Back to a fast-paced game at Lincoln Rec, which is "bursting at the seams" with guys waiting to play. During a heated game, Sticky gets an accidental cut over his eye. It disturbs him because he is planning to see Anh-thu that evening, her sixteenth birthday. A rival player taunts Sticky for being a "white boy." Fat Chuck, a hanger-on at Lincoln Rec, suggests he take Sticky to the restroom to treat the wound. Sticky feels disappointed for getting hurt and letting his teammates down. In the restroom, Fat Chuck tells Sticky he needs stitches, but he doesn't want to undergo that medical procedure, preferring to tough it out. Fat Chucky then asks Sticky about his plans for a birthday gift for Anh-thu that night. When Sticky reveals he has only \$12, Fat Chuck suggests purse-snatching, a strategy that Sticky flatly refuses. Then Fat Chuck makes a sexual advance, suggesting "white boy" Sticky can earn some money for his girlfriend that way. Enraged, Sticky punches Fat Chuck and tells the other boys what happened. They chase Chuck as he tries to escape by driving out of the parking lot. Sticky is most upset by the fact that he has to tell details of the sexual advance to his teammates. The gym's manager calls the police because he's afraid he will be accused of negligence during his watch. Flashback to Sticky's third foster-care family, the Smiths, who assume an air of middle-class respectability. But Sticky realizes that "he'd already started to figure out who he was supposed to be" and starts acting like a thug and thief, hanging out with black and Mexican gangs. He starts failing his classes, skipping school, and is arrested for shoplifting. The last straw comes when Sticky is found in bed with Jamie, the Smiths' teenaged daughter. Hysterical, Mrs. Smith punches Sticky and demands her husband come home to drive Sticky back to the foster-care center less than a year after they initially welcomed him into their household.

Chapter 17-20 Analysis

This group of chapters is framed by descriptions of Sticky's second and third foster-care homes, the one offered by Carmen and Ruben and that offered by the Smith family. Both situations are short-lived: Carmen and Ruben send him back to the foster-care center after only a week because they disagree on the value of a foster child as opposed to a biological child. The Smiths, on the other hand, send him back after they catch Sticky in bed with their teenaged daughter. The intervening chapters describe a



situation at Lincoln Rec where Sticky is injured in a game and where Fat Chuck makes a sexual overture to him. These chapters show Sticky's passage through adolescence, from a twelve-year-old with Carmen and Ruben to a fifteen-year-old with the Smiths. By the time he is fifteen, he believes he needs to act out his thuggishness, which he believes to be his true identity at the time. These chapters therefore depict the stress Sticky is experiencing in his adolescent years; they serve to chart the developing conflict in Sticky's psyche between the positive qualities inspired by Anh-thu and the negative qualities provoked by the competitive world of Lincoln Rec.



Chapter 21-24

Chapter 21-24 Summary

Return to the post-game celebration where Sticky and some of teammates are driving around in the '67 Impala, "the buzz of the big playoff win...still spinning in their heads." They visit a liquor store owned by Milo, a good-natured guy that the kids like. He offers Sticky some Tootsie Roll pops, which he licks while swigging malt liquor—the combination reminds him of being both young and grown-up at the same time: "Seventeen instead of sixteen. Almost a man." Sticky and his teammates are so excited after the game they start reenacting it. While doing so, they walk in front of Corona Imports, a Ferrari dealership. They admire the sports car in the window, wishing they could own one. In a sudden outburst of both rage and triumph, Sticky shatters the window with a rock. Pursued by a police car, Sticky leads his friends in a sprint through the upscale shopping district. The cops finally catch up with them and demand to know who threw the rock. Sticky admits to it, in a show of responsibility. Meanwhile, as the police action unfolds, the homeless denizens of the area shuffle past, not even noticing what was going on. Flashback to a Saturday night in mid-April when Sticky and Anh-thu are on their way to a party. They walk through a park with some basketball hoops and Sticky insists on demonstrating his expertise for her. He goes on for an hour, dribbling and clowning and explaining his passion for the game. Anh-thu falls asleep as Sticky is in nirvana, not stopping even with the automatic sprinklers come on. On another occasion, Sticky goes to meet Anh-thu for a sixth-month anniversary date in Paradise Park. He swipes some champagne from a liquor store, and she gives him a brown bead necklace she has made. He serves her the champagne in coffee mugs, boasting he's romantic like Romeo, "that one cat" Anh-thu reads about in English class. As night falls, the park becomes a refuge for vagrants and the homeless/ As they drink the two have a heart-to-heart talk and play a game of confession, where they each have to answer each other's questions totally honestly. Sticky says that the thing that makes him happiest is playing ball, while Anh-thu confesses that the thing that makes her saddest is thinking about how her mother abandoned the family when the girl was only six. But when Anh-thu asks Sticky about his mom, he freezes up and refuses to answer or continue the game. She says she worries about him because he has so much bottled up inside. They go to a park restroom and have sex. Later he tells her about going to basketball camp and dreaming of playing ball, both inspired by her. He walks her to her friend Laura's house, where she will spend the night. On his way home, Sticky has an OCD episode, where he has to tap every mailbox on the way. He is propositioned by a street hooker, telling her he is really 21. She complains about how men don't treat her right and shows Sticky how a woman likes her hand to be kissed. Their encounter is interrupted when a john pulls up in a car and the woman makes a deal with him for sex. Immediately afterwards, Sticky goes on to Lincoln Rec and finds Dreadlock Man and Danny, two of his gym buddies, sitting outside drinking. They offer him a swig from their bottle, which he accepts.

Chapter 21-24 Analysis

This group of chapters describes Sticky's first experiences of independent decision-making as he moves from supervision by adults to making decisions based on peer pressure. Sticky is depicted for the first time in an environment with his own age-mates, unlike the situation at Lincoln Rec where older adult males form part of the group. When he is with his high-school teammates celebrating after a game, Sticky begins to act out via underage drinking and petty vandalism. When he smashes a window at the car dealership, he gets into trouble with the police for the first time. Even his liaison with Anh-thu takes place in a sordid, dangerous environment. Though he is in love with her, he lingers with a street hooker afterwards. These chapters further underscore the turbulent struggles that are going on beneath the surface.



Chapter 25-28

Chapter 25-28 Summary

Georgia, Sticky's new "foster lady" takes him home to Venice, his present home. He says goodbye to his roommates in foster care. The director wonders why Sticky can't seem to find a permanent foster-care arrangement. He has a heart-to-heart talk with the boy, complimenting Sticky, telling him he's a good person, and tells the boy it's not his fault that he keeps getting rejected by his new parents. The other resident kids in foster care pull themselves away from watching MTV videos to bid him farewell. Shift to the morning of Anh-thu's sixteenth birthday when she has an attack or morning sickness in the staff bathroom at work. She realizes that she may be pregnant with Sticky's child. She resolves to grow up, stop acting like a little girl, and face this situation with courage. Scene shifts to Lincoln Rec, where Sticky is being interviewed by two cops about Fat Chuck's molestation attempt. Sticky resists their probing, and one of the cops remembers arresting him for throwing the rock through the car dealership window. Sticky had begged the Lincoln Rec director not to get the police involved, but is told his own job requires him to report these incidents. As the cops grill him, Sticky begins to bond with them a bit, remembering they too were once seventeen and are nothing more than "normal people dressed up." After the interview, he goes back to playing ball and thinks about buying a stuffed bear and swipe a bracelet for Anh-thu's birthday. Flashback to the sixth day of Sticky's presence at Lincoln Rec. The other guys question him, wanting to know his real name and why a white guy wants to play ball with them. It is revealed that his real name is Travis Reichard, born in Virginia and named after Randy Travis, his mom's favorite singer. Baby, his mom, took him to LA where they lived over a wholesale bakery shop. Young Travis used to eat the Hostess Cup Cakes, and Baby started calling him "my little sticky boy." The other guys reveal how they got their own nicknames. Though outwardly tough, the guys begin sharing honestly with one another and confess secrets about their past. Flashback to scene where Baby slashes her wrists in the bathtub, screaming out for Sticky to rescue her. In this traumatic situation, he is immobilized by OCD, rocking back and forth endlessly as the police come. Since "Sticky" is his mother's last word, he wants to be known by that name forever.

Chapter 25-28 Analysis

These chapters are especially significant because they describe a deep, introspective self-analysis that Sticky and Anh-thu are both undergoing. Suddenly made aware of her pregnancy, Anh-thu resolves to be grown-up about it and be a better mother than her own mother had been. Sticky's persona is challenged by his peers at Lincoln Rec, most notably by Dante, whose persistent questioning and devil's advocacy forces Sticky for the first time to make a deep and fearless moral inventory of himself. These chapters underscore the importance of confession and self-scrutiny. The flashback to Baby's

suicide scene only serves to remind Sticky of the need to exorcise the demons from his past and live authentically into the future.



Chapter 29-30

Chapter 29-30 Summary

Shift to Lincoln Rec, where Sticky gets into a fight with other players and is asked to leave. The guys at the gym sit around outside talking about life. They admire Sticky for his playing but demand he abandon his plans to shoplift a bracelet for Anh-thu's birthday. As Sticky and some of the guys are smoking pot, Sticky's friend Dante wants to know his rationale for shoplifting from a store: he tries to persuade Sticky to be more mature, though he admits that guys like Sticky have a disadvantage in American society. The two young men bond and have a heart-to-heart talk; even though Sticky is white, Dante sees him as a brother. Dante further confronts Sticky about his OCD and about the fact that he's been bouncing from one foster home to another. It is obvious that "the fact that Dante cares about Sticky is incredibly important." Sticky begins to feel a pain in his earlobe, where Mico had burned him with a cigarette years earlier. He forms a plan to rob a rich dude at knife point.

Chapter 29-30 Analysis

These chapters continue to carry forward the importance of introspection and self-scrutiny in the lives of the major characters. They also describe Sticky's journey of self-acceptance. He faces the reality that he is, indeed, an unwanted foster kid who, despite his whiteness, is still regarded as a marginalized person in American society. Lincoln Rec is the predominant setting for the two chapters in this section, again underscoring the reality of Sticky's ghettoized environment.



Chapter 31-32

Chapter 31-32 Summary

Wong and Rolando, two teenagers in Sticky's foster-care center, show Sticky a letter he got from a basketball scout at University of Southern California. As the two boys lose themselves in mindless video games, Sticky goes to take a shower and has an OCD episode, stepping in and out of the roach-infested shower, in and out, in and out. Thinking of the talk he has just had with Dante, he resolves to grow up and stop this behavior, but gives in again to his compulsion. He looks at his face in the mirror while shaving and doesn't recognize himself. Sticky is undergoing a deep soul-searching at this moment, wondering whether his life is at a turning point and how he should behave. He looks in the mirror and wonders if he is looking at a mask. He talks with Julia, one of the other foster kids, about how good she is doing in school. She is intelligent, and tells him about how astronauts are using polymers to grow food up in space, something that surprises Sticky. As he prepares to leave the house, he swipes Rolando's shirt, takes a steak knife from the drawer, and goes to the bus stop, reading the letter from USC. At the bus stop, he gets into a conversation with a fellow passenger, an old black woman, about the unpredictability of the bus schedule. In the bus, he stares at the official-looking letter from USC and re-reads it again, with obvious delight. Sticky goes to Santa Monica where he again immersed in the upscale world of power and privilege far beyond his own experience. He counts his money over and over again—twelve dollars. Enviously, he watches more privileged people withdraw money from the ATM. All the while, he is "brainstorming about hoops" and daydreaming about the next day on the basketball court. He tries to make alternative plans in case Lincoln Rec is still shut down because of the fight. He imagines a friend letting him sneak into a gym where he can play all night, pretending he is being cheered on by enthusiastic, though imaginary, crowds. Meanwhile, the scene shifts to Miller's store, where Laura gives Anh-thu a birthday gift—a home pregnancy test—saying "I been there." Then back to Sticky, who is watching people withdraw money from an ATM. He is conflicted while thinking of Dante's conversation, about how Sticky keeps getting bounced from one home to another. But he dreams of playing basketball, which will break this cycle. Then he realizes he really needs money to buy the bracelet for Anh-thu. He robs one of the ATM customers at knifepoint, stealing \$400 from the man, whose briefcase pops open revealing a cache of drugs, indicating he is a drug dealer. Sticky runs away and starts obsessively counting the \$400 over and over again. He is so obsessed with so doing that he doesn't see the victim approaching. The drug dealer demands the return of the money at gunpoint. Sticky grapples with the assailant but is shot in the wrist - his shooting hand — during the scuffle. Sticky is rushed to a hospital. Meanwhile, Anh-thu is worried because Sticky has not shown up for a planned rendezvous.



Chapter 31-32 Analysis

These chapters are of supreme importance because they describe Sticky's decision to break from his past and make a truly authentic, existential choice that ultimately changes the course of his life and leads to his redemption. On the surface, his choice seems to be a negative one—one that flies in the face of all that Anh-thu has tried to embody for him. Sticky chooses to rob someone at knifepoint in order to make money to buy her a birthday gift. As a result of the stickup, he is shot in the wrist of his ball-playing hand. However, they propel him to finally come to terms with the anger and pain that he has been bottling up since childhood.



Chapter 32-34

Chapter 32-34 Summary

Sticky goes to Santa Monica where he again immersed in the upscale world of power and privilege far beyond his own experience. He counts his money over and over again—twelve dollars. Meanwhile, the scene shifts to Miller's store, where Laura gives Anh-thu a birthday gift—a home pregnancy test—saying "I been there." Then back to Sticky, who is watching people withdraw money from an ATM. He is conflicted while thinking of Dante's conversation, about how Sticky keeps getting bounced from one home to another. But he dreams of playing basketball, which will break this cycle. Then he realizes he really needs money to buy the bracelet for Anh-thu. He robs one of the ATM customers at knife point, stealing \$400 from the man, whose briefcase pops open revealing a cache of drugs, indicating he is a drug dealer. Sticky runs away and starts obsessively counting the \$400 over and over again. He is so obsessed with so doing that he doesn't see the victim approaching. The drug dealer demands the return of the money at gunpoint. Sticky grapples with the assailant but is shot in the wrist - his shooting hand — during the scuffle. Sticky is rushed to a hospital. Meanwhile, Anh-thu is worried because Sticky has not shown up for a planned rendezvous. She calls all her friends Lincoln Rec, the police, and finally the local hospitals, learning that Sticky has been admitted. Lying in a hospital bed, with flashbacks of Baby in the bathtub, of his being arrested, he sees that Anh-thu has come to visit him. In his pain and confusion, Sticky remembers the traumatic scene when he had witnessed Baby's violent death years ago. He envisions himself rocking back and forth uncontrollably as Baby dies. For the first time since that traumatic incident, he cries, and life comes flooding back into him. For the first time, he accepts himself fully, and the love of Anh-thu. Some months later, after playing in front of scouts and coaches at several summer camps, Sticky returns to Lincoln Rec for one last game with the gang. He displays the scar on his wrist to the other dudes; it has healed well enough for him to play again. He feels fully accepted as one of the guys, and has fully accepted himself. The novel ends with the line "Then he makes his move."

Chapter 32-34 Analysis

In these final chapters, Sticky finally grows to adulthood and takes responsibility for his life. Lying in the hospital bed, suffering a wound that may curtail his budding basketball career, he is finally moved to feel all the emotion and anger that he had been bottling up since childhood, when he witnessed Baby's suicide in the bathtub of their apartment. The fact that Sticky could allow himself to cry is an important catharsis that allows him to experience feelings for the first time. He accepts himself fully, and he accepts the love of Anh-thu, something he has been unable to do because of the traumatic incidents of his early life. The final chapter shows him making a triumphant comeback on the basketball court after his hospitalization, when he went on to play at several prestigious basketball camps during the summer. Finally, Sticky has "made his move."



Characters

Sticky

Sticky (Travis Reichard), the main character, is a seventeen-year old white kid from a troubled background who's bounced from one foster home to another because of his anti-social behavior. Lanky, and with cropped raisin-brown hair, Sticky is the son of an absent father and a woman named Baby, who turns tricks to help support her only child, Sticky is so named because of his love for eating cupcakes as a child—he finds out as a teenager that his real name is Travis Reichard. When he is six, he is abused by one of Baby's boyfriends and is severely traumatized not long afterwards when she slashes her wrists in their bathtub. As a result, Sticky bottles up his feelings and develops a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) which compels him to repeat motor actions like tying his shoelaces or counting money over and over again. This is traceable to the time when he witnessed Baby's suicide: the police find him rocking back and forth, back and forth as his way of easing the tremendous psychological pain he is undergoing. He keeps his feelings bottled up for the next ten years. Though Sticky does poorly in his schoolwork, and has attitude problems, his great passion is to be a professional basketball player, which he indulges at the seedy, down-at-the-heels public gymnasium called Lincoln Rec, populated by homeless losers and street denizens as well as men whose only glory is playing pick-up basketball. Outside of the hoops courts at Lincoln Rec, Sticky's one inspiration is his sixteen-year-old girl friend, Anh-thu. She is the only person he can open up to and release his inner tenderness. Anh-thu is a sales clerk in a clothing boutique that he routinely visits to shoplift clothing from. When she pays attention to him during one of his shoplifting forays, he abandons his plans for stealing and begins developing a romantic interest in the girl. Though they are forced to have their romantic liaisons in raw, gritty, settings like abandoned boardwalks or public restrooms, they develop a caring, loving relationship that boosts Sticky's confidence and gives him hope for the future. Still, he gets involved in shady situations like vandalism and petty thievery. His most serious crime is robbing a man at knife point while the latter is making an ATM withdrawal. The victim happens to be a small-time drug dealer who catches up with Sticky when the boy starts obsessively counting the money over and over. During the altercation, the dealer shoots Sticky in the wrist of his prized playing hand. Lying in a hospital bed recovering from the gunshot wound, he finally achieves peace when he allows himself to cry over his mother's suicide. Unlike his mother, who dies when her wrists are slit, Sticky comes to the new life of maturity when his wrist is injured. Through his suffering—and in spite of it—Sticky transcends pain and deprivation to become a mature adult. The final scene shows him playing basketball back at Lincoln Rec after playing at an elite, all-star sports camp to which he has been invited by recruiters from some of the nation's leading colleges.



Anh-thu

Anh-thu ("Annie"), the main supporting character, is a sixteen-year-old half-Vietnamese girl who has her own bad memories: her mother abandoned the family when she was six. Unlike Sticky, Anh-thu is a good student and a sensible young woman who plays the role of a healing angel not only with Sticky but with her other friends. She is introduced having lunch in an upscale shopping mall, the Third Street Promenade. Some Mexican kids try to harass her and her friends, but she defuses the confrontation with her calm and no-nonsense attitude. The young woman has the qualities of a peacemaker, of being mature beyond her years. She works in an upscale clothing boutique and meets Sticky when he enters the store with the intention of shoplifting some jeans. They fall in love, and Anh-thu fearlessly goes on dates with Sticky in places that seem disreputable or downright dangerous, like under a highway bridge or in parks after sunset. They even end up having sex at night in a public park restroom. Throughout, Anh-thu remains calm and self-possessed, which has a redemptive effect on Sticky. The two learn a great deal about each other when, at Anh-thu's initiative, they play a game called "five questions" in which each has to give honest answers to questions posed by the other. Sticky reveals that playing ball brings him the greatest pleasure, while Anh-thu reveals that she is saddest when she thinks of how her mother abandoned her father. This childhood memory inspires Anh-thu to be loyal to the men in her life, particularly Sticky, who is now the object of her love. Later, though Anh-thu expresses self-doubt and fear of retribution when she contemplates she may be pregnant with Sticky's child, she resolves to be loyal to her new family. Despite her misgivings, Anh-thu is a strong and resilient young woman; it is clear that her unconditional love for Sticky redeems him and allows him to eventually express the feelings of rage and abandonment that he has bottled up all his life. Baby is Sticky's biological mother, who gave birth to him while a teenager. She loved her son but was a victim of impoverished circumstances and poor choice of mates.

Baby

Baby has a manic-depressive personality, either "dancing around the place on her toes or sobbing under the covers...nothing in between." Despite her emotional instability and suicidal tendencies, she dotes on Sticky, even though she does not have the mental or financial resources to take care of him properly. She tells conflicting stories to Sticky about the identity of his father, sometimes saying he was an actor, other times a construction worker when they lived back east in Virginia. When Sticky is a toddler, Baby moves with him to the Los Angeles area and takes Sticky out into the streets to beg for spare change. By the time Sticky is six, Baby is working as a street hooker on weekends to help support herself and her son. For six months, her abusive boyfriend, Mico, moves in and takes care of Sticky while she is out hustling. When he is seven, Sticky witnesses her suicide when she slashes her wrists in their apartment bathtub.



Mico

Mico is Baby's abusive, addicted boyfriend who moves in with Baby and Sticky when the boy is six years old. He is a ne'er-do-well sponger whose only job is as a babysitter to Sticky when Baby is out turning tricks. He is a troubled character whose paternalistic instincts inevitably go toxic. One night, he tries to teach the seven-year-old Sticky how to "be a man" by encouraging him to chase women just as he had done, all while puffing a joint. During this so-called lesson, the boy accidentally spills Mico's marijuana stash. Mico erupts in rage and burns Sticky's ear with a lighted cigarette as punishment,

Jimmy

Jimmy is the nearsighted manager of the Lincoln Rec gymnasium. A likeable fellow—a softie, even—with a pronounced stutter and thick Coke-bottle eyeglasses, he puts up with the vicissitudes of running a dysfunctional place like Lincoln Rec. Jimmy tries to avoid confrontation at all cost; when disputes threaten to break out, he typically responds by arbitrarily closing down the facility. A pushover, he inevitably backs down, reopens Lincoln Rec, and isolates himself in his office.

Counselor Julius

Counselor Julius is the counselor in the foster-care system that Sticky inhabits. He is a source of strength and compassion, always trying to make Sticky realize he is a good person at heart. It is Counselor Julius who introduces Sticky to basketball after the young man consistently beats him at foosball at the foster-care residence. When Sticky leaves for what seems to be his last placement with "current foster lady" Georgia, Counselor Julius gives him an Old Navy bag with a beat-up basketball that belongs to the foster-care residence. The ball has the inscription "7 FLOW" on it, which helps identify Sticky later when he was hospitalized after his shooting.

Dante

Dante is a thirty-seven-year-old basketball player at Lincoln Rec who played abroad for a few years, apparently in the military. He is described as a dark-skinned man "whose skin shines black as night, and his hair is scarecrow wild" with a goatee like the devil's forking out from his chin, appropriate since he enjoys playing the devil's advocate. Dante takes a genuine like to Sticky and is able to engage him in a deep, heart-to-heart conversation in which he tries to persuade the younger guy to take charge of his life and live more honestly and authentically. Dante himself has come up in the world through the school of hard knocks. Since he has chalked up a lot of streetwise experience under his belt, he talks with authority to Sticky about the "survival of the fittest" attitudes in the world. In one scene, he smokes a joint with Sticky and gives him much fatherly advice about how to be honest and truthful in the world. When Sticky reveals to Dante his plans to go shoplifting in order to buy a birthday gift for Anh-thu, Dante urges him to rob



someone instead, just as he had done in the past. He justifies this action based on the fact that "this ain't a righteous world." He is a situation ethicist: on the one hand, he believes people should take charge of their lives and live authentically, but on the other hand he believes circumstances change things if you are born with disadvantages. He tells Sticky that some of the rules of life were made by those in power in order to keep the poor and disadvantaged in check. His world-view is unchanging; while he seems ambivalent, it makes sense to him to believe in eternal values that can and must be tweaked to fit individual situations. Part of this is playing devil's advocate, part of it is streetwise wisdom accumulated from his hardscrabble existence.

Fat Chuck

Fat Chuck, a "mulatto," is described as "Lincoln Rec's team mom or resident die-hard fan." He's "so fat he'll cause a total eclipse of the court," says one of the denizens of the place. Fat Chuck is "fat boy licking double-scoop all grown up. Gray sweatpants, gray sweatshirts" and his "breath is tequila." The man is portrayed as a perverted weakling who preys upon people in their moments of vulnerability. He angers Sticky and his friends by making a sexual advance to him in the restroom while treating an eye laceration the young man suffered during a game. Fat Chuck presents himself as an immature, emotional little boy who never grew up.

Sin

Sin is a muscular, first-generation Puerto Rican American who was also the star running back on his school football squad. With dark skin and blue eyes, Sin wears a beanie over his shaved head; knowing that his well-proportioned worked-out body will attract the ladies. Sin and Sticky get into a fight in their school locker room when Sticky aggressively changed the music Sin was listening to, flipping the dial from reggae to hip-hop. They fight again outside, but come to terms with each other when they both realize they are suffering, deep down inside, from the same kind of psychological pain. They later become friends, hanging out together and getting involved in adolescent mayhem and vandalism.

Francine

Francine is the first of Sticky's "foster care ladies" who took him under her care when he was nine. She first met Sticky when she drove up to the foster-care home in an old Volkswagen minivan with Greenpeace and Dodgers bumper stickers, and a Christian fish. A freckled older lady with red-gray hair, Francine had recently been widowed and took Sticky in to assuage her loneliness and to express her sense of Christian charity toward the downtrodden. She tells Sticky stories from Sunday school, and takes him to museums and amusement parks. On one occasion, she buys him a new suit and takes him to a fancy restaurant so she can teach him table manners and give him a sense of how middle-class people live. A year later, Francine is diagnosed with cancer and has to



return Sticky to the foster-care system. She dies several months later, a fact that Sticky accidentally overhears. She is the foster-care lady who seems to have the sincerest attitude toward caring for Sticky.

Carmen and Ruben

Carmen is Sticky's second "foster care lady" and Ruben is her husband. They became his guardians when he was twelve, a year or so after leaving Francine. Described as "younger and prettier" than Francine, Carmen drives a beat-up Chevy with the backseat ripped out. When she picked him up, she is wearing cutoff jean shorts and a tight black half-skirt. She had wavy brown hair tied in a ponytail and wispy bangs that framed her dark-brown eyes. She lived in a rundown apartment complex with Ruben, her light-skinned Hispanic husband, who is much more extroverted and talkative than Carmen. Ruben identifies with Sticky because his own father was emotionally unavailable to him and abandoned the family when Ruben was a child. Carmen, Ruben, and Sticky spend time watching horror films together on television, but the relationship lasts only a week. Carmen complains that having a foster kid was not the same thing as having a kid of their own. Ruben tries to persuade her to be patient and give the situation a chance, but Carmen prevails, and Sticky is returned to the foster-care system.

The Smith Family

The Smith Family becomes Sticky's third foster-care family when the boy is about fifteen, after Carmen and Ruben and before Georgia. The family is a strait-laced, middle-class nuclear family consisting of the two parents, two teenaged daughters (Tammie and Jamie), and a seven-year old son (Johnny). Although the Smiths try hard to welcome Sticky into the family, Sticky is at a rebellious period of his life where he decides to act out his true nature, which is to be a thug and troublemaker. They try to appeal to him rationally, asking for mutual trust, but Sticky ultimately proves unable to accept their bourgeois values. The final straw comes when Sticky is caught in bed with Jamie, the Smiths' seventeen-year-old daughter. This so horrifies the Smiths that they return Sticky to the foster-care system.

Georgia

Georgia is Sticky's "current foster lady," a married woman who is his guardian during the narrative arc of the novel, which covers the period just before and after his seventeenth birthday. She is the last in a series of foster parents that have cared for Sticky during his adolescent years. Little is known of Georgia, though her name crops up throughout the book to indicate that Georgia is living with her. She is introduced as on the morning of Sticky's seventeenth birthday, when she leaves a cupcake with three candles for him before going off to work. In the final chapters, when Sticky is in hospital recovering from a gunshot wound, she comes to visit for a few minutes, but only to do paperwork. Georgia is portrayed as a woman who takes in foster children (her "pack of strays") only



to get funding from the state, not out of any love for the children. When she first comes to pick up Sticky, she drives up in a dull-colored "meat-and-potatoes minivan" with a red stripe. The woman has fat legs and fat arms and wears a tent-like summer dress. She doesn't like Sticky's original name of Travis Reichard, and vows to do something about "that awful name." Though Georgia is mentioned throughout the novel, she has little influence in Sticky's day-to-day life. She is more a caretaker than a foster mother.



Objects/Places

Lincoln Rec

Lincoln Rec is a municipal gymnasium in East L.A. that is the focal point for much of the novel. It doubles as a basketball court and homeless shelter that attracts a wide variety of characters from the 'hood to indulge in their love for hoops. It is a paradise of sorts for these men, who love coming there despite its shabby appearance, because it is the only place where they have any control in their lives. As the author writes of its patrons: "No matter who they are, or why they come, every one of them squints their eyes when they step foot out of the dark gym and back into the bright world that waits outside."

Venice

Venice is the town near Los Angeles where Sticky lives in foster care during the main narrative arc around the time of his seventeenth birthday. He plays basketball for the Venice High School team.

Santa Monica

Promenade where Sticky and his ghetto friends engage in shoplifting, vandalism, and other anti-social acts. It is the site of Miller's clothing boutique, in the Third Street Promenade, where Anh-thu works.

House 7

Foster Living of the West, House 7 (7 FLOW) is Sticky's "foster care pad," a transient group home managed by an unnamed Mexican director. This is where Sticky lives with other homeless kids as they await adoption or placement elsewhere. The bathroom is described as roach-infested, with a cracked toilet seat and cracked linoleum. The most popular locale here is the game room, where residents play video games and where Sticky enjoys playing foosball with counselor Julius.

Sticky's basketball

Sticky's basketball, an "old beat-up" item that Sticky keeps in an Old Navy bag. It is this ball that he used when first learning to play the game. It bears the black initials of his foster-care pad: 7 FLOW. When Sticky is semi-conscious after being shot, the hospital is able to identify him by deciphering these initials.



Millers Outpost

Millers Outpost is the name of the clothing boutique where Anh-thu works and where Sticky came on two occasions with the intention of shoplifting jeans and other items of clothing. It is a fairly upscale store in the mall at Third Street Promenade. Anh-thu suffers an attack of morning sickness in the staff bathroom at this store, which causes fellow workers to suspect she is pregnant.

Long Beach

Long Beach is the seaside city where Sticky and his birth Mom Baby lived when they first came to Southern California. They lived in an apartment over a wholesale bakery, where Sticky used to love eating Hostess Cup Cakes, hence his nickname. The flat is described as a "dim, run-down" place infested with ants and roaches and with dust balls spinning through the air.

Corona Imports

Corona Imports is the name of the car dealership on Broadway in Santa Monica whose window Sticky smashes as he and his friends admire a Ferrari on display there.

Cupcakes

Cupcakes are among Sticky's favorite foods, especially as a youngster when he lived over the wholesale bakery with Baby. His foster mother Georgia celebrates Sticky's seventeenth birthday by leaving him a Hostess Cup Cake with three candles before she goes to work that morning.

UCLA Hospital

UCLA Hospital, Santa Monica is where Sticky is brought after being shot in the ATM robbery incident. It is here where Sticky finally is able to release the bottled-up emotions that he has held in since witnessing Baby's violent death a decade earlier.

Themes

Identity Transformation/Coming of Age

Sticky tries to define himself in the face of overwhelming odds. He is a throwaway white kid, victimized by personal trauma and bounced from one foster-care situation to another. His dreams of playing professional basketball and the love of his girlfriend Anh-thu give him the strength he needs to transcend his past and get in touch with his true feelings. During the novel, the imperfect but likeable Sticky moves from being an angry boy out of touch with his feelings to a young man with a promising future, even if still limited by circumstance.

OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder).

OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). Sticky suffers from a syndrome that forces him to repeat certain motor actions over and over again. The OCD kicks in when he is under stress, and is probably exacerbated by traumatic incidents he witnessed as a child. His OCD proves his undoing when he robs an ATM customer at knife point; the customer pursues Sticky and finds the young man obsessively counting the \$400 over and over again, so he is easy prey for retribution.

True Love/Female Redemption

Anh-thu, the woman in Sticky's life, brings order and stability to his existence by her unconditional love. At times when Sticky seems prone to act out his impulses, the presence of Anh-thu restrains him and gives him confidence that he can overcome his difficulties. She sticks with him to the end, and his acceptance of her love gives him the ability to resolve the traumatic fallout from his mother's suicide, which he witnessed as a child.

Proletarian Values.

The "have-nots" who populate Lincoln Rec and the mean streets of L.A. are portrayed as essentially good people who care for and support one another. Though the odds are stacked against them, the novel implies that they can prevail over their circumstances and lead authentic, productive lives even if outside the mainstream of American life.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of "Balls Don't Lie" is a combination of omniscient narrator and first-person monologue. The narrative is not told in chronological order; instead, various incidents of past and present are related with a cumulative effect of telling the recent past story of the major characters. The author knows the story and backstory and presents them in unconventional order to mimic the vagabond, randomized way that the characters move through life. Only Sticky and Anh-thu seem to have a sense of direction: his is to indulge in his great passion for basketball, hers is to serve as a healing, redemptive figure. The author's point of view supports his affection for all his characters.

Setting

"Ball Don't Lie" takes place in the Los Angeles metropolitan area: notably East L.A., the gritty underbelly of the city that is the location of Lincoln Rec, a public gymnasium where men, mostly of color, go to indulge their passion for basketball. Lincoln Rec is the gritty paradise inhabited by the homeless or down-and-out as well as the aspiring hoop stars of the 'hood. Contrasted with this neighborhood are the upscale shopping districts of Santa Monica and the Third Street Promenade, where Sticky and his friends engage in various forms of mayhem, ranging from shoplifting to vandalism to armed robbery. The Third Street Promenade is also the site of Miller's clothing boutique, where Anh-thu, Sticky's redemptive girlfriend, works. Several scenes are set in the various foster homes that Sticky bounces in and out of like a dribbling basketball.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in an informal, colloquial style with short, pithy sentences that offer vivid descriptions of life in a minority neighborhood. Dialogue is set off in italics, not by more conventional use of quotation marks. Sometimes, informal spellings or less rigid grammatical constructions are used to give a sense of vernacular speech, such as "ain't," "gonna," or "It don't make no kinda sense." The overall effect of the language engages the reader in entering the world of characters and situations that may not be familiar to him or her.

Structure

The novel is composed of 34 unnumbered chapters. Some are short as one or two pages; others are ten pages or more. The main action takes place over a roughly six-month period around Sticky's seventeenth birthday and Anh-thu's sixteenth, when the two of them are engaged in a relationship. Other incidents, such as Sticky's earlier life



and foster-care situations, are described in chapters and sections that are interspersed with the main narrative, giving a filmic sense of "flashback/rewind" or "fast-forward" mode. The chapters are unconventionally "titled" by the device of having the first few words of each opening sentence blown up in large display type: for example, It's Tied Sevens And Sticky's handling the rock on top. Back and Forth with the left hand. In front of his glazed body. Rhythm pats....

The chapters are not arranged in chronological order. Instead, they present past and present events in seemingly random order, allowing the reader to piece together the story through the cumulative effect of the asynchronous chapters. As the reader recognizes recurring incidents and situations, the thread of the narrative makes itself evident. Chapters describing the endless basketball games going on at Lincoln Rec occur fairly regularly, underscoring the importance of the game and its rituals to the narrative. Everything else that happens to the characters is framed by this setting, which almost takes on life of one of the characters. Quotation marks are not used; instead, dialogue is italicized throughout, suggesting a greater sense of immediacy and informality.



Quotes

"It's the best place in L.A. to ball...one court houses the homeless and the other accommodates the fearless." (Chapter 1, p. 4)

"Everything else in the world turning off." (Chapter 3, p. 18)

"Sticky swipes gear like he shoots hoops. Shuts off his mind and rolls instinct." (Chapter 6, p. 31)

"Type of dribbles that get you in the groove to cut and slash, body loose and quick to make somebody look like a fool." (Chapter 8, p. 44)

"I could tell you a lot about this game ... How a dark gym like Lincoln Rec is a different world. Full of theft and dunk, smooth jumpers and fragile egos." (Chapter 9, p. 52)

"But no matter who they are, or why they come, every one of them squints their eyes when they step foot out of the dark gym and back into the bright world that waits outside." (Chapter 9, p. 55)

"I know it don't sound good, Annie, but I think if I couldn't make it I wouldn't wanna be around no more. Cause it's all I got in my life, you know? Playin ball. It's all I got in the whole world. And if I couldn't make it, I woulda been wrong all this time about God's plan." (Chapter 11, p. 69)

"No matter how you look at it, this ain't no righteous world. It just ain't. I mean, there's no debatin about that." (Chapter 30, p. 228)

"It actually feels good to cry. It's like he can actually feel himself settling into his own body. He feels the beating of his own heart. He no longer wants to hide, pretend he doesn't exist. He is here. In this hospital bed. Breathing. This is who he is. Sticky Reichard. Travis Reichard." (Chapter 33, pp. 273-4)

"Then he makes his move." (Chapter 34, p. 280)



Topics for Discussion

What attracts Anh-thu to Sticky when he first meets her?

Does Anh-thu remain a faithful friend to Sticky? What does she mean when she says she has "messed up"?

What are some reasons why Sticky is not at first appreciated by the other ball players at Lincoln Rec? How does he overcome these issues?

Contrast and compare the worlds of Lincoln Rec and the Third Street Promenade? Why does Anh-thu seem comfortable in both environments?

What role does repetitive, OCD behavior play in the plot line of this novel?

Why does Sticky have difficulties finding a permanent foster-care situation?

What does it mean to describe basketball as a metaphor in this novel?

How does Sticky change as a result of Anh-thu's influence?

Why do Dante and Sticky become such good friends?

Who are the most likeable characters in the novel, and why? Who are the most disagreeable, and why?