

Belzhar Study Guide

Belzhar by Meg Wolitzer

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Contents

Belzhar Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue - Chapter 2.....	4
Chapters 3-4.....	7
Chapters 5-6.....	10
Chapters 7-8.....	12
Chapters 9-10.....	15
Chapters 11-12.....	18
Chapters 13-14.....	21
Chapters 15-16.....	24
Chapters 17-18.....	27
Chapters 19-20.....	30
Chapters 21-22.....	33
Characters.....	36
Symbols and Symbolism.....	41
Settings.....	43
Themes and Motifs.....	45
Styles.....	49
Quotes.....	50

Plot Summary

Five students are chosen to participate in a special English class at a school for emotionally traumatized teens in the novel “Belzhar” by Meg Wolitzer. Jamaica “Jam” Gallahue and her fellow students are given journals that allow them to travel to a place the students decide to call Belzhar. In Belzhar the students’ lives are as they thought they were before they suffered their trauma allowing them a place of peace in their pain. Through the course of the class Jam and the other students develop deep friendships as they share their stories of trauma and depression.

Jam is sent to The Wooden Barn because she went into a deep depression after the “death” of her boyfriend. She was among five students chosen to participate in Special Topics in English. On the first day of class Mrs. Quenell gave the students red leather journals in which they were to write. Jam is shocked when she writes in her journal for the first time and is transported for a short time to a place where Reeve, her boyfriend, is still alive and well. She begins to talk to the other students and learns they had similar experiences when they wrote in their journals. They began to meet in secret so they can discuss the strange experiences they are having.

Because Jam is not able to go home for Thanksgiving break when a snowstorm hit the area, Griffin, another student in the class, invites her to stay with him at his parents’ goat farm. She learns he is attending The Wooden Barn because he and his friend accidentally set a barn on fire. The barn was destroyed and all the goats killed. After Jam listens to Griffin’s story she is not angry with him, as he expected, but she instead kisses him. Jam tells him they can’t have a relationship because she thinks she is cheating on Reeve.

As the semester comes to a close the students learn that when they write for the final time in their journals they will have to go through the experiences that brought them to The Wooden Barn in the first place. During her final visit to Belzhar Jam realizes that Reeve never loved her. She had been infatuated with him and had interpreted his behaviors in a way that supported her belief that he did love her. When he finally confronted her with the fact he didn’t love her Jam “killed” him in her mind because it was too painful for her to accept the rejection. Once Jam accepts the truth about Reeve, she is freed to leave Belzhar for good and love Griffin completely. The story addresses the idea that trauma can come from a variety of sources and have varying effects on different people. Themes in the novel include depression, friendship and literature.



Prologue - Chapter 2

Summary

In the Prologue, Jamacia “Jam” Gallahue says that she was sent to The Wooden Barn, a school for “emotionally fragile, highly intelligent” teens, because her boyfriend Reeve Maxfield, an exchange student from London, died. She says she loved Reeve like she’d never loved anyone before. After Jam compares her love for Reeve to math and his personality to long beaker in chemistry class she tells her reader that it was her English class at The Wooden Barn that changed her life. She says that if she had not been in that class, she would never have known about a place called Belzhar.

In Chapter 1, Jam's roommate, DJ Kawabata is jealous when she learns that Jam has been chosen for the class Special Topics in English. DJ has an eating disorder and has food stashed all over the room. The Wooden Barn is not a psychiatric hospital, it is a place intended to bring troubled teens together and help them heal. DJ has already been at The Wooden Barn for two years. One of the things that Jam did when she first moved in was to hide in her drawer a jar of Tiptree Little Scarlet Strawberry Preserve that Reeve had given her the night of their first kiss. She had sworn to never open the jar. At her old school Jam couldn't concentrate and sometimes had panic attacks. Her parents tried homeschooling but she couldn't concentrate at home either. They decided to send her to The Wooden Barn.

DJ explains to Jam it is a big deal that she got into the special English class because very few students were accepted into the class. Sometimes it wasn't offered at all if the teacher didn't think there was the right mix of students. DJ says the class lasts only one semester and that the students in it study only one writer. Students who have been in the class say it changed their lives, DJ goes on to explain, but said she'd never had a chance to talk to any of those students because they generally didn't return to school the following semester. DJ shows Jam to a big red building that used to be barn where Jam's English class will be.

Jam is surprised that DJ is popular at The Wooden Barn. She thinks how she didn't get popular at her school until she started dating Reeve. She'd even been invited to a party at Dana Sapol's house, a girl who hadn't liked Jam since they had been in second grand and Jam had noticed Dana hadn't been wearing underwear. DJ pulls Jam back to the present, ordering her to concentrate in her class and tell her everything that happens.

In Chapter 2, Mrs. Quenell starts class even though she says one student is not there yet. There are three other students in the class besides Jam. They are Sierra Stokes, Marc Sonnenfeld and Griffin Foley. Before Jam has a chance to introduce herself, a girl in a wheelchair bangs into the room. Mrs. Quenell is not as sympathetic with the girl as everyone thought she would be. She tells the girl she needs to get to class on time from that point forward. The girl in the wheelchair introduces herself as Casey Cramer. Later,



when Jam introduces herself to the class she notices that Mrs. Quenell looks at her as if what she has to say is riveting.

Mrs. Quenell then introduces herself and tells the students that this will be the last year she will be teaching. She has chosen to teach Sylvia Plath as the writer they will be studying. She passes out copies of "The Bell Jar." Marc asks if the book is appropriate since Plath killed herself. After Mrs. Quenell asks the students if they had any problems reading the book written by a writer with emotional problems and learns no one does, she introduces the students to the book. It is autobiographical and the only novel Plath wrote in her lifetime. Because Plath was an avid journal writer, Mrs. Quenell passes out red leather journals to the students so they can keep their own journals during the course of the semester. She tells the students they don't have to write in the journals until they feel properly motivated. At that point they are to write in the journals twice weekly. Before class ends, Mrs. Quenell asks the students to look out for each other.

Analysis

A good deal happens in these first two chapters of the novel. The reader learns in the Prologue that Jam, who acts as the narrator of the story, has had some sort of trauma in her life that has put her into a deep depression. She says that her boyfriend, whom she had dated less than two months, died. Notice some strange things in this section of the novel that indicate there may be a twist in what actually happened to Jam. First, notice that on her application to The Wooden Barn, Jam's parents wrote that she was suffering the effect of a trauma as the reason why Jam needed to attend the school. Notice there is no mention of a death even though that is the reason that Jam says she was sent there. Second, when Jam shares the way her friends treated her after the death of her boyfriend they don't seem very sympathetic. In fact, they seem almost callous. Jam mentions that one of the girls suggested Jam needed to "get over this already" (p. 11).

Depression is a theme in the novel since Jam is obviously suffering from depression. She can't concentrate and wants to stay in bed all the time. She recognizes that she is in a bad mood all the time and treats her little brother badly even though there is no reason to do so. Jam doesn't want to participate in anything. All she wants to do is sleep. Adding to the theme of depression and mental illness is Mrs. Quenell's decision to have the students study the writer Sylvia Plath. Plath was a writer who suffered with depression. She was unable to conquer her depression and it eventually led her to commit suicide. On the first day of class, one of the students question the choice of Plath and her writing as a subject of study because they are students who are termed emotionally fragile. When Mrs. Quenell questions if her students will have trouble with Plath, none of them indicate it will be a problem.

Literature is another important theme in this novel as it will be through Jam's literature class the she will begin healing. The teacher, Mrs. Quenell, tells the students that they each have a voice. She hopes during the course of the class they will be able to identify their unique voices. Notice that writing, reading and words are important to Mrs. Quenell



because she compliments a student for using a perfect word to describe her situation even while criticizing that student for being late to class.

Notice also that Mrs. Quenell seems to be the ideal teacher for the students in her class. She is sympathetic but realistic. When Casey comes to class late Mrs. Quenell lets Casey know it is not acceptable to be late even while she acknowledges that Casey's situation is difficult. She tells Casey that if she continues to be late, she will miss out on a good deal of her life. Mrs. Quenell also tells Casey that even though her life is hard, Casey had to learn to deal with this new level of difficulty. Mrs. Quenell both sympathizes with Casey because she is facing a difficult situation and encourages her to find a way to deal positively with her disability.

The theme of friendship is also introduced in this section of the novel. Among Mrs. Quenell's requirements for the class, she asks her five students to look out for each other. At this point, they aren't sure for what she's asking but agree to do so. Although it has been mentioned that Belzhar will be a big influence on Jam and her healing, the reader still knows very little about Belzhar or what it is.

Trauma and the effects of trauma is another important theme in the novel. Jam tells the reader some details about the trauma that had caused her to be sent to The Wooden Barn. She has been unable to get out of a deep depression after the death of her boyfriend. All the other students also have suffered some sort of trauma in their lives even though their traumas are not described in this section of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Jam's friends treated her so callously after the death of her boyfriend? Do you think their behavior was strange at all?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think that Sylvia Plath is a bad choice for Jam and her fellow students? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the reaction DJ has when she learns in which English class Jam is placed.

Vocabulary

subnormal, figurative, confiscate, synchronized, elite, apathetic, banished, scandalous, excruciating, aptitude, punctuality, succumbed, metaphoric, prolific



Chapters 3-4

Summary

In Chapter 3, after Jam tells DJ there wasn't anything special that happened in Special Topics in English, Jam reads two chapters of "The Bell Jar." She shares with her reader information about Sylvia Plath's depression and life before transitioning to Reeve and the way they met during gym class. She tells about conversations they had in the cafeteria as well as a portrait she drew of Reeve during her art class. It was after Jam had drawn Reeve that Dana Sapol invited her to a party. It was that night she and Reeve played with a dollhouse in Courtney Sapol's room. They had kissed and Reeve had given Jam a jar of strawberry preserves. Back in the present, Jam tries to write in her journal but can't.

In Chapter 4, DJ and Jam are woken by screaming. Jam runs upstairs to Sierra's room from where the screams are coming. Jane Ann Miller, the housemother, sends everyone back to their rooms. The following morning at breakfast, Jam hears Sierra trying to talk to another friend about a dream. The girl doesn't seem to understand what Sierra is describing. Jam learns from DJ that Sierra went through a terrible ordeal that caused her to have to be sent to The Wooden Barn. DJ can't tell Jam specifically what happened to Sierra. She says the school will not allow students to discuss the traumas suffered by other students.

At a social later in the week, Jam finds herself thinking about Reeve. Griffin confronts Jam because he thinks she is staring at him. He leaves and Casey tells Jam that she should go after him especially since Mrs. Quenell asked them to keep an eye on each other. By the time Jam decides to go outside, Griffin has already left. Casey follows her asking if she is going to hook up with Griffin. Casey is angry because she believes no one will ever want her again. Jam knows there is nothing she can say that will make Casey feel better.

Analysis

The topic of depression is developed in this section of the novel as Jam not only describes her own feelings of depression and but also as she begins studying the life of Sylvia Plath. Jam says the hours of her days go by pointlessly and she can't work up the energy she needs to try to apply herself to her work. A lack of energy as well as a feeling that there is no reason to live are both symptoms of depression. Jam indicates even the discussion in her English class zaps all of her energy. Note also that she says she feels there is no point in being awake. When she walks outside she feels she's being taunted by the beauty of nature. She sees the colors of the Vermont fall leaves but can't enjoy them.



Depression and literature combine when Jam begins reading “The Bell Jar.” The life of Esther Greenwood, the main character in the story, mirrors that of Sylvia Plath. Jam notes how Plath had begun to feel isolated and detached, similar to what Jam is feeling, during college. At that time period one of the treatments for depression was electroshock therapy, along with medication and talk therapy. Even though doctors believed Plath was “cured” she later regressed back into depression and killed herself. Mrs. Quenell’s choice of Plath as the writer for her students to study is significant because Plath’s writing lets the hurting students know that they are not the only ones to have gone through the pain of depression.

In the theme of the traumas that the students have faced, notice Jam’s statement that the isolation she feels is the hardest part. She is surrounded by people but she feels isolated. This isolation comes from her feeling that other people really don’t understand what has happened to her and don’t know how to respond to her. There are two examples of this isolation in these chapters of the novel. First, after Sierra’s screaming woke the girls in the dorm, Jam overheard as Sierra tried to tell another girl about her dream. Sierra also approached Jam but Jam also could not understand at that time what Sierra had experienced. Later, at a party at the school Casey talked to Jam about how angry she was because she didn’t think any boy would ever be interested in her again because she was paralyzed. Jam said nothing to Casey because she knew that there wasn’t anything she could say that would help Casey to feel any better about her situation.

One thing that is important to notice in this section of the novel is that Reeve didn’t give the jar of jelly to Jam as a gift as she indicated. He’d brought it with some other English foods as a gag for the party. When Jam saw it, she decided that he had brought it for her because of her name. When she asked if she could have it, he gave it to her.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences in the way depression was treated during Sylvia Plath’s life and how it is treated in modern times.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the encounter between Griffin and Jam.

Discussion Question 3

How do you think you would feel if you were in Casey’s situation? Do you think she should give up on love just because she’s in a wheelchair? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

inanimate, obscure, tedious, excruciating, protagonist, verge, surreal, mosaic



Chapters 5-6

Summary

In Chapter 5, Jam makes her first trip to Belzhar. One night after DJ had already gone to sleep, Jam decides it is time to finally write about Reeve. When she picks up her pen and journal and starts writing, her study buddy converts into Reeve. They are standing on the playing fields behind Jam's old school in New Jersey. She cries with relief. Reeve tells her they don't have much time. When the sky begins to dim, he tells her that she needs to get back. When she opens her eyes, she's back in her dorm room at school. Several pages had been completed in her journal. Some of the writing is smeared as if it were written while she was crying.

In Chapter 6, Jam wonders if she should tell someone what had just happened to her. She starts to tell DJ but decides against it. The next morning she reads what she wrote in her journal the night before. Five pages are filled with a description of the first time she met Reeve and then a description of their time on the playing field together. As she ate breakfast, Jam felt like Sierra had seemed to feel after her bad dream.

In English, everyone is in a bad mood. The students tell their teacher they are having trouble focusing. To their surprise, Mrs. Quenell dismisses them early. Jam goes to the pay phone and calls her mother, asking if she can come home. Her mother insists that she stay. Jam is angry when she gets off the phone. She meets Sierra coming into the dorm. She asks Sierra if she has seen something she believes she shouldn't have been able to see. Sierra explains what happened to her and the girls take a walk together. They don't talk much except to discuss how relieved they are to know that someone else has had the same experience they have had.

Sierra needs to pick up a book at the library so Jam goes with her. Inside they see Marc. He has his head in his hands. The girls can tell something is wrong. When Marc sees them he walks over. They tell him they know what is going on. As they talk they realize they were all writing in their journals when they had the strange experiences. Sierra suggests they should get everyone together to talk about what has happened. They decide to meet that night in their English classroom. During the meeting, Griffin seems to be paying close attention to the conversation but he doesn't admit he'd experienced anything strange. Casey did say she'd had a vision but that it had related only to her life. When Casey suggests that someone tell what they saw, Sierra volunteers to go first.

Analysis

At the beginning of these chapters Jam is still deep in her depression. Her roommate turns off the overhead light before Jam is finished studying. Jam doesn't care enough to turn the light back on. She indicates that the darkness suits her mood. After she writes



in her journal and has her encounter with Reeve, however, things begin to change for her.

In the theme of friendship, the students in the Special Topics in English class begin to bond together once they realize they have all shared similar experiences. Jam guesses Sierra had the same experience she did and confronts her even though Sierra didn't seem to think that Jam would have anything noteworthy to say to her at first. The girls share a mutual relief when they realize they've both had a similar experience. They see Marc and recognize he's probably had the same experience as they have. Once they discuss their experiences, they realize they all occurred when the students were writing in their journals. A late night meeting of all the students in the class reveals they've all had similar experiences.

In her Prologue, Jam tells her reader that it is Belzhar that changed her life. The reader is given a little bit more information about Belzhar which appears to be a place where the students can reconnect with someone they've lost. At least this was the case for Jam. She got to be with Reeve again, but only for the amount of time that it took her to write five pages in her journal. As Chapter 6 closes, Sierra is about to tell the others about her experience.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Jam's experience with Reeve.

Discussion Question 2

Why are the students hesitant about telling anyone else about the experiences they've had while writing in their journals? How might you feel if you had such an experience?

Discussion Question 3

How does Jam's mother react to her daughter's phone call asking to come home? Why will Jam's mother not let her come home?

Vocabulary

incoherent, lucid, demented, morphed, extricates, validate, infirmary, hallucination



Chapters 7-8

Summary

In Chapter 7, Sierra tells her classmates about her brother, André. The two had been very close. She studied ballet at Washington Dance Academy while André focused on jazz and hip-hop. One night riding home from classes, André asked Sierra if they could make cookies. Sierra didn't have time but told him he could get off at the store and buy some pre-made dough while she went on home to finish her homework. At dinner time André still hadn't come home from the store so Sierra and her father went to look for him. The clerk at the store remembered André buying the dough but he never returned home. Later the police found a bag with a roll of chocolate chip cookie dough in it outside the store. André had never been found. Sierra had called Sorrentino, the detective on the case, every time she thought of something she thought he should know. He finally told her to stop calling so much.

The other members of the class guess that Sierra saw André while writing in her journal. Sierra acknowledges she did see her brother and that her vision started when she was writing in her journal. She'd asked André what happened to him but he requested she not make him tell her. Sierra describes how awful it made her feel to come out of her vision and have people tell her it was just a dream. The others report similar experiences. Jam said she even tried to tell her mother what happened but that her mother wouldn't listen. When Casey indicates they would listen to her Jam knew she had to say something. She tells them only she had a boyfriend. They guess that he died. Jam has a memory of seeing her psychiatrist and having him tell her that she was telling him a story of loss. Jam hadn't believed even the psychiatrist was listening to her closely. Back in the future, the students agree not to write in their journals again until they've talked more.

In Chapter 8, back in her dorm room after bed checks, DJ asks Jam if she noticed who she was dancing with at the recent social. After Jam names the girl, Rebecca Fairchild, DJ says she thinks the girl is hot. Jam is surprised and offends DJ trying to cover her surprise. DJ recovers from the offense and says she was surprised as well. She thinks Rebecca likes her as well but doesn't know if she should talk to her about how she feels. Jam convinces DJ to talk to Rebecca.

The next morning in English class Mrs. Quenell asks Jam to give her presentation on Sylvia Plath first. Jam talks about Plath's affection for her father and her anger that he died while she was young. She discusses the poem "Daddy" in which Plath unleashed her fury at a target that Jam assumed was her dead father. Jam again asks Mrs. Quenell and the other students how they lived in spite their grief. Griffin speaks up. He doesn't give an answer but tells the class the loss doesn't have to be connected to a person. That night the group of students meet again in their English classroom. Casey volunteers to tell her story.



Analysis

In this section of the novel Jam asks a question to which many people with depression want to know the answer. After she hears Sierra's story, Jam wants to know how she gets motivated to get up each day and go out in the world, how she manages to behave like a human being when she is hurting so badly. During their discussion of Plath Jam again poses this question to her teacher and the rest of the students. Jam did not get a satisfactory answer either time that she asked the question. Notice also in this section of the novel that Mrs. Quenell asks Jam if she believes that Plath's depression came as a result of unfinished grief associated with her father's death.

As the novel progresses, notice the developing friendship between the five students in Jam's English class. They had been afraid they were each struggling with their own individual grief and would never find anyone who would understand them. Even though Griffin holds himself apart from the others and doesn't participate much in the conversations Jam wonders what happened to him to make him shut down.

Literature is significant as Jam talks about the poem Plath wrote about her father and his death. Jam is able to connect to Plath and her feelings as she wrote about the loss of her father. Significant in this section is the line in Plath's poem that she felt she needed to "kill" her father but couldn't do so because he was already dead. Notice also the timing of the break in the story during which Jam shares some background information about meetings she had with a psychiatrist. Note the wording that the psychiatrist uses to describe what Jam was telling him. He calls her story "a story of loss" (p. 87). There are two different times in the course of this short section where Jam notes the psychiatrist called what she was telling him a "story." This will be significant later in the novel.

Although the students have not yet named the place to which they have been transported when writing in their journals, it is apparent they are talking about the place that is called Belzhar. All of them, with the exception of Griffin, admits they have been transported to this place through their journals. Jam interprets Griffin's extreme interest in what the others are saying about their experiences as a sign that he's also had a similar experience. The reader already knows Jam has gotten a certain amount of relief from her grief because she'd gotten to see Reeve again. On page 85 Sierra expresses she too felt relief from her grief during her time with her brother. "All the terrible feelings I'd had since the day he disappeared were gone" (p. 85) Sierra told her fellow students.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Jam's meeting with her psychiatrist is mentioned in this section of the story? Why do you think it is significant that the psychiatrist called what she was telling him a story of loss?



Discussion Question 2

Consider Mrs. Quenell's question to Jam. Do you think Plath's depression was a result of unfinished grief from her father's death?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss DJ's decision to tell Jam about her feelings for Rebecca. Why is her admission significant?

Vocabulary

studiously, frantically, improvised, incestuous, vulnerable



Chapters 9-10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Casey tells her fellow students that her family was rich and happy even though her mother was an alcoholic. Her mother wasn't a mean drunk, drinking actually made her sweeter so the family basically ignored the problem. Casey and her sisters even had the code sentence "Mom took out the trash" when they recognized their mother was drunk. Casey's biggest fear about her mother's drinking was that she would be embarrassing. Casey said the summers were the worst because they stayed at their house in the Hamptons. Because their father worked during the week, their mother had to drive them where ever they went. One night they'd attended a party on the beach with some neighbors. A boy Casey liked had been chasing her and flirting with her.

When it was time to go home, one of Casey's sisters said she didn't think their mother should be driving. One sister thought her mother was okay to drive so their mother turned to Casey to make the tie breaking vote. Casey wanted to get home so she said she thought her mother was okay to drive. On the way home Casey said she suddenly had the sensation that she was flying and then she heard herself screaming before she blacked out.

Casey's mother had driven into a brick wall. Since Casey hadn't been wearing her seatbelt she hit the windshield severing her spinal cord and causing brain trauma. She was in a coma for three days. When she woke up Casey learned her mother had been legally drunk. She was sent to rehabilitation. Casey also went to rehabilitation to help improve her upper body strength and teach her how to use her wheelchair. When she went back to school, the boy she liked so much wouldn't have anything to do with her any longer. She became reckless and her parents decided to send her to The Wooden Barn. She tells her classmates that when she writes in her journal she her legs still work properly and she is able to walk and run.

She, like the others, has discovered that she writes five pages in her journal during each of her visits. They don't understand why they are having the experiences they are. They discuss if they should ask Mrs. Quenell if she knows about the journals. Marc believes they'd be best off to not say anything to Mrs. Quenell. Marc calls his experience a trance but Jam says she doesn't think that a trance is the right word. She thinks it is more of a place and the others agree with her. They agree to call it Belzhar, a twist on the pronunciation of Bell Jar, as a code to describe what they are going to do. They decide it is okay to continue to partake in what they call the delusion of Belzhar if they follow some rules so it doesn't take over their lives.

In Chapter 10, the group decides they should only go to Belzhar twice a week on set days. Jam is excited because Friday is her day to go to Belzhar. When DJ suspects that Jam is hiding something, Jam distracts her asking about her developing relationship with Rebecca. On Friday Jam elects not to watch the movie being shown to all students.



She sits against her study buddy again and begins writing in her journal. Suddenly Reeve's arms are around her. This time the dollhouse is in Jam's visit to Belzhar. Jam and Reeve play with the dollhouse again. She decided she wanted Reeve to see her without her shirt on but her hand is paralyzed and she cannot reach for her shirt. It is at this point she realizes that her relationship with Reeve in Belzhar can go no further than it had in real life. As the lights dim in Belzhar, Jam hears Sierra's voice calling her to wake up. Sierra has just come to check on her, something that none of her other friends had ever done for her before. Jam and Sierra look at the pages remaining in the journal and wonder what will happen when they fill in all the pages.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Jam and her fellow students come up with a name for the place to which the journals transport them. They decide to call it Belzhar, a play on "The Bell Jar" the name of the Plath novel they are reading. They base the name on the novel because they believe it is a place that people who can appreciate and relate to "The Bell Jar" need. Notice as much as the students enjoy the relief that Belzhar gives them, they realize they need to be realistic about it. They know it is a temporary fix from their problems. Because they realize their trips to Belzhar aren't fixing anything or providing a permanent solution to their problems, the students lay down some ground rules they all agree to follow. They will visit Belzhar only twice weekly on set days. They also decide to continue meeting in order to monitor and discuss their trips.

In this section of the novel Casey talks about what happened to her. Her past trauma is very different from Sierra's. Where Sierra blames herself for letting her brother walk alone from the grocery a trip during which he was abducted, Casey's trauma was physical. While drunk, her mother had driven the car with her three daughters inside into a concrete wall. Casey's spine was severed. There is no hope she will ever be able to walk again. To make matters worse, when Casey returned to school from rehabilitation, her friends all treated her differently. Some of them smothered her with pity. The boy who had once liked her would have little to do with her. Casey struggles to deal with her immobility, the difficulty of life in a wheelchair and her feelings of worthlessness.

Notice in this section that Casey describes the rehabilitation center to which she was sent as the grimmest place she'd even been. After she was released from rehabilitation Casey didn't stay in touch with any of the people there because they were too depressing. She describes the attitudes of the people there as if they had suffered such a severe trauma that they'd just given up.

Casey also describes to her friends what her version of Belzhar is like. She says that in her dream she is riding in the car with her mother before the car wreck. She's able to get out of the car and run alongside, a sensation that she misses. Notice that after her first visit to Belzhar she noticed that the papers on her desk were even blown around, as if the wind blowing in her hair as she ran was actually in the room with her.



Discussion Question 1

Why do the students decide it is best to limit their visits to Belzhar? Do you agree they made a good choice? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Sierra and Casey's versions of Belzhar.

Discussion Question 3

What does it mean that Courtney Sapol's doll house appears in Jam's version of Belzhar?

Vocabulary

delusion, disembodied, riddance, discrete, revelation



Chapters 11-12

Summary

In Chapter 11, Jam reads a letter from her mother. The letter tells her that her brother, Leo, has begun getting in trouble and smarting off to his parents. Jam's mother wants Jam to talk to him about his attitude. Jam intends to write to her brother but is so caught up in thinking about how many trips she has to Belzhar before the journal ends that she forgets. She's figured that the journal will last only through the end of the semester. Jane Ann had also made Jam join the school's a cappella group the Barntones. Jam doesn't feel like she belongs there. The only place she really feels like she belongs is in her English class. She's not sure why she belongs there. Class members have dropped hints trying to determine if Mrs. Quenell knows about the journals but can not get a definitive read. Jam has realized she's beginning to not hate her life as much anymore.

One night during one of their special meetings, Griffin brings a can of Four Loko, an alcohol based energy drink. Marc lectures Griffin that he shouldn't have the drink there because he could get expelled. Griffin blows it off until Marc reminds him of Casey. Griffin apologizes. Jam notices a nod pass between Casey and Marc. She feels they've suddenly become close. Marc dreads the end of the semester and the end of his journal. He tells them that his trauma came when he saw his father, who was his hero watching porn. When Marc looked at the computer screen closer Marc realized it was his father in the porn video. Marc's mother heard the two arguing and came downstairs. She saw the video and it destroyed the family. When Marc goes to Belzhar, he goes back to his family and home before it was destroyed. Marc believes it was his fault his family was destroyed.

In Chapter 12, when Jam tells Reeve about anything that has happened in her life since she started going to The Wooden Barn he can never remember what she has told him. In her most recent trip to Belzahar the two play soccer together. When she returns to her dorm room she looks at herself and sees a hickey on her neck. As she looks at it it fades. Meanwhile, she and Sierra have become very close friends. They exchange phone numbers so they can call one another during Thanksgiving break. There is some concern some students won't be able to get home because of a coming snowstorm. Jam is both looking forward to and dreading the break. She doesn't want to be home any longer than she has to so she waits until the last minute to try to leave. The roads have been closed at that point, and Jam is unable to go home. Griffin, surprisingly, invites her to go home with him. He lives just about a mile from the school. Jam agrees and Griffin's dad picks them up in a snowplow.

When she gets to Griffin's house, Jam has a moment of panic when she realizes she's left her journal at school. Griffin sympathizes and offers to show Jam around the farm. She asks to go inside the barn and see the goats. She learns one of them is pregnant. That night she hears Griffin and his father arguing. Griffin is refusing to help his father with the goat when she goes into labor. Jam agrees to help. The work is hard but Jam



manages to get the goat turned so it can be delivered. It is a boy. After the goat is born Jam asks Griffin's father why Griffin didn't want to help. He says there was a fire and all their goats were killed.

Analysis

There are signs in this section of the novel that Jam is continuing to heal from her depression. She feels like she's a part of her English class even though she isn't sure why. Jane Ann, the housemother, has made her begin participating in the Barntones, one of the school's singing groups. Jam realizes that she isn't hating her life as much as she used to.

Friendship also develops as a theme in this section of the novel as Marc and Casey connect with one another just as Sierra and Jam had done earlier when they shared their experiences about Belzhar. Notice that even the withdrawn and aloof Griffin realizes the mistake he's made by bringing an alcoholic beverage to class with him once his mistake is pointed out. He apologizes to Casey for his thoughtlessness. Notice also that Griffin extends friendship to Jam when he invites her to his house for Thanksgiving even though the two aren't really close friends.

In this section of the novel Marc shares his trauma story and the reader begins to learn a little bit about the circumstances that have caused Griffin to retreat inside himself. Marc's situation is different from any of the trauma's discussed thus far in the novel. The author seems to be making a point that individual people can be traumatized by a variety of different circumstances. In Marc's case, he believes he was the cause of the breakup of his family. In addition, he also lost faith in his father who was his hero when he learned that his father not only watched porn but also acted in it. Because Marc was the one who discovered his father watching the video and called his mother's attention to it by arguing with his father about it, Marc feels like it is his fault that his family has broken apart.

Griffin, on the other hand, has still not shared much about his own trauma. Jam learns from Griffin's father that there was a fire in one of the goat barns that killed all the family's goats. From the way that Griffin's father presents the information to Jam it can be inferred that Griffin had something to do with the fire. Griffin refuses to help his father with the doe in labor but his refusal seems to have more to do with fear. Griffin seems to care about what happens to the goats even though he is not willing to help out himself. This is shown by the way he watches as Jam and his father go to the barn. He also stays up presumably to hear news about the goat instead of going back to bed.

Notice in this section of the novel the student are dropping hints to Mrs. Quenell about what is happening to them when they write in the journals. They can't get a good read on whether or not she knows about the power the journals hold or what is actually happening to the students when they write in them. Notice Jam's description of the way the number of pages in the journals work out perfectly so that they will be completely filled in at the end of the semester. Notice also that Jam is becoming frustrated with the



limits of Belzhar. She is irritated that Reeve is not interested in anything new that is happening in her life. She's beginning to get bored with the limitations of their relationship.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways are the students following Mrs. Quenell's request that they watch out for each other?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the trauma with which Marc is dealing. How is it different from those suffered by Sierra and Casey?

Discussion Question 3

What does the author share about Griffin in this section of the novel? What do you think is the root of his anger and aloofness?

Vocabulary

obsess, subtly, oblivious, artisanal, sentimental



Chapters 13-14

Summary

In Chapter 13, Jam enjoys Thanksgiving dinner with Griffin's family. She and Griffin go to see the baby goat but Griffin remains aloof and pretends not to be interested. Jam and Griffin go cross country skiing the day after Thanksgiving. While they play a card game Jam admits to Griffin that his father told him about the fire in the barn. Griffin asks if his dad told her that it was his friend, Alby, who had tossed the butt that started the fire. Griffin admits the fire was terrible but says that because there is nothing he can do about it, he tries not to think about the fire or the dead goats. He asks her about Reeve. She's still not ready to talk about how Reeve died but admits to Griffin how much she misses him. He suggests that she try writing in his journal since she forgot hers.

When Jam starts writing she's transported to a goat barn instead of the playing field. A doll house seems to connect the two worlds. She can see Reeve through the doll house but can't get to him. Finally, Griffin's voice calls her back to the real world. She is shaking and he puts his hoodie on her. She explains what happened. After she learns Griffin had tried to read what she was writing, which was actually just one line of writing on top of itself over and over, she asked if she could read his journal. He agrees. She read his version of the story about the fire. It turned out he loved the goats, especially a newly born one that he had named Ginger. After the fire he'd snuck out of the house and run away in his dad's truck. He was arrested because his father reported the truck stolen.

When she finishes reading, Griffin is angry, expecting her to lash out at him. She tries to calm him down by asking what his version of Belzhar is like. He explains he's back in the old barn with Alby and the original goats. He says its the only time he feels good. Jam stands up and kisses him. He is shocked for a moment and then kisses her back. They sit on his bed and take off their shirts. They are happy and relaxed until they hear Griffin's parents calling them.

In Chapter 14, when Jam does get back to her journal and return to Belzhar, Reeve is angry because she's been away for so long. He also tells Jam he'd thought he heard her voice at one point. Jam knows it was when she tried to enter Belzhar through Griffin's journal. Reeve asks if they can just take it easy. He wants to show her the Monty Python video that he had already shown her. Jam realizes she's bored with the video. She tries to talk to Reeve about her Thanksgiving break but he doesn't seem interested. Jam can't stop thinking about Griffin and their kiss.

When DJ comes back into the room she shares with Jam after Thanksgiving break she begins crying. Her parents and Rebecca's parents had found out about the girls' relationship. Rebecca's mother has said she won't let Rebecca return to The Wooden Barn. DJ goes around the room collecting up the food she has stowed everywhere. She even finds the jar of jelly that Reeve had given to Jam but Jam yells at her to leave it



alone. As DJ is in the middle of bingeing, Rebecca bursts into the room. She'd been allowed to come back because she told her mother she'd tell everyone she was a lesbian if she weren't allowed to be with DJ. Jam thinks about how she will give DJ a lecture later about using food as an emotional crutch but then realizes she has done the same thing with Griffin.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Griffin finally opens up to Jam about his trauma. Notice that he still doesn't talk about it much, but he allows her to read his journal. He expects her to be mad at him, just like his parents were but she surprises him by trying to be understanding. He had loved the goats, especially the baby one named Ginger. It had hurt him to think that he was somehow responsible for their deaths even though he didn't see the fire as being his fault. He had not been smoking in the barn. It has been his friend Alby who had been smoking. Griffin felt his parents had jumped to conclusions because they automatically blamed him for the fire and the deaths of the goats as if he had intentionally set the barn on fire. They never asked for his side of the story. Even though his parents had told Griffin he owed them an apology, he didn't feel an apology would do any good. In his mind there was nothing he could do to change what had been done so it was best to just not think about it.

In this section a love triangle of sorts develops. Jam wants to help Griffin feel safe and happy despite his guilt from the fire so she kisses him. He is at first surprised but then begins kissing her in return. The whole time, Jam feels guilty because she believes she's cheating on Reeve but at the same time feels an attraction to Griffin. When Jam is finally able to return to Belzhar, Reeve seems to notice there is something off about their relationship. Notice that Jam is relieved when she has to leave Belzhar before she can promise Reeve that everything is sorted out between them.

When Jam had first moved in with DJ, DJ explained to her that there was a reason she kept food stowed all around the room. She said there would come a time when she would need it and that Jam would probably witness some really strange things. It is after DJ believes that her relationship with Rebecca is over that she goes on the first eating binge that Jam has ever seen. DJ's grief is short lived because Rebecca comes in announcing that she threatened her mother with coming out as a lesbian in their small town if she didn't allow Rebecca to go back to school. Notice that Jam thought she needed to give DJ a lecture about using food as an emotional crutch. Jam wonders, however, if she is not using Griffin as an emotional crutch.

Significant in this section is that Griffin and Jam learn that they can't use another person's journal as a way into their own version of Belzhar. Jam tried writing in Griffin's journal but wound up in a strange mix up of her own Belzhar and Griffin's version. When Jam did later return to visit Reeve, she learned that Reeve could hear her calling him but couldn't see her. Also significant is the way that Griffin pulled Jam out of the strange version of Belzhar by calling to her. This will be significant later in the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you think it didn't work when Jam tried to write in Griffin's journal?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Griffin's viewpoint that there was no sense in apologizing about the fire and the death of the goats since an apology couldn't change anything. Do you agree with his opinion? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss DJ's use of food as an emotional crutch. Do you think Jam used Griffin in the same way? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

aloofness, hybrid, snarky, emphatically, plundering



Chapters 15-16

Summary

In Chapter 15, all of the students seem different when they gather for the first meeting of their English class after Thanksgiving break. After class, Griffin gives Jam his maroon hoodie telling her that she left it at his house. She tells him they can't have another encounter like the one at his farm but takes the hoodie anyway. She wears it later that day. It makes her feel as if he is nearby. She realizes she wants him to be nearby even though she told Griffin otherwise.

That night at their emergency meeting Marc and Casey tell the rest of the class they've begun dating. Sierra tells them that during her last trip to Belzhar she noticed a man on the bus who she thought might have taken her brother. She'd noticed him before at dance recitals but never really paid attention until she saw him looking at André as they rode the bus together. The detective on the case had told her he didn't think it was a high value lead but Sierra plans to keep bugging him until he follows up. Sierra asks if there is something going on between Jam and Griffin. Griffin says there is even though it upsets Jam. When Griffin asks Jam again if it really can't happen again she responds by taking his hand.

In Chapter 16, Jam continues to be pulled between her growing attraction for Griffin and her love for Reeve. She receives a letter from her mother telling her that Leo had gotten arrested for shoplifting with Connor Bunch. She calls the house. Leo answers. Jam hears another boy's voice in the background. Leo tell her it is Connor Bunch. He says that Connor is the only kid in school who is nice to him. She promises him that she'll be home for Christmas and that they will hang out together.

When the students meet again for a nighttime meeting they talk about the coming end to their journals. Sierra says she will not leave André in Belzhar. They see spinning red lights and are busted by campus security. The headmaster asks the students why they were in the classroom after hours. He doesn't get a really satisfactory answer and tells them there have been problems with Special Topics students in the past. They don't tell him about what is happening to them so he grounds them from all activities besides classes, meals and rehearsals.

Analysis

In this section of the novel Jam is able to see how much progress she has made since she has been at The Wooden Barn. When she first arrived there she remembers herself as being "empty" and "barely a person" (p. 182). When she's back in the headmaster's office after the Special Topics students were caught in the classroom after hours she remembers how angry she was the first time she was in that office at the beginning of



the school year. She doesn't want to turn back into that person. She's afraid if she loses what little she has of Reeve she will go back to that place.

Even though Jam doesn't seem to be ready to give up Reeve yet, she is showing signs of moving on. She and Griffin have started dating. Although Jam feels torn between Griffin and Reeve, she's becoming bored with Reeve. They aren't able to go beyond anything they've already done and Reeve doesn't seem interested in hearing about anything from Jam's life in Vermont.

With the end of the semester coming up quickly the students wonder what will happen when they fill their journals. They are talking about what might happen when they complete the books when they are caught. Notice that Sierra tells her fellow students that no matter what she refuses to let André go.

Jam gets a new problem to worry about when she gets a letter from her parents. This time her mother tells her that her little brother had been caught shoplifting. Jam talks to him about what he's doing. Leo tells her that Connor, the boy he was with when he got caught, is the only kid in the school who is nice to him. He also tells his sister that he doesn't always go along with everything that Connor suggests they do. At this point in her recovery, Jam is coming out of her own self absorption and realizing that she needs to help her brother.

The help the students are getting from their trips to Belzhar begins to work against them in this section of the novel. As a whole, the group isn't able to explain to the headmaster why they felt they needed to have meetings in the classroom after hours. Because they can't explain themselves, they are grounded. This means unless they want to face breaking the rules again, they can't meet together in secret anymore. Sierra also feels limited by the things she has learned in Belzhar. While on the bus she noticed a man looking at André in a strange way. Once she noticed him she remembered seeing him before at dance recitals. She's spoken to the detective who has been working André's case but the detective isn't taking Sierra's lead seriously. He thinks it odd she has just remembered this man out of the blue. She can't tell him she's writing in a journal that transports her back to the night that André was taken and she has been able to see the man again.

A final thing to notice in this section of the novel is a line from Plath's poem "Mad Girl's Love Song." That line states: "I think I made you up inside my head." At this point in the novel Jam believes the line relates both to Griffin and to Reeve. As the novel progresses it will be more significantly about Reeve.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the new lead Sierra believes she's discovered in her brother's case. Why do you think the detective isn't taking the lead seriously?



Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the headmaster of The Wooden Barn has had problems with Special Topics students before?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Jam need to know that her younger brother is having problems? Do you think she gives him good advice? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

arbitrary, perceptive, demented, bigamist, melodramatic, monosyllabic



Chapters 17-18

Summary

In Chapter 17, with only five pages left each the members of the Special Topics class try to talk at breakfast. They all agree to postpone their final visits. One morning at breakfast, however, Casey announces she made her final visit to Belzhar. She tells them there is no way to go back to Belzhar once they are finished. Sierra and Jam did not want to hear that. Neither did they want to hear that their last visit to Belzhar would be traumatic. Casey said she had to live through the car wreck again. Once they were in the car and her mother was driving, Casey could see that her mother was in no condition to drive. She remembered what her mother said to her before the ambulance came to get her. Once she was in the ambulance Casey said there were not EMTs so she sat up and realized she was back in her dorm room. She'd lived through the worst thing that have ever happened to her for a second time and had survived.

When Griffin finally comes to breakfast he's wearing his hoodie and looks closed up. He admits he had a bad night. They fill Griffin in on what happened when Casey and Marc went back to Belzhar. Sierra says she can't imagine letting André walk off the bus and just watching him go. She says she won't finish her journal or hand it back into Mrs. Quenell. After she leaves, Griffin admits he doesn't want to finish his journal out either. He plans to hand it in incomplete. He says his parents keep bugging him to talk about what happened but he doesn't want to go through it again. Jam suggests that Griffin's parents want him to see the whole situation. Jam knows that Griffin needs to feel the pain and to accept his part in the accident. She encourages him to just take his final trip and get it over. Griffin agreed to go back before the winter concert in which Jam would be performing. At the concert Sierra performs a dance in honor of André. The Barntones also perform. Their last song is a Georgian chant. People in the audience begin stomping their feet in time to the music.

In Chapter 18, after the concert Griffin tells her he made his final trip to Belzhar and thinks everything will be okay. A teacher finally pries them apart. Now Jam is sleeping deeply. She hears Jane Ann screaming for a nurse. The girl across the hall says it is Sierra, that she's had a seizure. Jam pushes her way into Sierra's room. Sierra is sitting up in bed with one hand moving jerkily. She won't respond to anyone. Jam wonders if the condition has anything to do with Belzhar but can't find Sierra's journal anywhere. The nurse checks Sierra over and decides they need to call an ambulance. After Sierra is loaded up Jam feels behind Sierra's bed and finds the journal. In the last paragraph Sierra records how she told André they would make cookies another night and wouldn't let him get off the bus. She'd continued to hang onto him even after the light began to dim. Jam believes Sierra is stuck in Belzhar forever. In the morning, Jam calls the hospital and suggests to the nurse that she tell Sierra to come back from Belzhar. The nurse gets no response. At breakfast Jam tells the other students in the Special Topics class what happened to Sierra.



That evening, the students from the Special Topics class go downtown for Mrs. Quenell's retirement party. She tells her students she knows how hard it must be for them to attend a party when Sierra is sick. During the party Griffin confronts Jam because she is the only one who hasn't finished her journal. He is asking Jam to promise she'll finish her journal when Mrs. Quenell interrupts them. During speeches Casey talks about Mrs. Quenell and the class in a way the other students know she's referring to Belzhar. Jam isn't sure that Mrs. Quenell understood that Casey was trying to tell Mrs. Quenell that Sierra had chosen to go to Belzhar and stay.

Analysis

Significant in this section of the novel is Sierra's choice to stay in Belzhar with her brother. She had told her friends she didn't think she could let go of him when the end of the journal came. Sure enough, when Jam read the last pages of Sierra's journal, she saw that her friend had refused to let go of her brother when it was time for him to get off the bus. One thing that the students have learned is that they don't have the power to change anything that happened during the time of the trauma. They've only gotten the chance to go back to their lives as they were before they fell apart in order to get some temporary relief from the emotional pain.

Even though the others had agreed not to finish out their journals yet, Casey decided to go ahead and get her's over with. She's had to live through her whole experience again but she was also able to see it from a different point of view. When she went through the car wreck in Belzhar she realized just how drunk her mother really was. She realized her sister was right when she said her mother shouldn't be driving. Casey also realized that even though she'd forgiven her mother quickly after they had both just returned from their own forms of rehabilitation that she really wasn't able to completely forgive her mother for her decision to drive drunk and what had happened as a result.

Notice that even though Casey tells her friends that she was glad to have lived through the experiences that Belzhar gave her. She misses being able to run and to walk but at the same time is glad to be back in her life with her friends. Notice also that she mentions she's glad to be with Marc. For Casey, having a boy like her despite her disability is a major encouragement but in a way it touches on the belief held by teen girls that if they don't have a boyfriend their lives aren't complete. Both Sierra and Jam doubt they'll be able to be like Casey and let go of the lives they had before their traumas as quickly as Casey did.

Discussion Question 1

Although Sierra's act of holding onto her brother during her last visit to Belzhar had an effect on her, did it really change anything?



Discussion Question 2

How much of Casey's healing do you think is prompted by the fact she has a boyfriend? Do you think this sends a bad message?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Sierra and Jam think they won't be able to give up Belzhar as easily as Casey did?

Vocabulary

cryptically, acoustic, angular, improvisations, opaque, quinoa, deprived, cosmopolitan, improvising



Chapters 19-20

Summary

In Chapter 19, Jam admits she's holding out going back to Belzhar because she is split. She wants to break things off with Reeve and dedicate herself to Griffin. In the same way she wants to stay with Reeve. She finally makes up her mind to go to Belzhar for the last time after DJ is asleep one night. When she starts writing, she doesn't feel Reeve's arms around her as usual. She is alone on the playing field. She walks and sees a girl and boy standing together, kissing. Jam remembers Dr. Margolis telling her that it was sometimes easier to believe a story. Jam hadn't listened to what he had to say. She realizes she's seeing Reeve and Dana kissing. When Jam tells Reeve she thought they were together, Dana laughs. Reeve tells her they aren't together. He challenges her to remember the night of Dana Sapol's party. She hears again Dr. Margolis telling her that she had invented a story to tell herself. She remembers the times that Reeve had talked to her, he'd been talking to a group of people that included her. He'd shown the whole class the Monty Python video. When Reeve had sat beside Jam in art class it was because the art teacher had made him get away from Dana and sit next to Jam. When Reeve saw the picture Jam realized he wasn't happy with it. As she went back in her mind Jam also realized that Dana's invitation to her party had not been aimed at her directly and might not have been intended for her at all. She'd told the two girls with whom she usually spent the weekends that she was going to Dana's instead.

In Chapter 20, Jam remembers that the night of Dana's party hadn't gone exactly as she remembered either. Reeve had been drunk when he'd kissed her. She'd also dug through his bag of groceries to find the jar of jam. He hadn't even shown it to her voluntarily. Dana walked in on them while they were kissing. Dana accused Jam of both crashing her party and making a move on Reeve. She pulled him from the room. Jam followed them. She heard Dana asking Reeve what he was doing. Jam believed Reeve was intimidated by Dana and was lying to him. The next school day Reeve had met up with Jam in the library where he kissed her again. They'd met a few more times for secret kisses along with a few minutes of goofing around on the soccer field.

Jam's friends Hannah and Jenna tried to convince Jam there was no evidence that Reeve was in love with her. One morning Jam smiled at Reeve in the hallway and he didn't smile back. She tried to talk to him but he said it wasn't a good time. She waited for him to get in contact with her but he didn't do so. Forty-one days after she first met Reeve she saw Reeve and Dana together on the playing field. Reeve asked her to own up to what had really happened at Dana's house. Reeve wasn't hateful but told her that she had to stop her infatuation because it made her look bad. She asked him about the jar of jelly, which he hadn't even realized had any connection with her. The only way Jam could cope with the news was to kill Reeve in her mind. She went home and went to bed in her clothes. She began to tell people her boyfriend had died and she was inconsolable. She stayed in the dark until her first trip to Belzhar.



Back in the present in Belzhar Jam takes Reeve's hand. She knows if she holds onto him she can stay there and things can be like they were in her mind. When she thinks of Griffin, his real love, how disappointed he would be if she stayed and what she would miss if she stayed she let go of Reeve's hand without even realizing what she had done. She doesn't understand why she reacted so badly to Reeve's rejection. Dr. Margolis told her it was because the mind can play tricks on itself in order to stay in one piece. She decides she might need to see Dr. Margolis again.

DJ is talking to Jam telling her she was talking in her sleep. Jam looks at her journal and sees that it is all filled in. Even though it is the middle of the night Jam puts on her coat and goes to Griffin's room. Once there she tells Griffin she went to Belzhar. When he asks about the death, Jam hesitates at first because she's afraid that Griffin will think less of her because her trauma was imagined. When she finally tells him the boyfriend didn't really die, Griffin takes a while to answer but finally tells her he is happy that she didn't have to go through that again. Jam wakes in the morning still in Griffin's room. She tries to sneak out but runs into Dr. Grant. He tells her he just got a call telling him that Sierra's brother had just been found. He tells Jam that a new detective had looked at a new lead.

Analysis

The reader faces a major twist in this section of the novel. Up to this point it is believed that Jam was at The Wooden Barn because her boyfriend died. This is the story that she'd told everyone. However, there have also been hints dropped here and there by the author that Jam's story was just that, a story. For instance, Jam's friends back at her home school treated her in a way that was very callous if she had actually had a boyfriend die. The one girl's suggestion that Jam just get over it would be considered unfeeling at best if Jam had actually had a friend or even an acquaintance to die. Remember also that on her application to The Wooden Barn Jam's parents don't say anything about a death being the reason Jam was sent to the school. It seems if Jam's boyfriend had died they would have included that as the cause of her trauma. Instead they put the vague reason that Jam was suffering the lingering effects of a trauma without any indication what their trauma was. A third source of the hints that Jam's story was one she'd made up in her mind was the memories inserted in strategic places in the novel about Jam's visits to her psychiatrist. He'd indicated to her that she was telling him a story of loss. He warned her to be careful of the words she chose to describe what had happened to her. Notice also that Jam had blocked out what her psychiatrist was trying to tell her.

When Jam goes back to Belzhar the final time, the reader learns for the first time - and Jam finally accepts - that Reeve was never in love with Jam. They actually had very little one-on-one contact. Reeve had come to America hoping to have a good time. He liked the way that Jam hung on him and encouraged her at first by meeting with her in secret for only a minute or two. In reality he was dating Dana Sapol, the girl who hated Jam. Jam had figuratively killed Reeve in her mind on the day that Dana made Reeve confront Jam and tell her that he didn't love her.



While the reader may feel somehow cheated because Jam's trauma, the death of her boyfriend, was manufactured, there is a greater lesson to learn. Her trauma associated with the rejection by a boy whom she liked and had built up in her mind as liking her as well was just as real as that suffered by Casey after her car wreck and Sierra after the loss of her brother. The story cautions the reader to treat those he meets with respect and not "play" with another's emotions. Reeve had a part in Jam's breakdown because he did encourage her with their secret meetings. However, when he did break the news to Jam that he did not love her he did it in a way that was not hateful, at least not in Jam's Belzhar version. Dana, on the other hand, was extremely abusive toward Jam. Although her treatment of Jam didn't cause Jam to react the way she did, her comments are hateful and unnecessary.

Also significant in this section of the novel is that Jam learns that Sierra's brother has been found. It can be presumed that the new detective on the case decided to check out the lead that Sierra gave them. Sierra had made the right choice by continuing to bug the detectives about her hunch because it turned out she was right.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss your first reaction when you realized Jam's boyfriend hadn't really died. Did you think less of her? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways was Jam's trauma different from the trauma suffered by any of the other students? In what ways was it similar?

Discussion Question 3

How did Belzhar help Sierra to find her brother?

Vocabulary

tentatively, inevitable, objectively, unrequited, loitered, epiphany, inconsolable, receding, orient



Chapters 21-22

Summary

In Chapter 21, Jam and her classmates are upset because André is at home but his sister is in the hospital, stuck in Belzhar. In their final class, Griffin asks Mrs. Quenell if she is aware of what happens to them when they write in their journals. She tells the students that when she was younger she had a breakdown and had to spend some time in a psychiatric hospital. She noticed another patient, a college student, who knew her name and looked at her with kindness and without condescension. Mrs. Quenell kept up with the woman and her career even after they both got better and left the hospital. The woman, who was Sylvia Plath, became a writer. Mrs. Quenell learned later that Plath had killed herself. Jam and the others are surprised that the woman whose work they'd studied had been someone who their teacher had known. It was because Plath believed so strongly in writing in journals that Mrs. Quenell began giving her students journals. She'd bought a box of journals on sale at an antique store. She noticed her students were talking about how powerful the journals were. She tried to write in one herself but it didn't have the same effect for her. The students tried to explain to her what was happening to them. Because her students were getting better, Mrs. Quenell continued to give them the journals each year. She tells them she was worried that it was the journal that had caused Sierra's condition. Sierra, however, was the first student who had chosen to stay in the place the journals had taken her.

After class, Jam walks by herself and thinks about what has happened to Sierra. She suddenly has an idea and runs to the dorm to call Sierra's home. She asks to talk to André. She tries to explain to André what she wants him to do. He doesn't say anything. She tells André that he needs to tell his sister that he is here and that she can come out of Belzhar. André still says nothing. Jam realizes he has hung up the phone.

In Chapter 22, on the day the students are supposed to leave for winter break, Jane Ann bangs on Jam's door to tell her that Sierra is awake. Jam announces the news at breakfast. Even though Jam plans to stay at The Wooden Barn for the spring semester, she thinks she might go back to the high school in Crampton her senior year. She realizes she misses her old life and friends there. As they are waiting for their parents to pick them up DJ and Jam agree that they are hungry. Jam asks DJ if she has any crackers. She opens the jar of jelly that Reeve gave her and spreads some on a cracker for both of them.

Analysis

Several significant things happen to tie up the end of the novel. First, Jam comes up with a way for André to call Sierra back from Belzhar. Even though it isn't clear at first if André had even heard what Jam said to him or if he understood the instructions she gave him, it is soon apparent that he did because Jane Ann comes to tell Jam that



Sierra is awake. Sierra and André will be able to be together to help each other heal and work through their individual traumas.

Also significant in these final chapters is that Jam finally opens the jar of jelly that she got from Reeve. This jar has been a symbol of Reeve and the love she believed he had for her since the beginning of the novel. She had sworn that she would never open it but would keep it as a symbol of their relationship. Her willingness to open the jar and share it with DJ shows that she has really and truly put the situation with Reeve behind her. Notice the author describes the sound the jar makes as it opens: “It makes a surprisingly sharp pop, as if it were releasing not just air, but something else that’s been dying to get out for a long time” (pp. 263-264).

Notice also that Jam has gotten a new appreciation for literature. She directly addresses the new trend in schools to focus on science, technology, engineering and math. Jam acknowledges that while these STEM classes are great, the written word is still important. Jam realizes words matter, just as Mrs. Quenell told her students they did, because without words people don’t have a voice to describe themselves, their feelings and their problems. She realizes that through the course of the semester that she spent studying about another young lady with mental problems and reading her work, Jam has changed. She recognizes that Plath’s writing, and Jam’s own writing, has changed her.

As she thinks about what she can do for Sierra, Jam makes a profound statement about life. When she goes to the payphone to call Sierra’s brother, Jam remembers the time she called her mother from the payphone begging her to come get her. Jam believes she didn’t know anything at that time because she was still at the stage in her pain and her depression that she wanted to avoid her own reality. She’s learned since then that life is messy and that in order to survive the mess that is life, she has to face it and find her way through it.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Sierra was the first student who chose to stay in Belzhar?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the story that Mrs. Quenell shares with her students about her decision to have them study Plath. Why is it significant that she had a personal experience with the writer?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism involved in Jam’s opening of the jar of jelly.



Vocabulary

elongated, devious, integrity, condescension, lucid, skeptical, tribunal, compatible, pivot, stagnate, distorted



Characters

Jamaica “Jam” Gallahue

Jamaica “Jam” Gallahue is both the main character and narrator of this novel. She developed a crush on Reeve Maxfield, an exchange student from England. Drawing from the encounters that she had with Reeve, Jam concocted in her mind that the two were dating. Reeve had done some things, like pairing off with Jam at a party and meeting her in the library to kiss, that had encouraged her affection for him. In reality, however, Jam’s mind had blocked out parts of the “relationship” she didn’t want to think about and had embellished on others. When Jam was finally confronted by Reeve and his real girlfriend about Jam’s perception of Reeve and herself, she “killed” Reeve in her mind in order to shield herself from the emotional pain of his rejection. Jam grieved Reeve’s death for nearly a year before her parents decided to send her to The Wooden Barn, a school for teens with emotional problems.

At The Wooden Barn Jam was included in a class of four other students who had also suffered traumatic events that left them feeling isolated and depressed. Jam made friends with Sierra, a fellow student, after they learn they’d both had similar experiences after writing in the journals their English teacher had given them. These journals allow the students to travel to a place they called Belzhar. In Belzhar their traumatic experience had not yet taken place and they were able to enjoy a brief time of emotional peace. For Jam, she and Reeve really were boyfriend and girlfriend in Belzhar. On her final trip to Belzhar Jam has to relive the details of her “relationship” with Reeve and his rejection of her. During that final trip Jam saw things about the relationship she had missed before. The times she’d imagined Reeve talking just to her, he’d actually been talking to a whole group of kids. After their encounter at Dana Sapol’s party where Reeve had kissed Jam and given her a jar of jelly, she had later overheard Dana arguing with Reeve because he had been making out with Jam when he was actually Dana’s boyfriend.

After her experiences in Belzhar, Jam is able to put Reeve’s rejection of her behind her. However, the final trip to Belzhar does not go as well for Sierra. In her desire to keep her brother, who was abducted, with her Sierra held onto her brother and refused to return from Belzhar. It is believed Sierra had some sort of seizure that caused her to become unconscious. She is hospitalized but doctors can’t figure out what is wrong with her. Meanwhile, police detectives checked out a new lead that Sierra had given them about her brother and had located him. He was reunited with her parents. It is Jam’s idea that if André were to call to his sister to come back from Belzhar that Sierra would regain consciousness. She calls André and tells him what to do. After he follows her directions, his sister is healed.



Sierra Stokes

Sierra Stokes is one of the students in the Special Topics in English class with Jam. Sierra was the first to write in her journal and the first to visit Belzhar. After Jam made her own first trip to Belzhar and she was able to understand Sierra's experience, the two became close friends.

Sierra had been enrolled at The Wooden Barn because her brother had been abducted after she sent him alone to get chocolate chip cookie dough from a convenience store. During her last trip to Belzhar Sierra chose to stay with her brother. To those who saw Sierra, they believed she was having a seizure. She was taken to a hospital but doctors could not determine what was wrong with her. She didn't regain consciousness. When Jam found Sierra's journal she realized what had happened to her friend.

Before she'd written in her journal her final time, Sierra had given the police a new tip on the man she believed had abducted her brother. The police were able to use this tip to find André. Jam called André telling him that she believed that if he called to his sister to come back to him from Belzhar that she would do so. André did as Jam instructed him and Sierra regained consciousness.

Mrs. Veronica Quenell

Mrs. Veronica Quenell is the teacher for Special Topics in English. She is elderly and the class in which Jam is enrolled is the last class she will be teaching at The Wooden Barn. As a young woman, Mrs. Quenell had spent some time at a psychiatric hospital. There had been another woman there who had always spoken to her and seemed truly interested in what she had to say. That woman was Sylvia Plath. Mrs. Quenell decided long before she'd ever chosen the students for her final class that she would teach Plath as the writer for that semester.

As a young teacher, Mrs. Quenell had decided she wanted to give her students journals in which they could write so she'd bought some at an antique store. As the semesters passed students began reporting to Mrs. Quenell the experiences they had when writing in the journals. She tried to recreate their claims by writing in a journal but it didn't have the same result for her.

Griffin Jared Foley

Griffin Jared Foley is the student in the Special Topics in English class who is the most withdrawn and isolated. Although he never shares what happened to him with the rest of the class, Jam learns that his family's goat barn had caught fire after Griffin and his friend had been in the barn smoking marijuana. The barn was destroyed and all the goats, including Griffin's favorite, were killed. The firemen found the roach from a joint in the fire debris. Griffin's parents automatically blamed him for the fire without even asking for his side of the story.



After he relived the fire through his final journal entry, Griffin was able to apologize to his parents for his part in the fire. Griffin had at first not wanted to finish the journal but Jam encouraged him to do so. She believed it would help him accept responsibility for his role in the fire if he experienced all of the events of the fire again.

Reeve Maxfield

Reeve Maxfield is the English exchange student with whom Jam believed she was in love. She told her friends at her new school, The Wooden Barn, that she had dated Reeve for 41 days before he died suddenly. In reality, on the 41st day Reeve had rejected Jam's affections for him and told her that he was in love with Dana Sapol. Jam had figuratively "killed" Reeve in her mind in order to avoid the emotional pain of rejection. Jam did not completely make up her perceived relationship with Reeve. He was a bit of a playboy and paired off with her during a party at Dana Sapol's house. During that party they talked and kissed. Reeve would later find Jam in secluded places, like the library, and make out with her.

DJ Kawabata

DJ Kawabata is Jam's roommate at The Wooden Barn. Jam had first thought she would hate DJ but the two ended up getting along well. DJ was an emo who liked to wear dark clothes. She also had an eating disorder which caused her to keep junk food stashed around in the room so she could binge if she were ever emotionally upset. DJ was jealous because Jam had been chosen to be in the class Special Topics in English, a class for which DJ had applied for admission but had never been accepted. During the course of the novel DJ and another girl at the school realize they have feelings for each other. DJ talks to the girl because Jam encourages her to do so.

Marc Sonnenfeld

Marc Sonnenfeld is a highly organized teen who feels compelled to follow the rules. He is one of the students in the Special Topics in English class. He is in the class because he believes he destroyed his family. One night Marc had gone to his father's office and noticed a video playing on his father's laptop. As he watched it he realized it was a porn video and that his father was an actor in it. Marc's mother heard Marc and his father arguing about the video and learned what was happening. She and Marc's father were divorced and their home sold. During the class Marc and Casey, the girl who had been paralyzed during a car accident, began dating.

Dana Sapol

Dana Sapol is the girl in Jam's old school in Crampton, New Jersey who hated Jam. Jam believed Dana's hate for her began when Jam noticed the girl wasn't wearing any underwear when she was playing on the monkey bars at school when they were in the



second grade. Since that time Dana had been cruel to Jam every chance she got. Although Jam had thought that she and Reeve were dating, in reality Reeve was dating Dana. Dana arranged for Reeve to tell Jam that he was not interested in her in a way that was painful to Jam.

Casey Cramer

Casey Cramer is the girl in the Special Topics in English class who was paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair after a car wreck. She tells the other classmates that her mother, who was a drunk, had driven their car into a concrete wall causing Casey, who was not wearing a seatbelt, to be thrown into the windshield. Casey is late to class the first several meetings causing Mrs. Quenell to scold her for not being on time. The other students are surprised because the other teachers treat them so delicately. Casey and Marc began dating toward the end of the semester.

André Stokes

André Stokes is Sierra's younger brother. He was abducted when he got off the bus he and his sister were riding from their dance class two stops early to get chocolate chip cookie dough. During one of her trips to Belzhar Sierra notices a man on the bus looking at André strangely. Because of the new information, André is found. Sierra, however, is stuck in a coma after she refuses to let go of her brother during her final trip to Belzhar. When André calls for his sister to come out of Belzhar she hears him and wakes up.

Dr. Margolis

Dr. Margolis is the psychiatrist to whom Jam's parents took her when she first became depressed. Jam had first been concerned about Dr. Margolis' ability to help her since he had a dead cactus in his office. Later, Dr. Margolis began to refer to what Jam was telling him as a "story," a term that indicates that what Jam was telling wasn't necessarily the truth. After Jam accepts the truth about her relationship with Reeve, she decides she might want to go back and see Dr. Margolis again.

Leo Gallahue

Leo Gallahue is Jam's younger brother. Before Jam had left to attend The Wooden Barn Leo had always been shy and often spent his time playing video games. After his sister left Leo made friends with a boy who was often in trouble. Leo began getting in trouble and talking back to his parents. After Leo was arrested for shoplifting Jam called him and told him that he was headed down the wrong road.



Jane Ann Miller

Jane Ann Miller is the teacher who served as the house mother for the dorm in which Jam lived. Both when Sierra began screaming after she wrote in her journal the first time and when she became unconscious when she wrote in her journal the final time it is Jane Ann who tries to help her. She is also the one who arranges for Jam to join the a cappella group the Barntones.

Karen Gallahue

Karen Gallahue is Jam's mother. Jam calls her mother wanting to come home from the special school in Vermont after her first visit to Belzhar. She did not allow her daughter to come home. Later, however, when Leo began getting into trouble with a new friend, Karen wrote letters to her daughter asking her to try to convince her brother to straighten out.

Jonathan Sonnenfeld

Jonathan Sonnenfeld is Marc Sonnenfeld's father. Jonathan had been his son's hero until Marc discovered his father was working in porn videos.

Rebecca Fairchild

Rebecca Fairchild is the student at The Wooden Barn with whom DJ was having a lesbian relationship.



Symbols and Symbolism

Tiptree Little Scarlet Strawberry Preserves

This jar of jelly is a sign of the love that Jam believed that Reeve had for her. He'd brought it along with a bunch of other English groceries the night of Dana Sapol's party. Jam decided Reeve had brought the jelly for her because her nickname is Jam. She had sworn to herself that night she wouldn't ever open the jar. She keeps it almost a shrine to Reeve. At one point she compares it to an urn. At the end of the novel Jam opens the jar and shares the jelly with DJ, a sign that she is finally over the pain she felt when Reeve rejected her.

The Bell Jar

"The Bell Jar" is the name of the novel by Sylvia Plath that the students in Mrs. Quenell's class read during the semester. In science, a bell jar is used to isolate a sample from the rest of the world. Plath felt as if she were trapped in this type of jar and isolated from the world around her. It is inside a symbolic "bell jar" that Jam had trapped the love that she believed Reeve had for her after she figuratively killed him.

Red Leather Journals

These red leather journals the Mrs. Quenell bought in bulk at an antique store came to symbolize a place that the five hurting students in her class could go to get some relief from their emotional pain for a short while.

Study Buddy

When Jam first writes in her journal she is sitting against the study buddy her mother had purchased for her. The oversized pillow with its stuffed arms transforms into Reeve's body and arms when she enters Belzhar.

Roll of Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough

When the police found a roll of chocolate chip cookie dough dropped outside the store to which André had gone to buy dough, it was a symbol to the police that he had been abducted.



A Dead Cactus

When Jam saw a dead cactus on the windowsill at her psychiatrist's office she was first surprised to see that cacti could die. She then wondered if he were the best choice as a counselor for her if he couldn't even keep a plant alive.

Dollhouse

This dollhouse, with which Reeve and Jam played while they were in Courtney's bedroom at Dana Sapol's houses, is one of the things that appeared during their time together in Belzhar. It is also in Jam's weird visit to Belzhar when she attempted to write in Griffin's notebook. The dollhouse is a symbol of Jam's "relationship" with Reeve.

A Can of Four Loko

Griffin brings this can of an alcoholic energy drink to one of the meetings of the students who are in the Special Topics in English class. It is important because Marc is afraid Casey will connect the can of alcoholic drink to the accident in which she was injured. Marc and Casey seem to connect to each other after Marc asks Griffin to put the can, which is a symbol of the cause of her pain, away.

Hickey

When Jam immediately returns from one trip to Belzhar she can see a small hickey on her neck, proving that something had happened to her. As she looks at it in the mirror, however, the hickey begins to disappear.

A Maroon Hoodie

Even though she has not committed to being Griffin's girlfriend, Jam finds herself wearing the maroon hoodie that he gave her while she was visiting his home. It is a symbol of comfort to her even before she'd completely opened up to his affection.



Settings

The Wooden Barn

The Wooden Barn is the school in Vermont to which Jam was sent after she could not shake the depression she felt after her boyfriend Reeve “died.” The school is for intelligent but emotionally fragile teens.

Crampton, New Jersey

Crampton, New Jersey is the town where Jam lived with her parents before she attended school at The Wooden Barn. It was at the high school in Crampton that Jam met Reeve, the English exchange student she believed was her boyfriend.

Mrs. Quenell’s Classroom

Mrs. Quenell’s classroom is in the original barn structure for which the school The Wooden Barn got its name. It is in this classroom that the Special Topics in English class met. It is also in this room that the students from that class have their late night group meetings.

Belzhar

Belzhar is the code name that Jam and the others decide to give to the place they go when they write in their journals. Belzhar is a play on “The Bell Jar” the name of Sylvia Plath’s novel.

Playing Field

It is the playing fields behind Jam’s school in Crampton that is the scene of her version of Belzhar. It is on these playing fields both in her real life and in Belzhar that Jam realizes that she and Reeve were never dating and she had only imagined that they were. She “killed” him in her mind to keep from having to face her hurt and humiliation.

Dana Sapol’s House

Jam went to a party at Dana Sapol’s house. It was at this party that she and Reeve kissed. It was also at this party where Jam asked Reeve if she could have the jar of jelly that he brought to the party with him. Jam believed she and Reeve fell in love during this party.

Green Mountain Arms

Green Mountain Arms is the hotel where the retirement party for Mrs. Quenell is held. All the students in her Special Topics in English classes attend the party.



Themes and Motifs

Depression

Depression is a major theme in this novel because Jam and the other students who were in her Special Topics in English class were suffering from depression. Their teacher, Mrs. Quenell chose for them to read the work of a woman who suffered depression and eventually killed herself. Through the course of the semester of class work and the help of their special journals, the students worked together to pull each other through their dark times.

First in the novel, Jam exhibits the symptoms of depression before she is enrolled at The Wooden Barn and during her first weeks there. She retreats from life. In her case, she stays in bed all the time. She doesn't see any sense in staying awake. Small things, like the discussion in her English class, wears her out. She claims she hates her life and everything about it. It is when Jam starts writing in her journal and is able to reconnect with Reeve in Belzhar that she begins to reconnect with her life. By the time the semester is coming to an end, notice that Jam is worried that when she can no longer write in her notebook and visit Belzhar that she will go back to being the angry, barely functioning person that she was before she began writing in her journal. In her final visit to Belzhar Jam finally realized the truth about her relationship with Reeve and was able to accept that he had rejected her.

Depression is also important in the novel because Mrs. Quenell chooses for her students to study the work of Sylvia Plath for the entire semester of the class. Plath began her struggle with depression when she was in college. In fact the students learn that their teacher had met Plath when the two were being treated at the same psychiatric hospital. While Mrs. Quenell recovered completely from her mental issues Plath continued to struggle with depression. She killed herself when she was only 30. Because Plath was mentally unstable one of the students in Jam's class asks the teacher if Plath's work is the best choice for them. As the semester progresses Jam and the other students are inspired by Plath's work because she understands and puts into words how they feel.

Often when the students were discussing Plath's work Jam would come to a point where she wasn't sure if they were actually discussing the literature or if they were discussing their real lives because the themes were so similar. Jam learns that by reading about the experiences of another person who has suffered similar feelings and emotions, and talking with others who have suffered similar feelings and emotions, it is possible to heal from depression.



Literature

The importance of literature and words both specific to Jam's situation and to the world in general is a theme of importance in this novel. Literature and words are important to Jam's situation specifically because she is able to accept the reality of Reeve's rejection of her and overcome her depression with the help of the writing of Sylvia Plath. Plath's writing teaches Jam that she is not the only one who has suffered deep depression. The importance of proper word choice is another lesson that Jam learns through her semester in Special Topics in English. Her teacher tells her students from the beginning of class that words matter and that it is important to choose the proper words when communicating. Jam later uses this advice to tell Sierra's brother what he should say to her in order to get her to realize he has been brought home and that she can be with him in real life if she will come out of the fantasy world in which she had chosen to stay.

The importance of literature in a more general sense is also discussed in the novel. Jam points out that many schools and teachers seemed to be brushing aside literature in favor of math and science. Jam argues that while math and science are good classes, neither of those classes had the power to change her life. It was only after she studied Plath's writing that she saw changes in herself and the way she viewed life. She realized through reading about another person's life and writing about her own life that life was messy and sometimes a person had to work through the mess that is his life in order to ever make things improve.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel. The five students who were chosen for the Special Topics in English class developed deep friendships. These friendships helped them to get through the situations that had brought them to The Wooden Barn. Notice during their first day of class, Mrs. Quenell asked the students to look out for one another. They didn't understand what she meant at the time but by the end of the semester, their friendships were one of the aspects of the class that changed their lives.

Sierra is the first person whom Jam befriended in her English class. She knew Sierra had a strange experience that caused her quite a bit of distress. When Jam wrote in her journal and first visited Belzhar she wondered if her experience was similar to Sierra's. Jam took the chance and talked to Sierra about what she'd experienced. The two were able to connect and become close friends because they had shared a similar experience. Jam later sees the same connection that she and Sierra shared in Marc and Casey. It is after Marc realized that Casey might not want to watch Griffin drink and spoke up in her defense that the two began to develop a close friendship. Similarly, it is after Griffin, the student who seemed least likely to look after anyone, asks Jam to stay with his family for Thanksgiving that they strike up a friendship.

It is the friendships that these students share that seems to help them to heal almost as much as their trips to Belzhar. Even though they weren't supposed to meet together after hours, the five students met in their English classroom to discuss the experience



that had led them to attend The Wooden Barn. They also talked about their experiences in Belzhar and how the temporary reprieve from their emotional distress helped to them to heal. They had basically formed their own talk therapy/support group in which they provided mutual emotional support and understanding.

Belzhar

The use of the idea of Belzhar is interesting in the novel since it seems unlikely that anyone outside this novel has ever encountered a place like Belzhar in their healing process. However, the place that is Belzhar in this novel may represent the place to which a person can go while writing about an experience. Writing about an experience can help a person experience the feelings and emotions they had when they had the experience originally. It can make them feel like they did when they were still loved by their boyfriend, or they could still walk, or their family was still intact.

In this particular story, however, Belzhar appears to be a real place to which these five students are transported when they write in their journals. During their time in Belzhar they have a temporary reprieve from the emotional pain of their everyday lives. The journals and their experiences in Belzhar only last for the one semester they are in the Special Topics class. For their final entry in their journals, the students face and go through the experience that originally traumatized them. When they live through the experience in the journal, however, the students seem to come away with a full picture of what happened to them. Casey, for instance, has realized she isn't able to forgive her mother for driving drunk as readily as she thought she had been able to. Jam realizes that Reeve didn't die. She also realizes that he wasn't her boyfriend but she had instead built up their relationship in her mind by picking and choosing parts of their encounters to remember and then spinning them in a way that it appeared Reeve was in love with her.

Trauma

Trauma and the idea of what constitutes a trauma is another significant theme in this novel. Some traumas are easy to recognize. For instance when the students saw Casey in her wheelchair, they knew that something traumatic had happened to her. When they saw she was having trouble they would often hurry to help her. Others in the class had been traumatized as well but their trauma affected them emotionally, not physically. Griffin, for instance, was emotionally handicapped because of the death of the goats and his own guilt. Instead of helping Griffin when they saw he was pulling away people generally left him alone. It was not until Jam showed Griffin that he was still worthy of love that he began to heal.

In a different form of trauma, Sierra was traumatized because her brother had been abducted. Her brother was found but the reader knows that he will also suffer some sort of emotional trauma because he was taken from his family. Marc was traumatized because he believed he'd caused his family to break apart. He'd seen a porn video in

which his father had participated. He'd argued with his father, drawing his mother's attention to the video.

As a twist at the end of the novel the reader learns that Jam's trauma came not from the death of a boyfriend but instead being rejected by the boy whom she had imagined as her boyfriend. Once she realizes what really happened to her, Jam tells Griffin she feels she owes him an apology. She thinks she misused the emotions of her fellow students because she made them believe she'd suffered through the death of a boyfriend when that wasn't the case. Even though Jam wasn't traumatized in the way her mind had made her believe she had been traumatized, she still suffered from depression and had to come to grips with the reality of her situation just as the other students did. The novel shows trauma can result from a variety of different situations. A situation that one person might be able to just get over might completely overwhelm another person.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the first person point of view of Jamaica “Jam” Gallahue, the main character of the novel. Jam tells her story in the present tense. Because this is a story of the changes that Jam goes through and the insights she learns during her healing process after a boy whom she believed loved her rejected her, there is no other point of view that would have adequately told Jam’s story. Because Jam is telling her experiences in the present tense, she realizes at the same time the reader learns that Reeve is not dead at all but it was instead a trick Jam’s mind had played on her to help her deal with the pain of his rejection. Through her first person point of view Jam is also able to share with her reader the way that Plath’s writing affects her on a personal level and how she is able to connect with the writer.

The story is told through a good deal of exposition balanced with dialogue. It is through exposition that Jam shares with her readers her own thoughts and emotions as she goes through her semester at The Wooden Barn. It is through her dialogue with other characters that Jam is able to connect with the other students in her class. It is through dialogue that they share their own stories of grief and disappointment.

Language and Meaning

“Words matter” (p. 256) is the lesson that Jam takes away from her Special Topics in English class. She believes it is what her teacher had been trying to convey to the class all along from the very first day when she complemented Casey for using “the perfect word” (p. 25) when Casey described dealing with her disability as being hard. Jam points out that her English teacher provides her with a particularly important lesson since words and literature are being devalued in favor of students spending more time learning math and science. Jam had learned that there is value in the written word. That it is a talent for a writer like Sylvia Plath to write about her depression and mental illness so that her story can reach out to other young people struggling with their own depression and dark times.

Structure

This 263-page novel is divided into 22 chapters and a prologue. Each chapter is titled only with a chapter number. The chapters average 12 pages. The longest chapter is Chapter 20 at 19 pages. The shortest is Chapter 22 which is only five pages. The story is told in the present tense. It more or less follows a linear timeline but there are several forays into the past as the students share the stories of how they came to be enrolled at The Wooden Barn.



Quotes

I was sent here because of a boy. His name was Reeve Maxfield, and I loved him and then he died, and almost a year passed and no one knew what to do with me.”

-- Narrator (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: Jam opens her story by telling the reader why she believes she was sent to The Wooden Barn.

And the thing that amazes me the most, the thing I keep obsessing about, is this: If I hadn't lost Reeve, and if I hadn't been sent away to that boarding school, and if I hadn't been one of five 'emotionally fragile, highly intelligent' teenagers in Special Topics in English, whose lives had been destroyed in five different ways, then I would never have known about Belzhar.”

-- Narrator (Prologue paragraph 13)

Importance: At the end of her introduction to the novel Jam notes that if she hadn't been sent to The Wooden Barn she would never have know about Belzhar. The lead in creates interest and adds an air of mystery to Belzhar.

And so I get what my little brother has known for a while: Sometimes an alternative world is much better than the real one.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 23)

Importance: Just like Leo lived in an alternate world when he played video games, Belzhar became an alternate world where Jam could get some relief from the grief she felt.

I'm dying to know in what way it changed their lives. But it's not like you can ask anyone about it now, because no one who was in that class is still at school.”

-- DJ (Chapter 1 paragraph 70)

Importance: DJ, Jam's roommate, had heard stories about how wonderful the Special Topics in English class was. She hoped that Jam would tell her what it was about the class that had been so life changing.

You've already learned two things since you've been here. One: Lateness — your teacher doesn't like it. And two: Perfect words — she likes them very much.

-- Mrs. Quenell (Chapter 2 paragraph 44)

Importance: Mrs. Quenell both criticizes and compliments Casey when the girl arrived at her class late on the first day. First, Mrs. Quenell doesn't like for her students to be late. Second, she does like it when they use the proper words to describe their feelings.

But it's almost as if Mrs. Quenell were going right for the gut by picking Sylvia Plath. It's like she's doing whatever she wants, because she doesn't care what people think of



her. And for the quickest second, I'm almost impressed."
-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 84)

Importance: Jam is impressed that Mrs. Quenell has chosen to have them read Sylvia Plath, a reader that at first glance seems inappropriate for them.

And then I realized: Oh my God. He's brought the jar of jam because of my name. Of course. It was a present for me, a little in-joke just between the two of us, and I was so touched by it that heat sprang to my face again."
-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 70)

Importance: When Jam saw that Reeve had a jar of jelly among the English groceries he had brought to Dana Sapol's party, she thought the jelly was a gift for her.

We're talking about the novel, right? But maybe we're not. We're talking about ourselves. And I guess that's what can start to happen when you talk about a book."
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 25)

Importance: As she and the other students in Special Topics in English begin discussing Sylvia Plath's novel, Jam realizes the things about which they are talking are true both for the novel and for the lives of the students.

There's nothing I can tell her to make her feel better. I know this from experience. Both of us are lost and fragmented."
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 100)

Importance: After Casey has told Jam that she believes no man will want her because she is a cripple, Jam doesn't say anything because she knows anything she has to say will only belittle Casey's feelings. She knows from personal experience that there is no way to properly respond to Casey's grief.

But I can't bring myself to do that, because the arms that hold me have become confident and familiar, and the thing I want more than anything — the thing that's impossible — seems to be happening. And if I'm wrong, I'll be devastated."
-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 31)

Importance: When Jam first writes in her journal she is surprised when the arms of the study buddy morph into Reeve's arms.

I tell him I was writing in my journal too, and Sierra nods. So: the journals."
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 87)

Importance: After Sierra, Jam and Marc realize they've all had a similar experience, they compare their experiences and realize they were all writing in their journals when the experience began.



I'd been the cute girl he'd flirted with since we were kids, and now I was the crippled girl he couldn't deal with."

-- Casey (Chapter 9 paragraph 45)

Importance: After she returned to her regular high school after her car wreck Casey says that a boy who had been pursuing her before the accident would barely speak to her after she was confined to a wheelchair.

I don't think of it as a trance, exactly,' I say. 'It's almost more of a place. I feel like I went to a place where people go when they can't take reality, because it's just too depressing.'"

-- Jam (Chapter 9 paragraph 67)

Importance: After Marc calls his experience a trance, Jam tries to come up with a better way to explain what she experienced. She decides that it was more of a place than a trance.

All that Reeve and I can do in Belzhar is basically what we've already done in real life. We can't go further in any significant way."

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 41)

Importance: Jam realizes that as good as it is to be with Reeve in Belzhar that their relationship is limited because they cannot go any further in their relationship than they had gone before Reeve's death.

They've become close in this one instant; it's amazing how that can happen. It happened to Sierra and me too. A single shared moment."

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 41)

Importance: Jam notices a quick connection between Marc and Casey after Marc told Griffin to put away the alcoholic drink he'd brought because it might upset Casey.

The remaining journal pages, and the remaining weeks left in the semester, still work out perfectly and unexplainably, the way some things do in life."

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 47)

Importance: Jam marvels how the number of pages in the journal work out so that they students will have filled them by the end of the semester if they write in them only twice weekly.

I'm saying good night to my parents,' says Marc. 'I have no idea that within half an hour my family is going to be ruined, and that I'm the one who's going to ruin it.'"

-- Marc (Chapter 11 paragraph 80)

Importance: Marc tells his classmates that his trauma came from discovering that his father was working as a porn actor. Because he was the one who found out about the videos, Marc felt he was responsible for breaking up his family.



To find out what another human being feels, a person who isn't you; to get a look under the hood, so to speak. A deep look inside. That's what writing is supposed to do."

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 11)

Importance: Jam describes how a reader can come to understand a writer's point of view on life by reading their work. Through the course of their English class Jam and her fellow students have come to understand Sylvia Plath and her depression. Plath's stories and poetry also help the students to understand themselves and their own emotions better.

The thing that happened to you in real life, on your worst day? You have to live it again. At least, I had to."

-- Casey (Chapter 17 paragraph 35)

Importance: Casey was the first of the five students to complete her journal. She explained that for her last trip to Belzhar she had to relive the night of the accident during which she was paralyzed.

Oh God, it's all my fault. I'm drunk, Casey, and I did this to you. I did this to my little girl. I never remembered that before. And you know what, it was her fault, and I can't totally forgive her, at least not now. It's so hard, but at least now I remember what's what. At least now it's real."

-- Casey (Chapter 17 paragraph 39)

Importance: Casey had not remembered before what her mother had said to her after the car wreck or how drunk her mother had really been that night. She realizes after her final trip to Belzhar that her mother shouldn't have been driving that night.

I'm not ready for this. Why did I think I was?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 27)

Importance: As Jam begins her final trip to Belzhar and realizes that Reeve was not waiting for her there as he had been for other visits, she knows she isn't ready for what is to follow.

Being rejected by him was the worst feeling I'd ever known. But now in my mind he was dead, which was traumatic too. But it was the only way to cope."

-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 94)

Importance: It is through her last visit to Belzhar that Jam realizes that Reeve and she had never been dating the way she thought they had. When she learned in real life he didn't like her the same way she liked him, she had figuratively killed him as a way to cope with the pain she felt.

Maybe Dana was right; I am a psycho loser. I killed him and preserved his 'love' inside me in a little bell jar. I don't know why I needed to do this. Why I had such a big reaction to a boy not loving me back."



-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 130)

Importance: Now that Jam has gotten some distance on her “relationship” with Reeve, she doesn’t understand why she got so unhinged when he didn’t love her the way she loved him. Through the help of Belzhar Jam is finally ready to face the truth of what happened between she and Reeve.

I understand if you feel like you’ve been ripped off. You’ve all been through so much worse. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, especially you. But it all just sort of happened.”

-- Jam (Chapter 20 paragraph 164)

Importance: Jam feels she needs to apologize to Griffin because she told him that her boyfriend had died when it was really just a defense mechanism she’d created to protect herself and her emotions because Reeve didn’t like her the way she liked him.

She wouldn’t let us fall under the weight of our problems. She wouldn’t baby us. She had respect for us, even as we hated ourselves and everyone else, and thought nothing would ever feel good again.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 21)

Importance: Jam explains why she and the other students had such respect for their English teacher.

One year,’ says Mrs. Quenell, ‘I thought to give my students their own journals to write in. I was off antiquing with my late husband, Henry, and I bought a box of them in bulk at an antique store near here that no longer exists.’”

-- Mrs. Quenell (Chapter 21 paragraph 38)

Importance: After Mrs. Quenell’s students ask her about the journals she tells them she bought the books in bulk at an antique store. She had no idea the journals had the powers they did until her students began reporting to her what was happening to them.

The whole experience will close up like a fault line in the earth, and it will be as if this huge thing had never even really happened.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 75)

Importance: This quote is interesting because the author compares what happened to Jam and her friends to a fault line in the earth, an earthquake that could open up and cause unspeakable damage, and then close, as if nothing had even happened.